

# VODOU SHAMAN

THE HAITIAN WAY OF  
HEALING AND POWER



**ROSS HEAVEN**

FOREWORD BY TIM BOOTH

## PRAISE FOR VODOU SHAMAN



*It is often in the places we least expect it, that we find the deepest spirituality. Vodou, the least well known, most feared and even most ridiculed form of shamanism, is one of those places. In this must-read book we find a pragmatic way of being in spirit; one desperately needed as we face the challenge of living in this time of great change.*

—DR. EVE BRUCE, M.D., F.A.C.S., MEDICAL DOCTOR  
AND AUTHOR OF SHAMAN, M.D.



*A groundbreaking book that will contribute to the knowledge, diversity, and healing in this world. Ross Heaven writes with heart and wisdom about a true return to spirit.*

—KRISTIN MADDEN, AUTHOR OF PAGAN PARENTING AND  
THE BOOK OF SHAMANIC HEALING



*A most important and valuable study of Vodou—and an amazing adventure story to boot! In this book, we have a rich slice of superior writing in which personal encounters, vivid travelogue, and anecdote blend beautifully into an intelligent and well-informed guide to a fascinating spiritual tradition and a secret world.*

—SIMON BUXTON, FOUNDER OF THE SACRED TRUST  
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*Ross Heaven does for Vodou what Castaneda did for shamanism. With so many sacred ways and cultures dying out, it is wonderful that one of the world's oldest oral traditions is recorded here by an authentic wisdomkeeper.*

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*Ross Heaven is a modern sage. In his book Vodou Shaman we not only learn about Vodou and experience its powers firsthand, we also pass through portals to higher levels of consciousness.*

JOHN PERKINS, AUTHOR OF THE SPIRIT OF THE SHUAR



*The experience of Vodou is one of joy, dance, drums and song. It is an experience that enables all of us to connect with our spirits and the infinite power of the universe. This practical book is a valuable guide to how we can all achieve joy in our lives.*

—AMODA, AUTHOR OF MOVING INTO ECSTASY



*I am delighted to offer my support for this book, which is in the tradition of Maya Deren and Claude Planson, Caucasians who have discovered infinity in the African spirituality. Ross Heaven is enriching our understanding of the psyche and wisdom of humanity by going into the primeval source of our worldview.*

—DR. REGINALD O. CROSLY, MEDICAL DOCTOR  
AND AUTHOR OF THE VODOU QUANTUM LEAP



*Vodou is a very beautiful and practical spiritual approach to experiencing the power of other worlds. Through Vodou Shaman ordinary people will discover how to empower themselves in the most extraordinary ways.*

HOWARD G. CHARING, DIRECTOR OF THE EAGLE'S WING CENTRE FOR  
CONTEMPORARY SHAMANISM AND AUTHOR OF MEDICINE FOR THE SOUL

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FOREWORD BY TIM BOOTH



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## FOREWORD

# DO YOU VOODOO?

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What do we really know about voodoo in the West? Almost nothing. Not even the correct spelling. Even now my computer underlines *Vodou*, its correct name, in red to inform me of a typo. But feel the phony word *voodoo* in your mouth. It could be the first word a baby forms. A fantastic word—so many Os. For most of us in the English-speaking world it has a sexy, implacable feel, but one that is also dark and dangerous, courtesy of the Western empire's "reality tunnel." History is, indeed, the propaganda of the victors. And no wonder our would-be conquerors were scared! Vodou inspired the only successful slave revolt in history, defeating first the superior firepower and numbers of the French, and then the British a few years later. "Black magic" could be the only rational explanation . . .

It's easy to see how the empire's belief in the power of the rational mind to civilize "primitive cultures" would lead it to demonize Vodou. Vodou recognizes other dimensions much greater in scope than the narrow little world that, even now, our culture insists is the only true reality. Vodou, born in slavery, was more generous in its attitudes toward other beliefs. A profoundly adaptive belief, it absorbed other systems, adding to its pantheon of gods and rituals.

You can read this book as a history of the Vodou religion and the cultures that influenced it or explore the rich mythological landscape that it opens up to Western readers for the first time. But the real meal offered here is a journey into the essence of Vodou—how we can make contact with and attune ourselves to new spiritual realities. By use of elegant rituals and the focused creation of altars, we can all make contact with the *loa*, the guides from these dimensions.

These techniques naturally seem alien to us. In Christianity, use of

altars and direct communication with God have been the prerogative of priests. In Vodou, direct contact is the way for everyone. Some of the details may seem crazy to us, but if we are to explore other cultures in any real depth, beyond our own culture's matrix, we need to view them with unbiased eyes. For me, the great benefit of immersing myself in the exotic waters of such a rich system is the chance to step outside my own indoctrination and try out a new perception of life. When we do this we enrich our lives, enabling us to get a different perspective on some of our more limiting beliefs.

The two areas in which I am particularly beholden to Vodou are the use of altars and the trance state. I love using altars to focus my intention on what I want to bring into my life. They are a sacred, still space within the hubbub of daily affairs. Altars of bones, sculptures, images, drums, crystals—arranged in a way that means something to me—connect *me* to *my* source.

Trance is a place where I feel I can return to my source. It wipes the slate clean of all the bullshit I have accumulated, allowing me to step outside the limiting beliefs that compose my personality. It is a powerful primal state of intuition, creativity, and healing.

For the last nine years I have taught a system of movement called the Five Rhythms, devised by a brilliant Californian named Gabrielle Roth, whose background included the healing arts, theater, and dance. It is a system by which people can safely enter and exit trance states. I believe trance is the state many of us have gotten in touch with by using drugs. We know there is something out there that is more real than the dream we live in, and our spirits are magnetically drawn to it. Until this natural drive is addressed and given other healthier pathways, such as those shown in *Vodou Shaman*, drugs will remain the most popular shortcut.

*The White Rabbit beckons at the entrance to the  
wormhole . . .*

—TIM BOOTH, FORMER SINGER-SONGWRITER  
WITH THE ROCK BAND JAMES\*

\*Tim Booth is a successful solo recording artist, writer, workshop facilitator, and teacher of creativity and dance. His Web site is [www.tbadsl.clara.net](http://www.tbadsl.clara.net).

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to Mambo Racine for her teachings and for permission to quote from her work. Any errors that appear in this book are mine, not hers, as are the opinions I have expressed in my writing, which Mambo Racine would not necessarily agree with.

I also wish to thank Tim Booth for permission to quote from the James song "The Shining," which appears on the album *Pleased To Meet You* (Mercury Records, 2001), and for his foreword to this book.

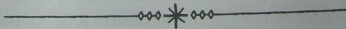
My thanks to Mambo Racine for front cover photography (vever of Ayizan, spirit of initiation), and to Michelle Clements for the other illustrations in this book. The hierarchy of needs pyramid was inspired by Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954).

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*To conquer fear is  
the beginning of wisdom.*

—BERTRAND RUSSELL



INTRODUCTION

# FEEL THE FEAR AND READ IT ANYWAY

*Mete hounsi yo deyo!*  
*Houngan malouk O!*  
*Mete hounsi yo deyo!*



Bring the initiates/faithful out!  
The Houngan is strong!  
Bring the initiates out!

—VODOU SONG OF INITIATION

Many people approach Vodou for the first time with a sense of fear or apprehension, which is not so surprising as Vodou has always been one of the most feared, ridiculed, and misunderstood of the shamanic traditions. The truth, however, will always dispel fear because fear feeds on ignorance and starves on a diet of fact. And so this is a book about the facts and reality of Vodou—its beauty as well as its ugliness, its ways of Power and its methods of healing.

You probably have your own ideas of what Vodou healing might entail, some of which, almost inevitably, you will have picked up from tabloid fantasies and Hollywood dreams. Perhaps these involve visions of bloodshed, sacrifice, voodoo dolls, and the living dead.

When I first began to explore Vodou twenty-odd years ago, I carried the same stereotypes about the religion and felt sure that I would encounter zombies and animal (and perhaps even human) sacrifice and have to deal with black magic rituals and pacts with the devil.

Let me reassure—or maybe disappoint—you that none of that appears in this book, for the very good reason that most of those subjects are the stuff of mythology rather than fact.

The dancer Maya Deren, who spent some of her life in Haiti among the Vodou faithful, described myth rather beautifully, as “the twilight speech of an old man to a boy.”<sup>1</sup> It is designed to evoke a mood, to conjure an essence, or sum up an experience, but very rarely to embody some absolute reality.

At the same time, all mythology must be based to some extent in fact, so I don't want to mislead you into thinking that there is never any sacrifice in Vodou or that zombies do not exist. There is and they do, but probably not in the way you imagine. In fact, the reality is often more poignant and sometimes more disturbing to Westerners than many things the imagination might lead us to, as you may discover later on.

## WHITE PRIEST

Let's not get ahead of ourselves. It is traditional (and only courteous) within Vodou to offer one's credentials before beginning this journey of discovery.

My name is Ross Heaven, and I am a graduate psychologist, an ex-journalist, and the author of *The Journey to You* and *Spirit in the City*,<sup>2</sup> two previous books on traditional spiritual practices and their applications in the problems of modern living. I tell you this to reassure you that I am not a religious fanatic who is trying to force Vodou upon you, or so prejudiced toward it that I cannot apply the objectivity of my psychological and journalistic training to the processes within Vodou. What I hope I *can* give you is an honest appraisal of the Vodou tradition and a fair introduction to its healing methods.

I have another name too: Bon Houngan Reve We Chemen Ginen. This is my sacred or “valiant” name (*nom vayan*) within Vodou, which was given to me by Houngan Yabofe Danise and Mambo Racine, the Haitian shaman-priest and priestess who formally initiated me into Vodou in January 2000. Translated from the Creole language (or *Kreyol*, as it is spelled in Haiti), *Bon Houngan Reve We Chemen Ginen* means “Good Priest Who Dreams the Road of Gine” (*Gine* is primal

Africa, the Vodou concept of heaven or Eden, from where all life comes). Less poetically and in shorthand, my name means “Seer of Spirits.”

The fact that I have a Western and a Haitian identity means that I walk between the worlds, with one foot in each culture—the Western way of materialism and physical science and the Afro-Caribbean belief in a nonmaterial, spiritual universe where all true Power and healing, and indeed, all things, originate. Walking carefully between these worlds and representing the ways of each as fairly as I can is one of the aims of this book, and I hope I can do so with balance.

When you are initiated into Vodou, you become a “child” within a family of the living and the dead. The *Houngan* (*oon-gun*) and *Mambo* (*mam-bow*) lead the ceremony and they become your father and mother, but it is the *loa* (*low-are*), the spirits, who actually claim you as their child. I am the child of the loa Ogoun Badagris, who is negotiator, communicator, and seeker of balance among the spirits.

As far as I and the Vodou community that initiated me are aware, I was the first white priest of Vodou in Europe; that is, the first white man to be ordained as a Houngan. Even now I am one of only a handful of white men in the world who have been so ordained. Because of this my job, as it was given to me by the Vodou faithful, is to make this essentially oral tradition accessible to others, which, in the style preferred by the West, means writing about it.

I hope you will bear with me in my attempts to explain in the written word what has before now been passed on only in whispers and secret language from one initiate to another. Indeed, in some cases we will be discussing the ineffable—the things beyond definition, which have no name and cannot be understood in words—so your patience, as well as your dedication to the practical exercises in this book, are doubly appreciated. Only through practice, by *experience*, can we know that which is beyond words.

For my part, I have tried to make the healing practices of this faith as clear to you as I can by adapting their central tenets and essences so they are sensible to a Western readership, without detracting from the heart of their teachings or the Vodou vision of the world. You may find this challenging. When cultures collide it is always easiest to sink into

what we know (or think we know) instead of opening to the new. I ask only that you are fair-minded and do your best to separate the habitual ways of the West from the other more ancient wisdom that is recorded here. This other wisdom may be of value to you as you engage with the modern world that in its boxed-off suburban take on what it means to be truly alive has forgotten so much.

## THE CALL OF THE SPIRITS

My interest in the spiritual traditions goes back more than thirty years, to my early childhood. I was raised in Britain, in the shadow of the Black Hills, deep within the soul of Welsh mythology. Among trees and fields, streams and woodlands, the spirits of Nature were a daily part of my life. I knew from an early age that everything is alive and has its own spirit. In the countryside it is possible to see, in a way that city living so often obscures, that all things are connected and move, in their mysterious ways, as part of a circle—not in the rigidly compartmentalized and linear way that scientific rationalism would have us believe. I suspect that this realization was my first early break with consensus reality, as the simple experience of life around me proved each day that the world was rarely (if ever) the way our scientists, educators, politicians, and other “authorities” explain it to us.

I was lucky to have had this childhood, because the connection I felt to the Earth is something most of us in the modern world have lost. We no longer know our place in Nature, we rarely experience the world directly, and therefore it is far easier for most of us to merely accept the reality we are given through newspapers, TV, the educational system, and our other institutional ways of being, instead of discovering our truths for ourselves.

It wasn't always this way. Not so very long ago in our native past our priests and seers were also people who understood the spirits of Nature and were taught by the trees and elementals. In the Celtic world they were called druids, and they worshipped not in man-made stone churches but in sacred groves and hollows in the land.

In surviving preindustrial and “uncivilized” communities of the world, it is the same story even today. The most powerful shamans of

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the Amazon are still taught by trees and rivers, just as the songlines of the Australian aborigines—the soul-songs of myth and meaning that speak of Earth's creation by God and man and also of the interconnection between man and landscape. The great Native American medicine man Black Elk also spoke of all things—the sun and the moon, the clouds, the trees, animals and humans—being united through the “sacred hoop” of life, illustrating the universality of this connection to Nature, in which we sense the truth of a spiritual world behind the material one we know. Certainly, communion with Nature plays an essential part in the healing arts of Vodou, as you will see.

I received my degree in the 1980s at a university that is now a world center of excellence for transpersonal psychology. My interests at that time were the nature of self (what is this thing we think we are?) and the nature of reality (is there a fixed reality we can all subscribe to, or only unique experiences to which we try to put a common name?). In trying to answer these questions I started to look at how other cultures had approached them, and so my study of shamanism, Vodou, and other tribal practices began.

Of all the shamanic traditions I read about, Vodou was the black sheep, the one not even the scientists, anthropologists, and, particularly, the religious historians, could remain objective about. Because I was a young punk, the renegade reputation of Vodou appealed enormously to my rebellious nature! Having been raised in the countryside, where personal experience, exploration, and the romantic imagination were ingrained in the way of life, I have always been driven to discover reality for myself; just as children are enticed by the mystery of fire, I have always been especially drawn to those places and things that I am warned away from. I am particularly attracted when the warnings are couched in holier-than-thou terms that make the prejudice behind them transparent, as was often the case when Vodou was mentioned.

It was also obvious from the anthropological research that this fear of Vodou was tinged with awe for what seemed to be one of the most powerful of all the shamanic traditions. Here sorcerers (known as *Houngans* when good and *Bokors* when bad) had the ability to contact and, often, merge with the spirits of the dead, to defeat illness, and to counsel the people of their village with advice from the supernatural

world. This advice could have come from no other source than a world beyond ours, as it contained information unknown to any other living soul and the healing that took place frequently defied Western medical knowledge.

The fieldwork quoted cases of people who were cured of sickness by witch doctors and medicine men using no more than drums and rattles, feathers and stone, and sometimes just the sweat from their brows or the touch of their hands. Often these illnesses were of such a nature and an intensity that our Western medical doctors would have struggled to find a cure, especially in such basic jungle surroundings, where they would have only the tools of the medicine man at their disposal.

Anthropologists who had experienced such healings spoke of people being brought back from the dead, as well as the Houngan's Power to create the "undead," the *zombi*, who is neither fully alive nor completely dead. All of this would be dismissed as nonsense by Westerners if it was not for the fact that men of science had seen it with their own eyes. But even then it remained inexplicable and mysterious, as these healings could not be easily slotted into any current scientific model. Whatever Power the Houngan had, it seemed vast and magical in the sense that it defied Western explanation.

I began to look more closely at the principles of healing and Power that these shamanic cultures embodied. The literature defined shamanism as a very ancient psychospiritual approach that uses communion with supernatural forces to create logic-defying episodes of healing and the ability to foresee the future. As a psychologist, though, I wanted to know what the Houngan was actually *doing* to create this healing.

My research into Vodou began, then, in the 1980s, and has continued over the past twenty or so years, during which time I have also put away the books and completed research on my own, studying with a number of Vodou practitioners who were prepared to teach me something about their healing arts. Perhaps inevitably, what began as academic interest has become a quest for personal and spiritual growth, as well as a search for fundamental human truths.

Two people in particular—Mambo Racine Sans Bout (Roots without End), a priestess of Haitian Vodou, and Ekun, a *Santero* (priest) of Santería, the Cuban form of Vodou—deserve special mention. Both

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have become close friends of mine over the years. It is rare that a week goes by that I do not talk with Ekun, while Mambo Racine is now my initiatory mother, the woman who oversaw my ordination into the Vodou priesthood so that I could become a Houngan myself.

## "CORE VODOU" AND CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

In trying to pass on to you some of the truths I have learned, one of my greatest challenges has been to accurately reflect the nature and techniques of Vodou while at the same time disentangling them from the culture in which they are practiced. Vodou is a spiritual tradition of Africa and Haiti, but the Afro-Caribbean culture is *not* Vodou any more than the Western culture is Christianity. To understand Vodou we must look at it outside culture.

I have answered the question of separating Vodou from its culture in two ways: by structuring the book to include both accounts of my own personal experience of Vodou and direct experiential opportunities for the reader, and by distilling the wisdom of a number of Vodou traditions into a core system of Vodou that will be accessible to readers who have not grown up within the cultures from which it derives.

### *The Structure of This Book*

You will notice that each chapter opens with a vignette that reflects my personal experience of the way things are done in Haiti. This is often very different from the acceptable Western way. Sometimes, as Tim Booth says in the foreword, it may even seem crazy to us. To make sense of this, I have written chapters that explore the essence of what is taking place, the function behind the form of the healing techniques employed. In this way I hope to set these techniques within a context we Westerners might better understand and make use of. As you read on you will see—and experience—what I mean.

Experience? Yes. Because in this book I will not only teach you what I know of Vodou, the secrets at the heart of the tradition that only the initiates learn, but also I will provide you with opportunities to use this knowledge, to apply its healing practices, and, to deepen your understanding of how Vodou heals and can help you empower yourself.

There is much ignorance about the Vodou faith, and the only way you will be able to decide if the prejudices attached to it are warranted is to experience it for yourself. Moreover, the only way to truly learn any new art is by experience. Simply reading about it can only take you so far. As the great Sufi mystic Rumi wrote, "There is no worse torture than knowing intellectually about Love and the Way."<sup>3</sup>

To this end, every chapter finishes with a selection of "Vodou Lessons," which are based on the practices and, sometimes, the secret teachings of Vodou. Of course, you do not have to attempt any of these exercises, but I think you will find them rewarding, enriching, and, perhaps, even enlightening. The first step toward real Power is to free the mind from the received wisdom of others and from our own fear of the unknown. This freedom will only come from experiencing the truth beyond the fear.

### *Core Vodou*

Perhaps more controversially, I have tried to distill the wisdom of various Vodou traditions to arrive at an approach that we might, I suppose, call "core Vodou," rather than focusing on any one tradition or culture in particular. This might seem rather mix-and-match to you, and I am aware that I may be accused of cultural imperialism and of borrowing various ideas and concepts from a number of different traditions in order to create a new brand of Vodou. Because I take these points seriously, I would like to deal with them.

Vodou, like most religions, is itself syncretic, which is to say that it has borrowed freely from other traditions over the years and now blends various African belief systems with those of Amerindian tribes, pre-Christian pagan beliefs, and even Catholicism. Vodou has always been an adaptive and evolutionary tradition because its followers have themselves changed over the generations. Originally, they were African villagers, and then became Caribbean slaves and, in some cases, later migrated as free men to various cities of the Americas and the world. The landscapes, cultures, and ways of life of these different territories have also meant different challenges, to which both the people and the spirits have adapted.

Madam Brigit, one of the Vodou loa, is an example of how these spir-

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its have evolved over time. Originally worshipped in Ireland as part of our native Western shamanic traditions, Brigid was the goddess of poetry and smithcrafts, of creativity, inspiration, and healing. With the arrival of Christianity in Ireland, the church leaders tried—and failed—to stamp out the Celtic faith, and so absorbed some of its pagan deities into their own legion of saints. The much-loved Brigid became Saint Bridget, a lesser deity who, miraculously, had also become a follower of Christ.

Saint Bridget traveled with the Irish refugees who journeyed to Haiti to escape the famine, where she was immediately recognized as a powerful loa and absorbed into Vodou as Madam Brigit.

In Haiti she is able to heal people who are otherwise certain to die as a result of magical illnesses. She is also a fierce protector of her people, and often quite vengeful toward those who would try to hurt her “children.” In addition to curing an illness, she will frequently turn back to the originator the harmful magical spell that caused the problem, so that they get a taste of their own “bad medicine.”

Her lineage is preserved in Vodou in one of the songs, which simply states:

*Maman Brijit, li soti nan anglete*



Madam Brigit, she comes from England

Nowadays, as people with different spiritual backgrounds—Wiccans, shamans, as well as New Age seekers—take an interest in Vodou, the religion is changing again, because the traditions of Vodou become blended with those of these other root practices. Vodou is expansive and fluid enough to deal with these changes and is sure enough of itself to actively welcome them.

What concerns me in this book is not to preach Vodou to you, in the religious sense, but to offer you a perspective on what this tradition really is and involves, and how its techniques of healing, self-exploration, and empowerment can be of service to people in the modern West.

Healing, not religious indoctrination, is the purpose of this book. By working with the essence, or core, of these various traditions, I hope

I have given you a book that is a useful to you on your own life journey, without (God forbid!) requiring that you also subscribe to a particular religious view.

I realize that this still leaves me open to the criticism of cannibalizing tribal belief systems and of encouraging you to do the same. In response to this I would say only that, for good or ill, we live these days in a global village, where cultural exchange takes place every day.

Some of this exchange, sadly, arrives and departs on the back of bulldozers driven by people from oil companies and fast-food chains into rain forests. Nonetheless, it is a romantic fantasy to believe that there is any tribe left on Earth that has not been exposed to Western ideas and contact, or that hasn't passed on its own beliefs in return.

Even the Shuar, recognized as the "last unconquered people of the Amazon," have not been immune to such exchanges. Mariano, one of the shamans quoted in John Perkins's book *The Spirit of the Shuar*, makes the extent of this clear when he says, "Quite a bit has changed over time. Today we have machetes, guns, saws, and matches for lighting fires. These have made an enormous difference. . . . Our children and some older people have gone to school where teachers have told us how things are in the outside world, some of us have become curious, and we've tried some of these things. . . . In the past, the Shuar lived alone in the forests. This is still true, in part . . . but the mission and the airstrip are not far away."<sup>4</sup>

The situation in Haiti is one of even more cultural exchange, because the island was occupied by Westerners—Spanish, French, Americans, and English—for centuries.

So what should we do with these tribal beliefs now that we are aware of them—ignore them? Or put them to positive, practical use in a way that makes sense within our own culture?

If we do choose to ignore them, there is a very real possibility that the wisdom of these tribal beliefs will be lost to us—and to the tribes themselves; the lessons to be learned must be disseminated by others who can carry their message (in a book or otherwise), where they can then be embraced and used by other members of the global village we share. Witness, for example, the tragic situation among Australian aborigines and Native Americans, where, largely as a result of inward-only

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Western influence, the indigenous connection with the spiritual has been largely lost as people move into the cities or are banished to reservations where alcoholism and drug addiction are now rife.

Many indigenous healers recognize these dangers and have requested, of me and of others, that their knowledge be taken back to the West and made available to the Western audience, so we can all help to “change the dream of the Western world”—for their good as well as ours. Because if we continue cutting down the rain forest in pursuit of corporate profits, there will soon be no indigenous culture left to save.

These are my reasons for proposing this system of “core Vodou.” I hope they are enough to satisfy my critics, but if they are not, I’ll do it anyway—because I was asked to by the Houngans themselves.

## **FEAR AND LOATHING IN LAS VODOU**

From what you have read so far, I hope you sense that this is not a sensationalistic book and that, despite the stories you may have read, there is little to fear about Vodou. Indeed, once anything is properly understood, it becomes almost impossible (and certainly illogical) to fear it.

When I first took my daughter, Jodie, to the seaside, she was fourteen months old and we were on a beach in Wales. It was a beautiful summer’s day and I took off her shoes for her so she could run in the sand.

Immediately, she began screaming so loudly and clinging to me so frantically that I thought she had stepped on glass. It took me some moments to realize she was screaming because she had never experienced sand before and was afraid of how it felt. She was—literally—in unfamiliar territory, on unknown ground.

I tell you this story to illustrate that we are all subject to irrational fears. Of course, they only become irrational when our experience teaches us that there is really nothing to be afraid of. I doubt Jodie can now remember her first experience of sand. She explored that fear when she was less than two years old and came quickly to realize that sand would not hurt her. If you still have fears about Vodou, I ask only that you keep an open mind and at least have the courage of a small child as you also step onto new ground.

As well as fear, a lot of prejudice, and even hatred, surrounds the

word *Vodou*. It is amazing how deep-seated these prejudices can be, so much so that we do not even recognize them as prejudice anymore—which is why we need to remain ever alert to our own judgments if we earnestly want to know the truth and not just reinforce the opinions of our culture and those who have socialized us.

If I tell you, for example, that one healing method used in Haiti today employs parts of an aborted human embryo, while another uses monkey glands, both of which are introduced into the bloodstream of the patient, you might well be horrified and shocked at these primitive healing techniques. What I am describing, however, are the ingredients of medical inoculations for hepatitis and polio, respectively—injections your own physician probably gave you at some time if you've traveled abroad. It is true that these treatments are used in Haiti, but probably to a much lesser extent than in London, New York, or even the town where you live.

Again, food rituals and sacrifice play a part in Vodou. One writer tells how a pig was aborted for her and she then ate the crisp-fried embryo. Disgusting? I agree. But what I am describing has nothing to do with Vodou, but is rather a culinary delicacy from southwest France. The embryo was extracted and killed not for any sacred purpose but so that a food writer (Nigella Lawson) could sample this gourmet feast, according to a report a recent U.K. newspaper.<sup>5</sup>

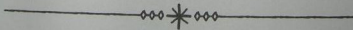
As these examples show, it is important to be alert to our prejudices before we pass judgment on Vodou, for the Western world will often have its own parallels to any Vodou practice we might find offensive, and, unlike in Haiti, the Western analogue will usually have nothing to do with the sacred and more to do with personal gain.





*Curious things happen at  
the edges between worlds.*

—JO MAY



# BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

## Dreaming the Road of Gine

*Kebyesou badji-m anwo*  
*Badji-m anba!*



My temple is above  
 My temple is below!

—VODOU SONG OF FAITH IN  
 CONNECTION AND INFINITE LIFE



*The peristyle (Vodou church) of Houngan Yabofe Danise and Mambo Racine is a short walk through a beautiful landscape of cane and palms. Behind it the rain forest sweeps majestically back toward the rugged purple hills and the turquoise of the still, warm sea, where fishermen make magical dives and can hold their breath for days, according to local legend.*

*The peristyle is the church of Vodou. A simple affair, this one is an open courtyard with a tin roof, supported by a wooden pole at its center. This pole, the porteau mitan, is the doorway, the edge between worlds, for the loa, the spirits who bring order to the cosmos. It is this pole that gives them their sacred entrance into the congregation, so they may take possession of*

the dancers, and spread their message of Love among the people.

At one end of the peristyle stand three crosses, erected by Yabofe to honour the loa with whom he works. It is these spirits who help him heal the people of his community.

The first is an ornate black iron cross for Baron, the enigmatic caretaker of the dead, whose appearances are marked by sexually suggestive dancing, the drinking of rum laced with twenty-one red hot chilies, and laughter, in paradoxical contrast to his somber duty as father of the ancestors, the sacred dead. Around this cross a gourd is hung. The cross is for the crossroads, the plane between life and death, death and rebirth, while the gourd is the cosmic womb from which all life is born. Beneath the cross is the corpse of a young man, taken by arrangement from a local morgue.

The next cross is wooden and has a child's plastic doll hanging from it, which, in turn, holds a smaller dolly. This is the cross of Erzulie, loa of love and protection, who is another of Yabofe's helping spirits. Beneath it is the corpse of a beautiful young woman.

The final cross is for Gran Bwa, the god of the forests and of Nature, the great natural healer of the loa. In the Haitian language the name Gran Bwa means "Big Wood," which reflects his connection with the Power of Nature. The sexual innuendo is not lost on the Haitians. Big Wood suggests sexual Power, fertility, and the ability to give life. Next to this cross stands a tree, whose trunk has been painted white. Emerging from it, also painted white, and not noticeable at first, is a small wooden sculpture of a man in a round hat, who seems to be coming out of the tree. This is Gran Bwa himself, a spirit linked intimately with Nature, but reaching out to man.

All three crosses are stained, dusty, and weathered by the elements. There is nothing about them that Westerners would find attractive alongside our own gold and marble crosses and grand religious statements. But still these have a certain beauty to the Haitians. They are perfectly natural and do not stand as something to be admired from a distance and worshipped in and of themselves, but are functional tools for the religious service of a

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people who can reach out and touch the Power they represent, and let the Divine flood into their bodies.

Opposite the peristyle is a small graveyard of white tombs and crosses, some leaning with age. At the base of each sarcophagus a small square is cut into the stone so the spirits can blow through the tombs and not become caught there. This graveyard is the home of Baron; it is one of many such graveyards in Yabofe's village where Baron and his family of the dead are welcome to take up residence before they are called to be part of the ceremonies of Vodou.

Behind the tombs is a white building, the heart of the Vodou church, which is decorated on the outside with bright murals of other loa sacred to Yabofe. To the left is the mermaid, La Sirene, queen of the underwater world, who rises from the waves alongside the ship of Agwe, the ocean god who represents the horizon and holds in balance the sky and the sea. Next to them is Ogoun, the warrior, here represented as Saint Jacques in the saddle of his white charger slaying a dragon at his feet.

Inside, at the very center of this building, is the djevo, a white-washed room with a dirt floor, where we candidates for initiation will spend five nights and four days in seclusion as we sleep with the spirits and learn their secrets. The walls are painted with images of the angels who will watch over us at this time, blue cherub faces floating above wings without bodies, circling the walls and looking down on us.

Mambo Racine picks up a libation bottle decorated with sequins and icons and pours a little of the liquor—Holy rum—onto the ground, completing the small ritual of jete dlo in salutation to the spirits of this place. "Before you come in here for your initiations, you will die," she laughs. "Then, in here, we cook you for the spirits, so they can pick you apart and consume you. Only then, when you are reborn, can you be a priest and know the secrets of Vodou—how to heal, how to work with the loa—lezen-visib [the invisible ones]. This peristyle is your mother, and the djevo is the womb that will give you birth."

—HAITIAN JOURNALS, JANUARY 2000



Initiation into Vodou is an arduous and sometimes frightening procedure, involving trials and challenges to your worldview and personal courage, as its origins are in the warrior traditions of Africa, which test "manhood" and physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual prowess before conferring the status of priest. This is only right and proper, for the priesthood in Haiti brings huge responsibilities and duties with it, and should not be taken lightly by anyone.

For those who earnestly want to know the ways of Vodou, however, initiation is also very necessary, because the secrets of the tradition and its healing Powers are passed only to initiates.

The Vodou lessons in this book, which have been adapted for a Western audience, will take you through the key stages of the initiatory procedure and are valuable in their own right. They also reveal more of the secret rituals and teachings than any other writings on this subject. But they will not make you an initiate; this status can only be conferred upon you in person and with the direct assistance of the loa. The key difference is experience, particularly of the djevo.

There is a saying in Haiti that when the anthropologists arrive, the loa leave. Vodou cannot be studied in that sense; it cannot be dissected and analyzed in the way our scientists and psychologists would like; it must be experienced. Nor can it be fully understood from the outside, as the real teachings take place within the djevo, the very heart of the Vodou church, where the anthropologists cannot go (only priests and initiates can experience the djevo).

For those who truly want to learn the ways of Vodou, this problem has been compounded because members of the priesthood cannot reveal the hidden knowledge that has been passed to them. No one may be completely open about what happens within the djevo, since all priests are sworn to secrecy and may not write or speak about these matters.

This secrecy has been the way of traditional cultures for generations. In his wide-ranging, though hugely ethnocentric, book on tribal culture, *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer points out that "Europeans have resided among savages for years without discovering some of their capital articles of faith."<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this are many.

First, these "savages" understand the nature and fragility of the human soul and how easily it is lost or damaged. A priest would be fool-

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ish indeed to willingly give away the secrets of his faith and make himself vulnerable to spiritual attack. "No inducement that can be offered is likely to tempt him to imperil his soul by revealing its hiding-place to a stranger. It is therefore no matter for surprise that the central mystery of the savage's life should so long have remained a secret, and that we should be left to piece it together from scattered hints and fragments."<sup>2</sup>

If these concerns of the Houngan to so forcefully protect his soul seem rather melodramatic and based on primitive superstition, I ask only that you withhold final judgment until you have read through this book, especially the chapters that concern the nature of Power and disease.

Second, Haiti has been, for much of its existence, a slave colony, where the practice of traditional spirituality was outlawed on pain of death. Many slaves were forcefully baptized into Catholicism while others were shot or beaten for daring to cling to their original faith. Such imperialism is the stuff of ruling elites—the Romans behaved in the same way toward the Christians before Christians became the elite. In such circumstances of threat and coercion, secrecy was not just a matter of choice; it was a matter of survival.

"Scattered hints and fragments" have therefore been the basis of much of the existing literature about Vodou, and this has led to many of the sensationalistic stories that have appeared about the religion over the last four hundred years. With so little to go on, writers have simply made it up. This, of course, has led to further prejudice toward the tradition and the culture and people of Haiti and, inevitably, to greater levels of secrecy by those who practice Vodou.

It is sad that such prejudice continues in these supposedly enlightened times. As long ago as the 1950s, the religious writer Mircea Eliade bemoaned the ethnocentricity of the West when it came to its exploration of other cultures. Half a century later, little has changed. Fewer than ten years ago, for example, one of Vodou's most sacred religious sites at Bois-Caman, was desecrated and burned by Catholic priests and their zealous followers who had traveled from America to perform this act, all in the name of "love" and "the one true god."

"Some strange sort of inferiority complex seems to inhibit us—the representatives of European culture—from talking about primitive cultures in just and unprejudiced terms. If we attempt to describe the

logical coherence of an archaic culture and discuss its nobility or humanity without stressing the less favourable aspects of its sociological, economic or hygienic practices, we run the risk of being suspected of evasion or even obscuratism."<sup>3</sup>

Recently, however, the Haitian people have realized that the way to tackle such prejudice is to address it by being open about what their tradition really is and does, and the practices it employs.

When I became a member of the Vodou faith, the priests and priestesses spoke proudly to their congregations about the white man who had come to join them, expressing their delight that a Westerner was treating their religion seriously and wanted to take its wisdom back to the West. There was also a recognition of the pressing need for someone to do so because of the deep wounds within our Western culture, the blood of which was beginning to cover the entire world. There was an earnest hope that Vodou might be able to heal our pain and the scars we carry by giving the West the one thing it currently lacks most: a connection to the spirit.

"America and England are wealthy countries," said one Houngan, "but your people are starving in ways they do not even know. You have no community and no real love in your countries and so crazy things get made and the people get greedy and sick. Wars begin because people are hungry in their souls for power. They want only their ideas and dreams to run the world. But they do not know what to do with this power or how to use it when they have it, except to create more sickness and war. Their hunger is never fed because they do not know how to feed their souls."

How true these words turned out to be. Less than three years after they were spoken to me, we find ourselves involved in yet another "world war," this time against terrorism, and in which power (and the lack of it) is, once again, at the root of our suffering, as one half of the world fights for ideological supremacy over the other. How little we have progressed since 1945. In a world like this, healing is the best shot we have at peace.

## **VODOU IN THE MODERN WORLD**

It is a basic principle of Vodou that initiation into the priesthood is not the end of the learning process, as it is when people enter the religious

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priesthoods of the West; rather, it is the beginning of a lifelong process to become a *Bon Houngan*—a good priest. Initiation opens the connection to the spirits, but to become spiritual may take a lifetime.

Since initiating I have deepened my study of Haitian Vodou as well as explored other Vodou traditions. I have been heartened too that many other people are now beginning their own spiritual journey into the Afro-Caribbean shamanic traditions. Since I returned from Haiti a dozen or so British and European men and women, and as many Americans, have made the same journey to the Caribbean to take part in the same ceremonies as I did, and I have a growing family of brothers and sisters around the world who are also the children of Mambo Racine and of the loa they serve.

Vodou is also beginning to enter popular culture in a way that is more positive than at any other time in its history. A few months ago, for example, I watched a television documentary by ex-Spice Girl Melanie Brown (Mel B.), who traced her ancestry back to Benin in Africa and consulted with a number of priests and healers while she was there. The documentary was called *Voodoo Princess*, and Vodou was portrayed as a very gentle, beautiful religion that is empowering and healing for its followers. Even more recently I was asked to consult on a feature film called *London Voodoo*, about an American family who suffers spiritual problems after it moves to London. Finally, they call in a Vodou priest to help them. Unprecedentedly, the priest is the good guy in this film.

Vodou has captured the public imagination, I believe, because, once understood, its Ways of Power are undeniable and the truths behind its teachings remain relevant and accessible to every modern seeker.

Though Vodou is a religion in structure, it is, at heart, a spiritual discipline. It does not require unchallenging loyalty to a dogma that, in cases of fundamentalism, can kill not only the individual spirit of the follower but also the physical body, as we have seen throughout history with the various campaigns of the Christian churches and, more recently, the suicide bombings that have become almost daily events in our recent wars.

Instead, Vodou remains fluid and adaptable to life and the needs of its followers, in almost a Taoist way. It works with what is, not with what should or shouldn't be. Its myths and legends speak of heroes who



have used their own Powers of belief and internal strengths to overcome external forces that were oppressing their lives. Its healing engages the sick person in acts of empowerment, in the knowledge that physical change can only come from physical action in a physical universe. In all of these ways, it is the individual and not the dogma that is important.

This is very refreshing for Western seekers who have walked some way along their path in search of answers. We all start with ourselves, with an inkling, a suggestion, that there might be more within us. We are raw and unformed at this stage. Attracted by angels and whispers of Power, we seek out miracles and masters who can teach us. We witness adepts who walk through fire, transform their bodies into animals and energies, throw themselves from cliffs into an abyss and arise unharmed from the rubble of themselves. I have seen all of these things too, but none of it has helped me, and none of it will, until I do it for myself. And so we come full circle to meet ourselves again and realize our own Power. Our answers will not be found in what others can do or in what they teach, because the important question remains: what will *I* allow myself to do, to be, to know, and to become?

Perhaps Vodou has some suggestions for you. Its approach stresses stopping the rational mind, overcoming mental chatter, and getting beyond the dogma of reality, so we can touch the Infinite within us, our connection to all there is, and, finally, to embrace our Power.

If you choose to explore this tradition, there has never been a better time. But first things first. How do you even spell the name of this tradition? Is it *Vodou* or *voodoo*?

There is confusion over this in the West. Films and newspapers usually favour *voodoo*, and use this spelling to refer to anything that has any associations with black magic or witchcraft, or, at best, African-derived spirituality. In fact, Voodoo is a particular form of the tradition (that of New Orleans), and, if anything, is less directly associated with African spirituality than many of the other branches of the religion, such as Candomble or Obeah.

I prefer the use of *Vodou*, with the capital letter, because this is a religion, just like Buddhism or Catholicism, and deserves the same respect. The word *Vodou* comes from the Fons people of Africa and translates as "deep mystery," "invisible force," or, simply, "spirit,"

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depending on whose translation you accept. It is the form of the tradition most associated with Haiti, and can also trace its roots directly back to African shamanism.

Since Haiti was a French colony for many years, we should not overlook the French connotations of the word. *Vous deux* means “you two.” In other words, all human beings are also something greater and carry another entity within themselves. This entity is the spirit of God, the unifying energy of the universe, which infuses all things. It is also the spiritual connection that exists between us all. We are all one, mirrors of each other, and part of a single family that is the consciousness of all sentient forms.

You will also see the word written as *Vaudu*, *Vaudan*, *Voudu*, and many other spellings, a key reason being that Creole, the language of Haiti, only became formalized quite recently, the culture having historically been an oral one. All of these spellings are therefore acceptable and in continued usage.

For simplicity, in this book I will use the word *Vodou* throughout unless I am referring specifically to practices found in a particular religion (such as Santería or Candomble), in which case I will give the proper name of that tradition. If another spelling appears in direct quotations from a third party, I will retain the original spelling. By the use of *Vodou* I mean the Haitian Vodou tradition and the religion in general.

Many people in the Western world today have a view about what this tradition is, though much of it is ill informed. Two of the most common misconceptions are:

1. Vodou is a terrifying dark art similar to black magic and Satanism, which involves sacrifice, harming others through the use of voodoo dolls, unholy fetishes, and the creation of undead zombies.
2. It is a laughable practice undertaken by hysterical and uncivilized primitives and those in the West gullible enough to believe such nonsense.

Both ideas are dangerous—not to Vodou, but to people in the West who express these theories—and often they coexist, which merely compounds the danger.

The first of these ideas, and the first danger to which it exposes us,

stems from our fear of things that are not us, are of the unknown, are of hidden forces that may in some way harm us. This is the same fear that has led the Western world to the brink of collapse in recent years as we have sought to control the things we have no explanation for, that challenge our worldview, or that may otherwise rise up and engulf us.

We see this fear in our attempts to control the forces of Nature, by burning down the forests so we can graze our cattle and drill for oil, all of which has created a crisis of global warming and massive depletion of the ozone layer that safeguards our planet. We see the same fear in our distrust of natural process and our consequent introduction of pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, processed cattle feeds, and genetically modified crops, which have poisoned our waters and led to diseases such as foot-and-mouth and BSE. Our attempts to control Nature has produced the opposite effect; we have taken our planet to the edge of destruction.

"There is an old Indian saying that the further man's feet are removed from the earth, the less respect he has for living, growing things," writes the American survivalist Tom Brown, who was taught by the Apache medicine man Stalking Wolf. "For too long mankind has been fighting, resisting, and trying to conquer or destroy the pure and natural. This is a grave mistake, for in doing so we also resist and destroy ourselves."<sup>4</sup>

The trees are the lungs of the Earth. Water is her blood, the rivers her arteries, the oceans her heart. What do we imagine we might really achieve by cutting down our forests and poisoning our rivers? We need to stop fearing and start seeing the consequences of our actions.

The second idea—that the worldview of "primitives" is laughably inferior to our own—makes obvious our arrogance and gives rise to the taken-for-granted of the modern civilized world. We have been forced the "self-evident truth" that West is best and might is right.

With such a worldview it is no surprise that we feel justified in seeking dominion over other cultures as well as over Nature herself. The expression of this worldview has taken us even closer to self-destruction as the Western powers now stand ready for nuclear and biological warfare in the Middle East, with political control and oil reserves as the prize.

Mircea Eliade, writing in the 1950s, immediately after the last World War, lamented even then for the tragic state of the European

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soul. Fifty years on, things have changed only in the sense that they have become progressively worse.

“For close on two centuries the European scientific spirit has made prodigious efforts to explain the world so as to conquer and transform it. . . . Having for so long (and so heroically!) followed the path which we believed to be the best and only one worthy of the intelligent, self-respecting individual, and having in the process sacrificed the best part of our soul in order to satisfy the colossal intellectual demands of scientific and industrial progress . . . the stalwarts of European culture have now reached the point where they wonder whether their own work (since it may no longer be regarded as the peak of man’s spiritual achievement or the only culture possible to the twentieth century) has been worth all the effort and sacrifice expended upon it.”<sup>5</sup>

It is time for the healing of the West. For the real danger, inherent in both of these ideas, is that we have lost our sense of respect, excitement, wonder, and awe for the world. We are no longer amazed, delighted, and involved in our surroundings and the joy of our lives, as we once were. Without a sense of awe at the miracle and magic of living (which traditional spiritualities still embrace), we may as well be dead because life itself becomes lifeless and worthless.

When we gave up the nomadic ways of our ancestors, we lost our connection to the natural landscape and it became property instead of a living thing to be nurtured and cared for. Over time, corporate agribusiness, quotas, and profit margins have taken the place of genuine reverence for the spirits of Nature. Without something to care for, our emotional selves atrophy and die; we withdraw our feelings from life and become analysts instead. Our hunger for love and involvement is replaced with an institutionalized reverence for machines and a new science of the mind arises to replace ritual and explain away the “savage’s” connection to Nature as a fetish, a form of madness.

In recent history we have damaged ourselves spiritually, then emotionally, then mentally—which is the way all illness spreads, according to traditional healers—until eventually, we have damaged ourselves

physically. So many new illnesses have developed in recent years—new viral strains such as HIV, alcohol-related liver disease, smoking-related cancers, stress—and emotionally, in the face of our collapsing sense of control, we now find ourselves, early in the twenty-first century, in a situation where at least 60 percent of our teenagers have considered suicide.<sup>6</sup>

In her novel *The Volcano Lover*, Susan Sontag speaks to the disaffection of modern society: “How thin the line between the will to live and the will to die . . . How about a hole . . . a really deep hole, which you put in a public place, for general use. In Manhattan, say, at the corner of Seventieth and Fifth. . . . A sign beside the hole reads: ‘4PM–8PM/Mon Wed & Fri/Suicide permitted.’ Just that. Why, surely people would jump who had hardly thought of it before.”<sup>7</sup>

We have lost our sense of balance and involvement with the world, and it shows.

It is uncommon in the Western world to find a sensible portrayal of traditional spirituality, which just might hold an answer to some of these problems. This is especially true of Vodou, which still sells newspapers, after all, because of the sensationalistic stories that can be woven around it. An understanding of how these practices might be used by ordinary people in order to fend off disease and find a sense of purpose and Power is what has been lacking and, in the current climate, what might do the most good to restore a sense of wonder to, and involvement with, life. And so we can heal the wounds that are leading us toward our own global suicide.

## THE MEANING OF POWER

In Vodou, as in other spiritual traditions, personal Power and personal well-being are not separate, as they are in the Western worldview. In the West our sense of power is normally granted through office or role. We may be a boss, a housewife, a doctor, a plumber, a father, or any number of prescribed social roles that have nothing to do with our health or our true purpose (which sometimes is never discovered; its discovery is usually not granted enough importance, as long as our social role is performed).

In Vodou it is different. An individual is Powerful to the extent that

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he is protected by the spirits and by his ability to work in partnership with them to achieve what he needs in life. If he is Powerful in this way, he is also full of health and well-being and able to resist the onslaughts of life and the drains on his energy. He automatically has purpose, for he is aware of his calling: the loa have told him.

The Houngan and the Mambo have achieved the highest state of Power and are considered masters of spirit and consciousness—their own and that of others. We have much to learn from them.

By making the spirits directly available and visible to the people through the possession state of *danse-loa*, the Houngan demonstrates, in three-dimensional reality, the existence of another world. In essence, this is a highly political statement of personal Power, for if a simple human is capable of communion with the gods, how strong and visionary he must be—way beyond that of the institutions and elites that in their unchallenged arrogance assume that they have automatic ascension above mere mortals.

It is one of the paradoxes of the spiritual path that you can only be spiritual by physically *doing*. You will never achieve enlightenment by sitting around and thinking about it. Instead of trying to force enlightenment, you just have to let it happen. Knowing—seeing and experiencing—that we are a part of something infinite, that there is something other that is not us, provides us all with a sense of universal community, of belonging, and the certainty of survival after death. The Houngan's presentation of this physical evidence gives the follower a purpose beyond the trivial and mundane concerns of daily living, which can be so stultifying to the soul and which involve us all in the battle for the political status quo whether we enter the fight willingly or not.

This evidence has been missing from our Western worldview and, believing we lead tiny and finite lives, we have created a finite planet of tiny concerns that we are not interested enough in or enthused enough about to protect and respect.

Perhaps the Power of the Houngan to provide such spiritual certainty to a purpose-hungry planet accounts for the growth of interest in Vodou in recent years. One author, Migene Gonzalez-Wippler, writes, "In the United States and Latin America, there are now over 100 million practitioners of Santería [Cuban Vodou]," and calculates a growth rate of more

than two hundred people a day.<sup>8</sup> Add to this the followers of Santeria that live outside America, and factor in the thousands of people worldwide who follow or are interested in the other Vodou traditions, and we are probably looking at a world congregation in excess of two hundred million. This makes Vodou the fastest-growing religion on Earth.

Despite the stereotypes and the potential for abuse, the destructive use of Power is rare in Vodou. This is because the Houngan, while master of the spirits, is also directly answerable to them in the partnership that exists between the living and the dead. While he is immensely powerful on Earth, in spiritual terms the Houngan is merely a channel, a "hollow bone" through which the spirits make their presence felt. The essence of these spirits and their desire for the people is Love. Any Houngan abusing his Power and disrupting the flow of Love is dealt with swiftly by the spirits themselves.

There are many cautionary tales about such spiritual retribution in Vodou. One Houngan, for example, was known as a difficult, paranoid man who would often take vengeance on perceived enemies (many of whom were actually quite innocent) through his use of curses. Over the years this once rich and successful Houngan watched his congregation dwindle to nothing, as he ignored a series of warnings from the loa to change his ways. Finally, the man died penniless and alone.

"The loa have Power; the Houngan merely serves," as they put it in Haiti.

## **MAKE LOVE, NOT SENSE: THE WORLD AS AN ACT OF FAITH**

Before we move on to the techniques of Vodou, I want to give you a little background on the principles behind the tradition so you have a context for its practice. The first step for the initiate is always to learn the context of the teachings; only then can these teachings make sense.

The central principle of Vodou is this: The world we know is no more than an act of faith. We actually live in a field of energy, where we can see or sense whatever we choose. Moreover, there are many different levels even to the reality we have chosen. Modern science talks of "ten-dimensional hyperspace," which is a fancy way of saying that this

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world we think we know must have at least ten different dimensions to it, most of which are invisible to us, for the world to work at all.

One of the biggest puzzles for today's astronomers, in fact, is that 90 percent of the universe seems to be missing. Scientists first hit this snag in the early 1930s, when they tried to weigh galaxies to find out how much mass the universe has. There are two ways of doing this calculation: either by working out how bright a galaxy is and converting its light to mass, or by studying how fast stars at the edge of the galaxy are moving inward to join the bigger galactic mass. The two calculations should work together, so that one set of data perfectly matches the other, as they are effectively recording the same thing: mass. The problem is that they don't match. This prompted Jan Oort and Fritz Zwicky, two pioneers in this field of science, to speculate that there must be something else out there in the universe—some "dark matter" that is invisible to us and holding the cosmos together. If it didn't, galaxies would simply fly apart.

In other words, even our scientists only know 10 percent of the universe; just like the rest of us, they have to accept the other 90 percent on trust, as faith.

The way we see the world is, therefore, no more than convention. It is what we have been conditioned and taught to see. We assemble its reality from best guesses, available data, and speculation. It is an act of faith. And the only way we can really know it is not through scientific proof or common sense, but by using our own senses, uniquely, as individuals. Whether we like it or not, that is the way the universe truly operates.

When you first enter the *djevo*, the Vodou initiation chamber, you are blindfolded and all those in the community who have come to witness your incarceration—many hundreds of people from the village and the congregation—weep for you. Their mournful songs speak of your loss, of your death, and their prayers are for your safe passage back to Gine, the land of the spirits.

In a symbolic, but nonetheless real, sense this is the position in which we all find ourselves. From birth we have all been blindfolded with the folds of our cultural worldviews and scientific guesstimates, and we must die to that if we are ever to be able to truly open our eyes. We must replace one faith with another.



Human beings are indoctrinated into the faith of their culture: that the world works in one particular way. The process of indoctrination begins at the instant of birth—perhaps sooner—and intensifies quickly after that. When we are born we are bundles of raw potential and the directions we might take in life are infinite. We will soon find ourselves herded in a particular direction, however, as a result of both parental and cultural influence. At first we are only blinkered, but soon we become blind to the rest of the vast universe that we are also members of.

When does this blindness set in? In the womb, perhaps, when the human soul first incarnates. One of my healing clients is a young girl of fourteen who suffers terrible fear of death along with separation anxiety from her mother, to the extent that she has awoken screaming at night for the last ten years. Brought to me by her mother, this young girl asked me to help her with the problem, and so I journeyed and dreamed around her problem (using techniques we will come to in other chapters). What I saw was that her mother and father had been separating and discussing divorce even as this child was conceived, and the mother had actively considered abortion. Even having decided to keep the child, the mother was convinced that the fetus would not reach full term as a result of the stress she was under. Their tiny progeny and its fragile soul had absorbed this information from the moment of its sentient incarnation. Fear of death. Separation anxiety. Inevitable, given the circumstances. This is the script this child would have to live with unless it could be rewritten through healing.

This original script is reinforced from the first day of our lives, when the world takes hold of us. For example, Smith and Lloyd, two psychologists working in the 1970s, showed that parents respond differently to boys and girls within twenty-four hours of their birth, not on the basis of gender but purely because of their expectations about how boys and girls *ought* to behave. This means that the child's course in life has already been set. Children are either boys or girls—with all that entails in terms of who they are and who they can never be—from the moment they are born. This research was very blunt, considering only the major manifestations of the parent's worldview. Consider what else might be going on behind the obvious, as with my client and her fears of death and loss of the mother.

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Smith and Lloyd's research is one tiny example from one tiny life, but it illustrates the point. The world acts cumulatively in order to impress itself upon you, so by the time you are capable of independent thought, you are no longer able to think independently; you are part of the "mood" of the world.

Houngan Pierre, a Port-au-Prince Houngan, once said to me, "The most difficult part of initiation is to let go of everything you 'know.' This is the fear. Once you see the world as a sea of energy, you will understand." In Haiti this process of letting go of the world is symbolized by the blindfold that is wrapped around your eyes as you complete the first major ceremony of initiation, the *bat ge* or *bat guerre* (words derived from the French *battre guerre*, meaning "to beat war" or, more loosely, "the battle for the spirit"), and prepare to enter the *djevo*.

The *bat guerre* lasts for three nights of arduous exertion, dancing, and spirit possession, as well as liberal doses of the mildly hallucinogenic liquor absinthe. The ritual is designed to separate your sense of who you have become as a result of your conditioning from the raw potential of who you were and still can be. You enter the battle to fight for your own first-born spirit.

When the *bat guerre* is complete the blindfold is applied to shield you from the world so your fragile, newfound spirit is protected from further outside influence.



*We are bundled into the djevo, each of us dressed wholly in white, and laid in the fetal position on the dirt floor. Each of us is coming into being. This is our time of conception. We are, if human at all, infants, and like an infant we cannot speak or take care of ourselves.*

*We lie in total darkness, our eyes bound shut, and we are forbidden to make any sound at all. If we need the toilet, we are led to a bucket, in front of the entire initiate group (all, thankfully, blindfolded), that we use it in their company, like babes on a potty. We are starting again as babies, free from the conventions that have been forced upon us.*

*There is another interpretation too. As well as making ourselves as newborns and available to the spirits once again, we are slaves within the bowels of a ship making its way to another world.*

*When the Africans were taken from their homelands their conditions were no better. Herded together in one room, they ate and pissed and cried, gave birth and died (many hundreds of them) together, kept in this one small hold like cattle. No more and no less valuable, the priests and the peasants, the tribal kings, the cows and goats. All lay down together, no division between them anymore. They were all equal now, and equally dispensable.*

*The djevo is the experience of Gine, primal Africa; of being removed from the world so we become people without culture, and, in one way or another, sent on a journey where we will redefine who we are. During this time we will connect again with our own primal selves, from before we were made into slaves of the worldview of our culture. Over these next few days we will evolve into something else: independent human beings with our own sense of self, which a prison ship or a culture can never take from us.*

*The djevo connects us to Gine, gives us all a spiritual heritage within Africa, where all life began, and allows us to feel that sense of self-direction that the warrior will never allow to be taken from him. In this there is Power. That is our first lesson.*

—HAITIAN JOURNALS, JANUARY 2000



This extract from my journal at the time of my initiation gives a sense of this stage of the process, during which you must give yourself over (or give yourself back) to the spirits and the energy of the universe, as a child again, in order to discover a new faith: who you truly are.

### **GOD'S FOOLS AND THE ORIGIN OF VODOU**

The great visionary Terence McKenna once wrote that in order to know ourselves, "We must become god's fools."<sup>9</sup> All children and "uncivilized"

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peoples begin their personal and collective evolutionary journey in this state of grace, before we learn the rules of who and how we must be.

The legends of Vodou and the archaeological evidence speak of a time when the entire human race coexisted in divine connection with the spirits of Nature in the land of Gine—Africa as it once was. It was a time when we all understood the land and honored its spirit through the power of ceremony and ritual. The people derived their sense of self and their healing Powers from interaction with these forces, just as some still do today. It was this sense of balance and co-creation with Nature that enabled the medicine men of these tribes to work intimately with the land and produce the amazing healings and feats of divination I had been reading about since I was an eighteen-year-old undergraduate.

Visit any tribal and Earth-honoring community today, whether a traditional village or a modern collective, such as a music festival, and despite your proximity to encroaching “civilization,” you will still get a sense of this Power. There is something about the energy of like-minded souls coming together in simple ceremony that liberates the forces of Nature and leads to inspiration, creativity, and a sense of belonging to the Earth.

In the legends of Vodou, and in the facts of history, the expulsion from this paradise came with the slave trade, as people from a different, less peaceful culture invaded the lands and made commodities out of human beings. People of many different African nations were transported to Haiti to become agricultural slaves. While their new masters enjoyed the opulence of a luxurious lifestyle beneath the Caribbean sun, thousands of Africans died from sunstroke and dehydration in the fields or from beatings delivered for the smallest offenses to Western sensibilities. At the height of slavery in America the average survival time for a slave was thirty years; in Haiti it was two.

In this new world, where people were herded together in prison-camp conditions, it was inevitable that there would be a sharing of experiences and beliefs and the emergence of a strong sense of community and spiritual connection, just as prisoners of war from many different cultures have reported.

Inadvertently, an ethnic and spiritual melting pot—a crucible—was created by the slave trade itself, when Africans of different lineages were introduced to each other and to the surviving members of the indigenous

Haitian people. The beliefs of these indigenous people turned out to be very similar to those of the Africans and were immediately accepted, as were those of new and later arrivals, including Scottish and Irish immigrants who also shared a belief in the pagan Earth gods and had similar rituals for contacting these supernatural forces.

This sense of solidarity and community was unnerving for the slave owners, who were outnumbered on the island and could not risk rebellion from those they owned. In addition to greater brutality and tighter discipline, another strategy for controlling the passions of the slaves was to forcibly baptize them into the French Catholic faith, replacing their earthy and Power-filled rituals with others that were far more sedate. And so thousands of Africans were marched into churches at the point of a gun, where the power of the "one true God" was confirmed with bullets and whips before the Catholic-convert slaves were taken back to the fields.

Unfortunately for the slave owners, however, their slaves were happy to accept the Catholic faith—not *as* their own, but *into* their own, recognizing its saints and angels as just different versions of the same spirits they had been worshipping for generations. In a sense Catholicism actually created Vodou, for the final outcome of this great blending of African, Haitian, European pre-Christian, and the Catholic faiths was indeed the emergence of Vodou as a new religion that encompassed them all.

When you serve your time in the djevo, therefore, you are connecting not only with your original self and with your deep, genetic history as a member of the African nation that gave birth to all life, but also with every race and generation that has suffered persecution at the hands of another—whether Irish, Scottish, African, Arabian, Jewish, Muslim, or Native American.

## THE PATH OF THE HERO

The way of the "outsider" is always one of increasing frustration. There are numerous stories from our own Western history of people who were excluded from society but believed passionately in their own vision, and who finally exploded back into the culture that had exiled them in order to make their point. Such people are often pioneers who see a bet-

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In Haiti the outsiders were the slaves and it was their oppression that led to the vision of Boukman Dutty, a slave from Jamaica who had long been imprisoned for crimes he had never committed. Boukman, who was also a Vodou priest, is one of the heroes of Haiti. It was he who gave the slaves their freedom.

Inflamed at the injustice he saw around him, Boukman passed into Vodou history when he assembled a group of Maroons (escaped slaves) at Bois-Caman in the hills above Cap Haitien, in the north of Haiti. On August 14, 1791, Boukman made an offering to the gods, and so began the ceremony of Bois-Caman (*Bwa Kayiman*, or "Alligator Woods," in Creole), a simple ritual that would lead, eventually, to the only successful slave revolt in history.

Legend has it that the drumbeats ricocheted like bullets that night as, ever more frenzied, the people danced their prayers for freedom. Then Boukman, "the new Spartacus," stepped forward to invoke the whole of Nature against the oppressors:

The good lord who created the sun which lights us from above, which stirs the sea and makes the thunder roar—this god, watches us. He sees what the white people do.

The god of the white people demands from them crimes; our god asks for good deeds. But this god who is so good demands vengeance! He will direct our hands; he will aid us.

Throw away the image of the god of the whites, who thirsts for our tears, and listen to the voice of liberty that speaks in all of our hearts!<sup>10</sup>

The revolution began eight days later, on August 22, when almost two thousand coffee plantations and two hundred sugar farms were burned to the ground and the plantation slaves were liberated.

Napoleon countered by ordering thirty-four thousand of his troops, who were en route to New Orleans, to detour to Haiti in order to quell the riots, believing that this would be more than enough to restore order. Only two thousand of his men survived, despite their military training and weapons and the fact that they vastly outnumbered the

unarmed slaves. The Haitians, however, had something far more powerful than guns on their side.

Calling on the loa to protect them, the slaves, many of them deep in the trance of spirit possession, charged the French. Whole magazines of bullets were emptied into the bodies of the possessed slaves; still they kept coming. There were legends of Houngans entering the battle armed only with magical horse tails with which they directed an army of the dead and the spirits of war; the French troops mysteriously fell dead in front of them, with no sign at all of physical injury.

The revolution continued in this way for almost two years until, on August 29, 1793, the French government gave in and abolished slavery on the island.

The victory was half won, but the fight was not over. Offended that white gentlemen should be defeated by black slaves, England decided to lend its weight to the French in order to reinstate slave ownership. The English force invaded but was immediately repelled by a new hero of the black cause, Toussaint-Louverture, grandson of the king of Arada, who had been born to slavery on a plantation in the north of the island. Bolstered by his victory, Toussaint-Louverture went on to conquer the entire island, declaring it a free black republic in 1801.

The heroes of the revolution died proudly—Boukman in an ambush, Toussaint-Louverture, eventually captured, in a French jail—having liberated thousands of slaves who had committed no other crime than having a particular skin color and belief. The independence of Haiti was confirmed on January 1, 1804, almost thirteen years after the ceremony at Bois-Caman, where the priests had called for the intervention of the gods.

Of course, no one really knows what actually happened on that hillside above Cap Haitien all those years ago. It is a myth, a legend, “the twilight speech of an old man to a boy”—and therein lies its Power and its truth.

The path of Vodou is the path of the hero who lives within us all. It is the Way to Power that only comes through facing our oppressor—whether it is an external force or the enemy within us: the tiny, finite mind that fears every challenge and always answers no.

By walking the Way of the Houngan you become your own hero

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and master of your destiny. This is the real truth of what happened that night at Bois-Caman, and it is as true today as it ever was.

The time has come now for us to embark on the hero's path. What follow are exercises that will allow you to explore the first stage of the initiatory process in Vodou: the return to the sacred.



## THE VODOU LESSONS: 1 OPENING TO THE SACRED

Throughout this book I will give you the opportunity to experience some of the practices of Vodou. If you wish to use these opportunities, please follow the lessons at the end of each chapter in the order they appear, as each has been designed to lead into the next in a logical sequence that is based, to some extent, on the process of Vodou initiation.

These first teachings are the most basic, and the most important. They will show you how to create a peristyle of your own, as all peristyles are essentially altars designed on a grand scale. If you have a serious desire to communicate with the spirits, it is vital that you create a sacred space in which you are energetically protected and can focus on communion with the otherworld, rather than on the mundane events of the day. Then you can begin to explore the worlds of the ancestors and the loa, and they can offer you their insights and healing.

### *The Kay Myste: Creating Sacred Space*

Altars are central to most faiths, and the focal point of almost every church. Even if you don't think of yourself as religious or spiritual, you may still have a quiet room or area of the house where you meditate, listen to music, read, or just get away for a few minutes from interruptions and other family members. Whenever we create a space like this, consciously or unconsciously, we empower it with our intention and, through our peaceful energy, we make it a Power place, a battery for the sacred, within our homes.

An altar is a gateway to the otherworlds that exist within you—the places of imagination, intuition, inspiration, the poetry of the soul, and



creative genius—and to the spirit world that exists all around us. Whenever you sit before it you invite these spiritual forces to notice and interact with you, and you give your intuitive self permission to interact with them.

In Haiti altars may take the form of *kay myste* (from the French *caille des mysteres*, “house of mysteries”), which are separate buildings, like small houses, that provide a sacred space for the spirits that are special to the owners of these buildings. Often they are decorated and very beautiful spaces, and every *kay myste* (sometimes known as *kay mo*—“house of the spirits”) is as individual as the person who created it.

Your *kay myste* should consist of a separate room or a small area screened off from the rest of the room, to make it a very definite place for spiritual activity. Providing a screen also means that this section of the room remains uncontaminated by mundane energies and that you do not project your ordinary concerns into it during your normal occupation of the room. Your divider can be as basic or elaborate as you wish—from a simple curtain or sheet hung across the room to a separate room built within the house.

Begin by installing a small table (or some planks placed on bricks) to create a raised platform. Found natural materials are good for this and bring their own energy with them. Driftwood from a beach or a few logs collected while out walking in a forest are ideal. Cover this with a clean, plain white cloth, and, if available, sprinkle it with Florida water (a strong perfume used in Vodou as a medicine and particularly as an “antiseptic” for the cleansing of spiritual wounds). Florida water can be purchased from *botanicas* (magical supply shops) in most major cities, or on the Web. You can also make your own by using the following recipe, which is based on an old New Orleans formula. The ingredients should be available from most herbal or health food stores.

You will need one ounce of benzoin gum, two ounces of dried bergamot, and three ounces of dried cinnamon bark. These are added to two pints of 75-proof alcohol and allowed to stand for nine days. Then simply decant the liquid into smaller bottles.

Next collect four stones (roughly the size of an orange or small grapefruit) from your garden or from your walks into Nature. Clean these in salt water, and place one in the center of each side of your altar

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of love (Exalté) and P  
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you and more

so that they, effectively, make the sign of the cross. (In Vodou the cross has nothing to do with the Christian understanding of this symbol. Rather, as Michel Philippe Lerebours explains in exercise four, below, it represents the union of spirit and matter, and the crossroads where the living and the dead meet).

At the center of the altar place a clean glass bowl and fill it with water, adding three drops of white rum (the drink preferred by the spirits) as you bless the water, the container, and the altar itself.

Sprinkle a little water onto the stones and the altar, naming them as you do so. In Vodou ritual objects are normally baptized and named in this way. This enhances their Power by giving them life and charging them with the purpose of your intent. Once you name something, it becomes real and its faith is fixed.

Now take a glass candleholder and place a little earth from your garden and a few grains of salt in its base. Put this directly in front of your bowl of water.

Take a white candle and anoint it with natural oils (aromatherapy oils are fine) by rubbing it with the oil, from the middle to the top and from the middle to the base. Direct your energy into it as you do so. Then insert the candle into its holder.

You now have representatives of the four elements on your altar: Fire (the candle), Water (the bowl), Earth (the stones on your altar and the soil in your candleholder), and Air (the altar space itself). These elements are significant in Vodou and may also be used in healing, as we will see later.

You may add to the altar any other Power objects that seem appropriate to you, according to the divine principles you wish to serve and bring into your life. A shrine for the ancestors, for example, will have images of deceased relatives, enabling you to draw upon the wisdom of those who have gone before you. An altar for the loa will attract the energies these spirits represent. You do not need to know each spirit in order to attract this energy, as the loa represent cosmic archetypes, such as Love (Erzulie) and Power (Ogoun). Even without knowing the loa, you can still include items that represent these energies—such as flowers and images of hearts, for the Love-Erzulie principle, or a photograph of you on a day when you felt particularly strong and healthy or

achieved something important in your life, to symbolize the Power-Ogoun principle.

Other items you may add include stones, crystals, sacred symbols, or incense. My own altar also includes feathers, rattles, drums, spiritual books, a *govi*, my *pot tete* (see page 65 for an explanation of the *govi* and page 164 for discussion of the *pot tete*), divinatory tools, and oils. Objects you wish to empower, such as jewelry, wands, herbs, medicines, or instruments of healing, can also be incorporated into your altar design.

At the back of the altar, at the very center, place a short branch or cylindrical length of wood. This represents the World Tree or *porteau mitan* of the Vodou peristyle (see pages 75–78 for discussion of the function of the *porteau mitan*) and is the symbolic doorway between worlds through which the spirits enter.

Always keep your altar clean, the water in your bowl fresh, and never use the altar as a dumping ground for nonritual items. Mambo Racine warns: “Let it get dusty, let the water become murky and stale, use it as a resting place for house keys and pencils, or ignore it, and you will find yourself tired, drained, unlucky, and uninspired. Treat it with respect, keep it immaculately clean, visit it often, and you will be rewarded with energy, spiritual growth, personal victories, and remarkable coincidences.”<sup>11</sup>

### Empowering Your Altar

Once you are happy with the design of your altar, you need to empower it as a place for spiritual activity.

First, on the altar behind the bowl of water place a photograph of a deceased relative whose love for you was always strong and pure. If you have no deceased relatives you can think of or were that close to, use a photograph of a person who represents ancestral wisdom and love. This might be a well-known public (almost archetypal) figure, such as Gandhi or the Dalai Lama (they don’t have to be connected to Vodou); it could also be someone unknown to you, but whose image (even a picture from a magazine) suggests the qualities you are looking for. If the latter, give the person a name that is meaningful to you and that symbolizes these spiritual attributes. This image represents your connection

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...with some a consecrate  
...empower Legba

to the ancestors (*zanset yo*), but you need also to make a connection to the loa who work with these ancestors.

The first loa to be called in any Vodou ceremony is Legba. Papa Legba, as he is affectionately known, is the gatekeeper for the other loa, much as Saint Peter is for the Catholic saints and angels, and must always be addressed first and asked to open the gate for you so that you can make contact with the specific loa and cosmic principles you wish to work with.

There are many songs in Vodou that reflect the importance of Legba's role. The following is an example and may also be used as an invocation before your altar:

*Papa Legba ouvri baye pou mwen, ago e!*  
*Atibon Legba ouvri baye pou mwen.*  
*Ouvri baye pou mwen, Papa, pou m pase,*  
*Le m retounen, map remesi lwa yo.*



Papa Legba open the gate for me, open!  
 Legba open the gate for me.  
 Open the gate for me, Papa, for me to pass,  
 When I return, I will thank the loa.

Note that Legba is asked three times to open the gate. This is because Legba's sacred number is three and anything asked of him or given as an offering to him must therefore take place in threes. There are parallels here with the Power of three that is recognized in other spiritual traditions, such as the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) of the Catholic Church, and the Wiccan threefold way.

Legba is also the protector of the home and is a very Powerful loa to have on your side. He should therefore be represented on your altar with the particular symbols that are sacred to him. His natural habitat is in the earth found at gates and crossroads, for example, and his color is red. A bowl (or calabash, if you have one) filled with three scoops of earth from a crossroads and holding a red candle can therefore be used to represent Legba. If possible, collect this soil on a Friday or Saturday, as these are the days sacred to this loa. If you have one, an image of

Saint Peter, Legba's Catholic counterpart, can be propped alongside the bowl. Every time you light your candle, you are then calling upon the Power of Papa Legba.

Baron, meanwhile, is the guardian of the ancestors, and should therefore also be symbolized on your altar. Baron's colors are black and purple—funereal colors—and his habitat is subterranean places. A little dirt taken from a place in Nature that gives entrance to the Earth or the underworld (such as a cave or a mine) can be added to a bowl containing a candle in one of Baron's colors. If possible, collect this soil on Saturday, the day sacred to Baron. Light the candle and you will be in connection with Baron and may then request his help in calling the ancestors to you.

When you are ready, begin to explore the Power of your altar by simply finding some time when you will not be disturbed and sitting quietly in front of the altar. Light the candles, and gaze meditatively into the water in your central bowl.

Relax and breathe slowly as you visualize a deep peace entering your body. Then think about the ancestor you would like to connect with. Recollect moments from the past that you shared with that person, and feel the love between you that still exists. If you are using an ancestor-surrogate, such as the Dalai Lama, visualize a tangible link between the two of you.

Repeat the name of your ancestors out loud, talk to them, and tell them that you love them and wish to work with them. Explain your purpose for doing so—that you wish to heal yourself or others, or to find out more about the spiritual world, or simply that you miss them and want to feel that they are still with you. When you sense their presence around you, tip a little water from your bowl on the floor three times as a libation to welcome them.

Do this meditation often and the bond between you and the ancestors will strengthen every time, even as your altar becomes more charged with the sacred.

### **Manje-loa: Feeding the Spirits**

After you have repeated the above exercise for a few weeks, it will be time to "feed" the altar by offering a feast to the loa and the ancestral spirits who are now working with you.

This ceremony represents the power of you. Sacrifice in Vodou types. The Okech of prayer or the another"—is a sacred offering. In Vodou this do with the sla rice, green ban chicken, rum, c foodstuffs in an Place a little altar. In the cer one for Baron. Also place enjoyed during since salt is a d tures of sprinkl do not know w offerings that peanuts, popcorn tobacco (which ancestors drank place a white ca the candle. Touch each be into the food, pu do, talk to the lo tive energies from serve you—all hea unhappiness, or la tive energies to be and immediate

This ceremony is known as *manje-loa*. It is a gesture of love and also represents the partnership of energetic exchange that exists between you.

Sacrifice in Vodou rarely has anything to do with the media stereotypes. The Oxford English Dictionary definition of the word—"an act of prayer or thanksgiving . . . giving up a valued thing for the sake of another"—is far closer to its Vodou meaning. It is about making a sacred offering in exchange for something that you value.

In Vodou the sacrifices preferred by the loa usually have nothing to do with the slaughter of animals. Legba's preferences, for example, are rice, green bananas, smoked foods, and cassava, while Baron enjoys chicken, rum, cigars, and herring. You will find some, if not all, of these foodstuffs in any large supermarket, if not your own refrigerator.

Place a little of these foods into small bowls and put these on your altar. In the center of the bowl, for Legba place a red candle, and in the one for Baron, a black or purple candle.

Also place in a separate bowl a little of the food your ancestors enjoyed during their lives (do not, however, include salt or salty foods, since salt is a deterrent to the spirits—hence the tradition in many cultures of sprinkling salt across thresholds for spiritual protection). If you do not know what foods your ancestors preferred, you can use generic offerings that all spirits seem to enjoy. These include grilled corn, peanuts, popcorn, white foods like cooked rice and milk, and rum and tobacco (which are often favored by the spirits, whether or not your ancestors drank or smoked during their lives). In the center of this bowl place a white candle. Liquid offerings can be placed in glasses next to the candle.

Touch each bowl to your forehead and heart, and blow three times onto the food, putting your love and intention into every breath. As you do, talk to the loa and your ancestors and ask them to remove the negative energies from your life that are creating situations that no longer serve you—ill health, ill fortune, poverty, disharmony, unemployment, unhappiness, or lack of love—and ask that they replace these with positive energies to bring only good things, such as healing and health, love and friendship, work, money, joy and laughter. Ask for practical changes that will really make a difference in your life, and be explicit;

the spirits will not second-guess you, just as your relatives, when they were alive, could not.

Place your offerings on the altar and safely light the candle within each one, then leave the room. The flame of the candles will carry the energy of your offerings to the ancestors. Allow them to burn down naturally, and when the flame is extinguished, take the food and any candle remains and bury them in Nature at the foot of a tree. All of the utensils you have used should be washed thoroughly in salt water and never used for ordinary meals.

However you have built your altar, remember always that it is a door between the world of human beings and the world of the ancestors and the *loa*. Your ancestors love you. They will come and visit you, accept your offerings, and point you on the way. They will instruct you, protect you, fight for you, and heal you. They will bring you messages through your intuition and your dreams.

—MAMBO RACINE

### **Vever: Designs for Mystical Union**

Each *loa* has a particular drawing or design representative of only him or her, which is known as a *vever*. These designs are “calls” to the particular spirits you wish to work with.

Once again, it is not so important to know the specific design for each particular *loa* because these drawings also represent the archetypal or cosmic principles that the *loa* themselves embody.

As Michel Philippe Lerebours points out in *Haiti: Art Naïf, Art Vaudou*:

In the voodoo liturgy, each colour has a particular meaning . . . Lines also have cosmic value. The vertical represents the spirit; the horizontal, matter; the cross becomes the meeting of spirit and matter, the sign of Legba, who provides access to the other *loa*; it is also the sign of Christ, god becoming man. The circle, which appears one way or another in almost all the *veve*, is . . . the image of humans who become the centre of everything.<sup>12</sup>

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It is not just in vever that horizontal and vertical lines and circles are used, of course. Our written language is also composed of these basic units. It is therefore unnecessary to know that Azaka is the loa of the plentiful harvest, that Agwe offers protection for travelers on the seas, that Simbi brings the gift of clairvoyance, or that Erzulie brings love, in order to draw upon the Power of these loa. Instead, it is possible to create a *sigil*, a sacred drawing of your own design that attracts these archetypal strengths to you.

A sigil is a picture made up of letters or, rather, the lines and circles that comprise these letters. The word *LOVE*, for example, is composed of two vertical and four horizontal lines (in the *L* and the *E*), two angled lines (in the *V*) and a single circle (the *O*).

Therefore, to create a sigil to call Love into your life, begin by breaking the word down into its constituent lines and circles. There is no need to repeat any lines. So you will notice, for example, that the vertical in the *L* is replicated in the vertical of the *E*, as is the bottom horizontal of the *L*. Instead of using both the *L* and the *E*, the *E* alone will suffice, as this also incorporates the *L* and can stand for all of these lines.

The *V* and the *O*, however, are not repeated in the parts of any other letters, so these need to be integrated separately into the drawing. You might choose, for example, to connect the *V* to the base of the *E* and surround the whole with the circle of the *O*, so that the word *love* now becomes a sacred image, unrecognizable as a word but still carrying the energy of your intention and attractive to the loa Erzulie, who stands for the principle of Love:



Figure 1.1. A sigil for Love



In the same way, a sigil of the word *POWER*, attractive to the loa Ogoun, might become:



*Figure 1.2. A sigil for Power*

And a sigil for the word *CLAIRVOYANCE*, attractive to the loa Simbi, might be drawn as:



*Figure 1.3. A sigil for Clairvoyance*

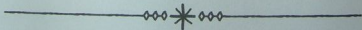
In this way, you can create vevers of your own, which are doubly Powerful because they also carry the spirit of your own intention as very personal designs. Be imaginative and allow your creative genius to flow as you work on your designs, thus reflecting your own Powers and uniqueness, as well as your needs.

These vevers, when placed on the altar to attract the appropriate loa or spiritual energy, can be used to empower your altar for particular ends. You can also carry them with you in order to remain focused on your intent and maintain a connection to the spirits. If you have the money to have them made into jewelry, these sigil-vevers also make attractive pendants or brooches, which you can wear close to your skin at all times and allow the Power of the loa to course through you.



*There is some kiss we want  
with our whole lives,  
The touch of Spirit on the body.*

—RUMI



# 2

## THE QUEST FOR POWER

### Becoming a Bon Houngan

*Djab O!*  
*Djab-la nan baye-a*  
*Djab O!*  
*Gen de pawol m ta pale ave yo . . .*



Spirit, oh!  
The spirits are at the gate  
Spirit, oh!  
There is something I would say to  
them . . .

—VODOU SONG FOR  
CALLING THE SPIRITS



*There is a different quality to night in Haiti. Without streetlights to dazzle the darkness, no blare of radios and TVs, or streets full of houses, there is a silence and a deep, womblike darkness that is like stepping into another world. A short walk takes you into the*

primal landscape that our ancestors knew. They must have looked up at these stars too, vast and bright and infinite, in their time as human beings, and marveled at the mystery there.

Our small group has been invited to the inauguration of a new peristyle in the jungle outside Jacmel, close to the border with the Dominican Republic. Very few outsiders are invited to such a ceremony, and it is a great honor to have been asked. Most of our walk is completed in silence as we meditate on what we may see and experience at this rare event.

In this state of deep reflection, it is strange when we finally come to the new peristyle, bedecked in lights of red and blue, yellow and green, a beacon in the jungle. It is as if a UFO has crash-landed here in the deep dark of the forest.

We pass through stalls of people selling roasted foods and trinkets, cold drinks and charms, and I am immediately offered rum by an insistent man with a brown, wizened face. I look at Mambo Racine, who eyes him up and down and only then nods yes. I take a drink and hand the bottle back. There will be many other offers of rum this night, each one accepted only after the same formal checkout process.

The priest of this new peristyle and his assistant, Laplas, are preparing veve before the altar of drums and the porteau mitan. These elaborate designs, made in cornmeal on soil, similar to Navajo and Tibetan sand paintings, are created as an announcement to the loa that the people are ready to receive them. I recognize the characteristic insignia of Legba—the loa who is called first in any ceremony—and of Erzulie and Ayizan, the loa of ritual and initiation.

Once the veve are made, the drums immediately kick in. The crowd answers with a scream, signaling the first possession—an elderly woman who falls, shaking, to the ground, her white robes billowing around her and her face contorted in ecstasy. But now is not the time and she is helped to her feet by the Houngan, who banishes the spirit, muttering criticisms at the intruding loa for its overzealousness and poor sense of timing. "Get back to Gine and wait till you are called," he scolds the errant spirit.

The Houngan  
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The Houngan  
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the Houngan

The Houngan waits for respectful silence, then arranges a chair over the veve for Ayizan. A group of white-dressed priests and priestesses line up before it as a huge, freshly cut royal palm frond is carried in, the carrier circling ever more crazily around the peristyle in increasingly erratic steps, dancing and whirling to the screams of the crowd, which grow in intensity until eventually the palm carrier is wild-eyed and distant. "She has loa!" the Mambos whisper. The palm carrier is grabbed by three strong men who can handle her newfound Power, and she is then transplanted to the djevo, the sacred heart of this new church, where the blessings of the goddess Ayizan will later be coaxed from her. At the moment it is all they can do to close the door against her will to dance.

The Houngan hands the palm to his attendants and they begin to shred it with machetes, cutting it ever more finely until it becomes wisps of palm leaf laid across the chair and wrapped in a white sheet. The frond itself becomes the loa Ayizan, who is therefore still present among us.

There is a piercing scream from a young girl of seventeen or eighteen, who has thrown herself to the ground in a violent fit, her eyes rolling back in their sockets, her arms and legs jerking erratically. The electricity coursing through her limbs seems to run together within her chest, and with that she is shocked so violently that her body shakes with one massive allover convulsion and she explodes free of the ground. She begins to dance, some wild Congo dance with the elegance of ballet. She is a brilliant light spinning like a Catherine wheel through the darkness of the peristyle.

When people are possessed of spirit, there is an energy about them that is palpable and can be transferred through touch—we have a distant memory of this in the Christian healing practice of the laying on of hands. So it is with this young girl; everyone she touches is also touched by spirit, and soon the room is alive with the dead souls of Africa dancing their ecstasy through the bodies of their followers.

Suddenly, the spirit of the mighty loa Gran Bwa takes hold of the Houngan who owns this peristyle. Gran Bwa is the great

healer of the Vodou pantheon, associated with the Power of Nature and the forests. His movements tonight are so charged with energy that he seems to be flying as he spins around the room, leaping some four or five feet into the air before coming to a standstill in front of the drums, which quickly pass into silence.

Like a wild animal he stands in a half-crouch, as if ready to pounce, with arms on hips in a posture that signifies control and authority. He is swaying like the serpent of a snake charmer. If I have ever doubted the existence of the spirits as separate entities with their own identities, the look on this possessed Houngan's face has cured me of that forever. This is a strong and furious loa, who must be placated quickly. The people are silent, awestruck. Even the invited Mambos and Houngans seem concerned at this appearance. "Merde" (shit), someone behind me mutters, not very comfortingly.

No one wants to approach this Gran Bwa, but they know that they must or who can tell what might happen. So slowly, cautiously, Laplas, the Houngan who is second in command, moves toward the possessed body of his religious leader. He lifts him up, helps him stand upright, then ties a blue scarf around his arm to signify his possession. He hands Gran Bwa a machete, a symbol of his office, feeds him rum, and lights a cigar for him. I am struck by the trust of these people in their spirits; even though this Gran Bwa looks wild, he must be given the machete and fed with rum—that is the way of this spirit and his will must be done.

Perhaps it is the fact that he is accepted in this way, that his office is recognized and he is fed, that after a while Gran Bwa begins to relax and his control over the Houngan's body becomes more developed.

He takes the bottle of rum and starts to drink, but not through his mouth. Instead, he puts the bottle to his ear, and then his shirt pocket, and pours in the liquid. Remarkably, none of the liquor runs down his face, and there is no stain on his shirt. It is as if the alcohol is absorbed by his body, drunk without the need of lips or mouth.

There is a legend that Gran Bwa was once struck by lightning

as a punishment /  
disfigured that he /  
drinks through his /  
disfigured mouth /  
changes physically /  
that are swallow /  
Now that Gran /  
people, he is read /  
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hurt by weapons /  
blood.

The Houngans /  
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maria temple, back to /  
ancestors reside.

is taken it is the loa who /  
occupy the sacred space in /  
when entering his ven /  
the loa.

as a punishment for some crime, and his face was so distorted and disfigured that his mouth is now pushed to one side. When he drinks through his ear, Gran Bwa is actually drinking through his disfigured mouth, and during possession the Houngan's body changes physically so that his ear is transformed into a new mouth that can swallow the liquid offered to it.

Now that Gran Bwa has been pacified and honored by the people, he is ready to bestow favors. He pushes the machete deep into his arm to demonstrate that he has Power, that he cannot be hurt by weapons, that he is ready to heal the people. There is no blood.

The Houngans and Mambos approach Gran Bwa in an orderly line and salute him, then dogwe, or kiss the ground in front of him. He lifts them, hugs them, rubs their brows with his own, passing on his energy to them. Some of the Houngans are possessed themselves as the Power of Gran Bwa is transferred, and are led away so they do not distract from this audience with the gods. Others are crying softly as peace and healing is bestowed upon them and a sense of spiritual certainty, the existence of otherworlds, of connections with the whole of ancestral history, with something vast and infinite, courses through their souls.

Hundreds of people are crowding Gran Bwa by now and, clearly, we novices will not get near him, etiquette dictating that we lowliest of the low, the barely initiated, should be the last to greet the gods. We make our salutes at a distance and then leave Gran Bwa to his people, walking back out into the night and the starlit jungle, back to the Jacmel road and the darkness where the ancestors reside.

—HAITIAN JOURNALS, JANUARY 2000



In Vodou it is the loa who are powerful; the Houngan merely serves, creating the sacred space in which the spirits may manifest, and sometimes offering his very body to them in service so they may bring their gifts of healing to the people of their community.

As is often the case with traditional spirituality, people are called by the spirits themselves to become Houngans. Usually, the person chosen undergoes a life- or lifestyle-threatening illness, which may be physical, mental, or emotional in nature but always has a spiritual cause at its center. Where the illness is physical, death is often prevented only by the intervention of the spirits themselves, as the condition will normally arrive suddenly and be so severe that medical science cannot cure it or in many cases even understand it.

In shamanic traditions from Africa to Siberia, the calling is similar. Divinely inspired accidents may suggest a shamanic vocation—for example, the gods choosing the future shaman by striking him with lightning, raining on him with mysterious rocks that fall from the sky, or engineering an injury during a hunting trip. At other times the sign is not a physical illness but a mental or emotional difference displayed by the shaman-elect. Often he exhibits exceptional traits from adolescence and may be nervous, distant, lost in dreams, able to communicate with trees and rivers and Nature spirits, or subject to epileptic seizures.

Whatever the nature of the illness, it is always sufficiently potent to drive a stake between ordinary and nonordinary reality, and is normally only curable by the sick person himself, with the help of the spirits.

As a result of this healing crisis, and the failure of medical science to help the sufferer, everyday life is shown to be limited, an act of faith that is only one narrow view of the infinite and unfathomable, a “10 percent universe,” and when it comes right down to it, often of little use in matters of life and death. In these circumstances only the spirits can help by unleashing the healing Powers of the shaman himself.

This healing ability is the key point of the shamanic calling. As Eliade remarks, “The primitive magician, the medicine man, or the shaman, is not only a sick man; he is, above all, a sick man who has been cured, who has succeeded in curing himself.” Now that the shamans have healed themselves in a way that has defied other medical specialists, these medicine men are able to heal others too “because they know the mechanism, or rather, the theory of illness.”<sup>1</sup>

There is usually a price to be paid for such spiritual assistance, however. In exchange for his life, the person in question must agree to act as a human intermediary for the spirits so they can do their work on



Earth for the people of the community they have chosen to serve. In other words, the person saved must become a shaman, and thereby save others.

Mambo Racine describes this process in relation to her own initiatory Houngan, Luc Gedeon.<sup>2</sup> Luc had a normal childhood, but at the age of twelve, while in a Catholic Church service with his family in Haiti, he was suddenly possessed by one of the Vodou loa.

This episode was as traumatic and embarrassing for Luc's conservative and locally respected family as it was for Luc himself, and he was subsequently immersed in Catholicism as a spiritual barrier to the loa, in order to prevent a repeat of this event. But only, it seems, with limited success.

"Luc gradually found that the pull of the loa was irresistible. The more he fought against it, the more he became tired and overwrought. In 1972 he suffered a crisis, and spent 22 days sleeping under the bushes on the Champs de Mars in the middle of downtown Port-au-Prince. This was the final blow to his family. When Luc returned to his home, he was permitted to serve the loa."

As soon as Luc initiated as a Houngan he was never again bothered by mental or nervous problems.

Once again, such preludes to initiation are very common in the shamanic literature. Eliade writes that there is often "a progressive change in behaviour. The candidate becomes meditative, seeks solitude, sleeps a great deal, seems absent-minded, has prophetic dreams and sometimes seizures. All these symptoms are only the prelude to the new life that awaits the unwitting candidate."<sup>3</sup>

Spiritism, it seems, also had deep ancestral roots for Luc Gedeon, which is often the case for those chosen to follow a spiritual path. In Luc's case, it was his great-grandmother, Tante Bobo, who exhibited spiritual characteristics.

Tante Bobo's own great-grandmother had been a priestess of Vodou in Africa before she was brought to Haiti by the slave traders. Despite her persecution at the hands of the slavers, she had managed to keep her religion alive and had passed on many songs and stories of ancient Africa to her children and grandchildren.

One day Tante Bobo was singing these sacred songs as she bathed

in the stream, when the spirits of the water began to answer her with a song of their own:

. . . A lovely, musical sound which seemed to come from under the water. The sound grew in intensity as the rest of the world faded. The afternoon sun dimmed, the voices of her friends grew remote, and Tante Bobo embarked on a voyage into the world of the spirits. Her great-grandmother came to her, young and beautiful, dressed in the manner of her people and singing the ancient song, and she followed her great-grandmother through realm after immaterial realm.

For seven years she wandered, learning the secrets that had been known to her ancestors. She walked through the mirrored gate of Legba, the doorway of sunlight and spiritual power into the world, and the entrance into the Earth of tree roots. Mighty Dambala, the silver serpent, and his rainbow wife Ayida Wedo encircled her, whirling in a glowing ring that surrounded the entire universe. The universe sang with love, love for its own self, love for its own joy of being.

She whirled in the cosmic dance of love, until she spun into the shrine of the Goddess and the source of all human love, Erzulie. She spent hours or years, she could not say which, in divine play with Erzulie, laughing and dancing in her shimmering rose-pink palaces.

She was introduced to many other gods and goddesses on her journey—to Ogoun, the great warrior loa, to La Sirene and Agwe, the Powers of the sea, and finally to Baron, the ruler of the dead—and she sees “the cycle of life, death, and rebirth as an endless, gleaming road through Eternity.”<sup>4</sup>

Once again, this notion of being taken by the spirits, of being introduced to the spiritual pantheon—and particularly in the context of a proximity to water or trees—seems symptomatic of a mystical vocation. Eliade gives the example of a shaman near death from a physical illness (smallpox) who is “carried into the middle of a sea. There he heard his Sickness (that is, smallpox) speak, saying to him: ‘From the Lords of the Water you will receive the gift of shamanizing.’ Your name

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as a shaman will be Huottarie (Diver). . . . The husband of the Lady of the Water, the Lord of the Underworld, then gave him two guides, an ermine and a mouse, to lead him to the Underworld. . . . He met the Lord of Madness and the Lords of all nervous disorders . . . Thus he learned the various diseases that torment mankind."<sup>5</sup>

Having survived this tangle with the Infinite and having experienced some of its secrets, the relationship with the spirits is formalized in Vodou through the process of initiation, which is a visible expression of the quid pro quo now operating between the material and the immaterial worlds.

## THE JOURNEY OF THE HOUNGAN

All future Houngans enter the faith as *Vodouissants*, a generic term like *Buddhist* or *Christian* that refers to uninitiated people who attend ceremonies and are involved in rituals. They may also be healed by the priests. During this stage, they are learning the ways of Vodou from the outside in, as the recipients of healings and ceremonies, in the way their own future clients and congregations will experience these rituals.

As he prepares for initiation and begins a more serious involvement in this spiritual work, the novice becomes *Hounsi Bossale*. These are words from the Fons language—*hounsi* meaning “wedded to (or chosen by) the spirits,” and *bossale* meaning “wild” or “untamed.” To be *Hounsi Bossale* therefore means that your spiritual calling is acknowledged, but you are still raw and unformed in your practice.

The distinction refers to the fact that all Houngans-to-be are clearly ambassadors for spirit; not only have they been chosen by the loa, but the very nature of initiation into the priesthood, its financial cost, and the dedication it requires mean it is never a decision taken lightly. During my initiation, for example, in order to make the necessary ritual items I took with me beads, which cost 150 U.K. pounds (about 240 U.S. dollars) when I bought them in England. Haiti, however, is a third world country and, accounting for relative wages and standards of living, this figure translates to approximately 1,200 U.S. dollars. The spiritual calling must therefore be strong if the journey to priesthood is to continue.

While the spirits may have chosen the Houngan, however, the candidate has not yet learned how to partner them on Earth with the proper ritual practices so that the loa may manifest here. There is still much that he must learn before he can be considered well formed, or "cooked," as the Haitians express it.

The first official grade of initiation is *Hounsi Kanzo* (initiate), which refers to someone who has spent the requisite nights and days within the *djevo*, sleeping alongside the loa. Many people in Haiti take this grade (which is not so costly, but still a significant investment) so that the protection and blessings of the spirits are conferred upon them and their luck in life will be good.

If the chosen one wants to go further after this initial period of confirmation, he must undertake more ceremonies and ritual challenges in order to attain the second grade, *Sur Pwen*. This puts the person "on the point" (that is, ready to enter into a reciprocal relationship with his or her patron loa) and confers certain privileges and responsibilities. While there are many loa (more than five hundred different spirits, each with distinct personalities), the Vodou faith believes that we are all born the child of one specific loa. In Haiti the *met tete* ("master of the head") is the loa who will be your guardian spirit during your lifetime—analogueous to the Western notion of having a guardian angel who watches over you. But the connection to this loa must be activated in order for it to work, and this is done through the rituals of *Sur Pwen* initiation.

Once the relationship between the human and the loa is developed, the spirit will protect that person for life, but will also require something in return. The spirit must be regularly fed, for example, with ritual offerings that give it the energy it needs to provide its human child with protection. The grade of *Sur Pwen*, then, activates the invisible connection between the sacred and the mundane.

The final and highest grade of initiation is *Asogwe*. (Which translates loosely as "one who is kissed by spirit.") Achieving this grade may take years of practice and dedication to the spirits, for its Powers and responsibilities are awesome. The *Asogwe* is the final authority on ritual procedure, for example, deferring only to a loa who may manifest during the ceremonies through the possession of a person, and then not always because the *Asogwe* is the spiritual connection on Earth while the loa is

the spiritual connection  
between two worlds overlap.  
Each of these grades  
occurs within the *djevo*  
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of the law to heal. The healing  
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the way of the universe is  
of the heart.  
they finally however, they  
the way of the universe is  
of the heart.

the spiritual connection in Gine—so there is always a gray area where these two worlds overlap, as to who is actually in charge at that moment.

Each of these grades of the priesthood requires a further time of seclusion within the djevo, so that new levels of secret teachings may be passed on. Normally, these teachings are a combination of ancient knowledge that was carried with the slaves from Africa and spiritual knowledge that is passed on by the loa themselves.

The djevo is like a crucible of learning. The priest will talk of “cooking” the initiate until he is “good and hot.” He is referring to the raising of the initiate’s spiritual ecstasy and passion so that he becomes a glowing star in the spiritual universe, and very visible to the spirits. The loa are attracted to this heat and will enter the djevo to talk directly with those within. The initiates stay within the fire of this place for almost a week, while the flames of the loa rage around them, infusing their bodies with Power and knowledge of Gine.

This spiritual knowledge may be uniquely understood by each person, but turns out to be remarkably similar in terms of its content. Usually, it concerns ways of healing and ritual and new insights into the teachings and songs of Vodou, which are revealed as secret spiritual and ceremonial knowledge given in the code of song in order to protect the religion from outsiders. This was particularly necessary during the days of slavery, when the slave owners ruled the Haitian Africans with guns and whips, and practice or even talk of native religions was strictly forbidden.

Often, the influence of the loa in the djevo is quite visible to others. During one of my nights of kanzo, I dreamed that the loa came to me and told me how to heal. The healing must come from the heart, they said, and they meant this in two ways: as a metaphor, and also quite literally.

“The energy of the universe is mobilized by Love,” they said. “You must have pity and compassion to be a great healer.” That is the metaphor of the heart.

More literally, however, they showed me that the energy of the healer, which connects with the client during healing, has a gateway at the heart. It is through this gateway that the healing intention reaches out to make changes in the client’s body. This is how the healing takes place: heart to heart.

The next morning I woke up, and Ricardo, another initiate who had been lying next to me, told me he had lain awake and watched during the night as a blue light hovered over my body while I slept. After an hour or so of this, the light was absorbed into my body, right in the center of my chest, at the heart.

In order to work effectively as a healer, the Houngan must also learn the roles and talents of the different loa, all of whom have very specific functions. He must learn how to contact them, how to feed them, and how to work with the knowledge they impart.

To do this, he will also need to learn how to induce possession states, a form of deep trance that enables the Houngan to step aside from his own consciousness so that the consciousness of the loa may enter him to carry out the healing. He must also know how to work directly with other spiritual entities, the ancestors and the spirits of Nature, which have a different function to perform.

To understand these different entities and how they help the Houngan, we have to know something of the Vodou cosmology and the nature of the spirits.

## THE SPIRITUAL UNIVERSE

Most forms of traditional spirituality understand that there is a seen world and an unseen world occupied by invisible forces. These forces reach out to us and can influence the affairs of humankind in ways that can be helpful or detrimental to our well-being, depending on how we interact with them.

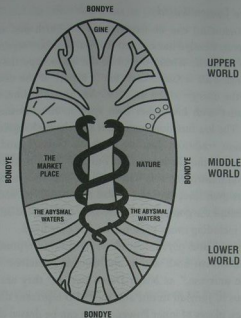
In many traditions the unseen world is divided into separate domains where different entities and forms of Power reside. In the map of these worlds used by Vodou, five such domains exist.

Outside the circle is the cosmos, which is the home of God, who is known in Vodou as *Bondye* (from the French slave owners' *bon dieu*, meaning "good god").

*Bondye* is involved only peripherally in the affairs of humankind since She or He is also responsible for all life and for reality in all its forms. The task of holding together the very fabric of the universe means that *Bondye* cannot be available to every human petition and will inter-

Figure 2.1. The map of the lower world of the middle world, which affairs and its spirit (portez mitan), encircled by the *lwa* *Wedo*, connects

and family in world affairs. The ways of this god (or *lwa*), as we can only understand in human terms, and these ways of such a being. *Bondye* would be unfathomable and every breath that we can ever breathe.



*Figure 2.1. The map of the worlds: The upper world of Gine, the lower world of the Abysmal Waters beneath the Earth, and the middle world, which is divided into the Marketplace of human affairs and its spiritual counterpart, Nature. The World Tree (porteau mitan), encircled by the cosmic serpents Dambala and Ayida Wedo, connects all three levels of the spiritual universe.*

vene directly in world affairs only in the most extreme circumstances.

The ways of this god (or any god) are a mystery that can never be known, as we can only understand god through our human senses and in human terms, and these are too limited for us to comprehend the vastness of such a being. Bondye is beyond us in the same way that a human being would be unfathomable to an ant.

Each and every breath of Brahma takes fifty-two thousand years. How can we ever hope to know such a being? The answer is that we cannot. This is why Bondye has created the loa.

*Gine: The Upper World*

In order that God can be experienced on Earth and understood in human terms, Bondye has created the loa, who are separate aspects of Herself or Himself. Within the circle the loa occupy the top layer, the upper world. This is Gine. Each loa is a part of the divine Love that mobilizes the energy of the universe. At the same time, each is also a distinct entity with his or her own specific consciousness, roles, and functions. The loa function somewhat like the archangels and saints of the Christian tradition. Just as Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael are ambassadors of the Christian God but also have their own identities, callings, and natures, so it is with the loa. The Vodou conception goes further, however, since the loa are also aspects of you and of all human beings, because the god-energy of the universe created and is present in all things, including every person who has ever lived.

In spiritual and psychological terms the loa represent something vast and unknown both within and outside ourselves. They are "the soul of the universe," as Maya Deren puts it;<sup>6</sup> they are the collective unconscious in Jungian terms; and they also represent different aspects of ourselves, places of inner Power, which can be drawn upon whenever we step outside our cultural faith and the limitations of its worldview to attain a state of ecstasy. In this sense the loa are models for us in our quest for personal Power.

We talk, in Western psychology, of archetypes, and of modeling ourselves on our heroes. Very often (though usually unconsciously) when we are faced with a particular challenge, we reach inside ourselves for a brief moment and decide how someone we admire might deal with this issue.

This "hero with a thousand faces" is also an aspect of ourselves, because we are carrying it within our own psyche. At times the hero we model ourselves on will be someone we know, so we might ask ourselves how Mom or Dad or our boyfriend might have confronted this problem. At other times we draw our strength from a more archetypal figure—one psychiatrist I know often asks herself "What would Jung have done for this particular client?" To her Jung has become an archetypal force to be called upon in moments of crisis.

This does not make these archetypes any less real. The reality is in the

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*Abyssal Waters: The*  
The lower world, at th  
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tral spirits.

There is a mournful  
who are lost in the mystic

*Dlo kwala ma*  
*petit*

*Dlo kwala ma*

*Anba dlo, ma*

*Anba dlo, pap*

*Dlo kwala ma*

*Mev anba ton*

*Water of the Kw*

*which equates*

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*Under the water,*

*child, oh!*

*Under the water, a*

*child, oh!*

*Water of the Kw*

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experience itself and the effect that it has on you. If calling on these forces makes you more able to cope, that is no less real, in terms of outcome, than if your hero manifested in front of you as a three-dimensional, living, breathing entity and gave you the advice you were asking for.

In Vodou, of course, the loa do both. They are archetypal energies, sources of inner Power, and at the same time directly available to human beings in the communion with the gods, which is possible through trance possession.

### *Abysmal Waters: The Lower World*

The lower world, at the bottom of the circle, represents the Abysmal Waters that circulate beneath the Earth. It is to this place that the dead go at the moment when they leave the mortal world to become ancestral spirits.

There is a mournful song in Haiti about the melancholy of these souls who are lost in the mystic waters and who yearn to return to their families:

*Dlo kwala manyan, nan peyi sa maman pa konn  
petit  
Dlo kwala manyan  
Anba dlo, maman pa konn petit O!  
Anba dlo, papa pa konn petit O!  
Dlo kwala manyan  
Men anba tonel la, dlo kwala manyan*



Water of the Kwala River [a river in West Africa,  
which equates with the rivers of Gine]  
In that country a mother does not know her child  
Water of the Kwala River  
Under the water, a mother does not know her  
child, oh!  
Under the water, a father does not know his  
child, oh!  
Water of the Kwala River  
Under the peristyle, the waters of the Kwala  
River

The last line refers to the fact that the peristyle is the sacred doorway to the ancestors through which the dead may still be reached. The waters flow more strongly there. It is for this reason that the corpses of a young man and woman sleep beneath the crosses in the peristyle. In this place of honor they represent the souls of every ancestor, their presence signifying that the sacred dead are never forgotten but remain an ever present part of the community.

The water is a place of reckoning and review, where past actions, transgressions, and kindnesses are weighed in the balance. Here we stand naked and alone and answer for all we have done on Earth. Unlike the Western conception, there is no punishment here and "sinners" do not go to hell while others go to heaven. If anything, it is more like the Buddhist conception of a place between lives where attachments to the physical world are released and the lessons of life are learned. The ancestral spirit has an opportunity to rest after his long journey to this otherworld, to settle into his new role as spirit, and to let go of the past, so he may heal the sense of loss he feels because of his separation from his family and community.

Always, the spirits spend one year and one day in this place. How much longer they remain depends on the lives they have lived. If they were people of exceptional Power, holy men, Houngans or Mambos, they may spend only a short time here in addition to their year and a day of spiritual retreat. After that their positive energies may be absorbed into Gine and they may become loa themselves, ready to take pity on the still living and serve their new community, which for the loa is the entire human race.

Once again, this is not about good and evil—you do not become loa because you were kind to others or lived a perfect life, but because you were Powerful and your behavior was in keeping with the agenda of the spirits for the future of the Earth, which is one of conscious evolution toward the godhead.

According to Vodou tradition, most spirits who enter the lower world do not become loa. Most will become ancestral spirits instead, who will choose to return to the communities they have just left so that they may be of service to their own tribal people and relatives.

The Houngan may also intervene in this cycle by performing the

ceremony of *retire mo nan dlo*—to “take the dead out of the water”—where the ancestral spirit is called back to the community through a vessel of water and ritually installed in a clay pot called a *govi*. This pot is kept in the Vodou temple, and from here the voice of the dead may speak to the people, offering wisdom and counsel from the spirit world. Such counsel is considered invaluable because the ancestor is now a walker between worlds; one who has lived among the community and knows the ways of human beings but is also touched by the grace of God and knowledge of the loa.

A sense of humanness remains attached to the ancestors, as they are not fully evolved into divine beings, and during their possession of others they may sometimes exhibit very human qualities of jealousy, possessiveness, and irritation, in a way that the loa do not (as well, of course, as positive human qualities such as compassion and kindness).

In Santería, the Cuban form of Vodou, these ancestors are known as *eggun* (sometimes spelled *egun*).

One important thing to remember with *eggun* is that they are the spirits of people. And just as there are the good and the bad, the liars and the reliable, and the refined and the crude on Earth, so it is with the world of the *eggun*. It is up to us to determine which sort of *eggun* we have relationships with, just as it is up to us what kind of living people we associate with.

Your *eggun* are also a fundamental part of who you are and where you come from. In fact, when saluting your *eggun*, you are declaring who you are in a direct way by the act of declaring where you come from. By connecting with your *eggun* you affirm the continuum from the distant past towards the distant future as we can all look forward to becoming *eggun* one day.<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes the spirit of an ancestor may also return of its own accord, finding its way from the waters without the intervention of the Houngan. It then becomes a *gede* (dead spirit).

The *gede* (gay-Dee) can be dangerous to human beings, for they may not have served their time of reflection in the lower world and may still hunger for the world of the living. Furthermore, since they have not

been purposefully and ritually called back to the community, they have no direction or affiliation. Rather, they may wander the Earth in limbo, as hungry ghosts who crave the energy and attention of living beings.

The restless gede can attach themselves to people, leading to physical and mental illness as they drain the energy from those they cling to. They may also become troublesome (in much the same way as poltergeists) or attract the attention of Bokors (sorcerers), who will use these zombi-souls to work dark magic by sending their spirits against enemies as *expedition morts* (spirit entities that deliberately attach themselves to living people in order to infect them). One of the responsibilities of the Houngan, in fact, is to remove these entities or placate them so they will do no harm to the living.

Sometimes these lost souls may even be adopted by a Houngan as an assistant in his healing work. Mambo Racine tells the story of a spirit adoption by her initiatory Houngan, Luc Gedeon, who was contacted by a wandering spirit named Arapice la Croix, who offered to work with him in exchange for a home in Luc's djevo.

Luc agreed to this and Arapice was so pleased to have a community to be part of again that he immediately possessed Luc's body in order to demonstrate the Power with which he would protect the Houngan. Having taken control of Luc, Arapice walked directly into the center of a ceremonial fire and sat down among the flames.

"Screams of fear from the congregation and from Luc's family did not dissuade the spirit," said Mambo Racine. "Yet in a moment the terror turned to wonder as not a hair of Luc's head nor a thread of his clothes was burned. Arapice then entered the peristyle and was reverently installed in his very own govi, where he remains until today, manifesting through one of the younger relatives of the Houngan."

The ancestral spirits and the gede form a family, at the head of which is the loa Baron la Croix, who is master of the cemetery and guardian of ancestral knowledge. Baron is a very masculine spirit who enjoys mixing the sacred with the profane and will often crack sexual jokes and dance in a highly suggestive way during his possessions, even when he is healing the sick or passing on deep spiritual wisdom during a sermon. His possessions are always enormous fun and he is one of the best loved loa in Haiti. He is also a powerful healer and, in fact, is con-

sidered the last resort against magical illnesses, as no one can be killed if Baron refuses to “dig his grave.”

The only thing to be wary of with Baron is accepting a drink from him! Whenever Baron appears during a possession, he is given a bottle of his favorite drink—rum laced with twenty-one hot chilies. He is an extremely generous spirit and likes to share his drink with the people. It is rude, of course, to decline this, so it is best to prepare yourself well in advance if you are likely to be offered a drink. A mouthful of hot chilies can otherwise come as something of a surprise to the unwary.

### *The Marketplace: The Human Middle World*

At the center of the circle is the middle world, which, you will notice, is divided in two. One of these sections represents the ordinary world of human beings and physical reality, while the other represents the spiritual dimension of this world.

In Vodou the human world is the Marketplace. Here everything is for sale—people as well as things—and power is the goal. At first this seems a rather depressing view, but we must remember that this situation was the reality for many Haitians, who arrived on the island as slaves and were bought and sold by their masters or worked to death in the fields for financial gain.

Furthermore, we have to ask ourselves if this concept of human reality is really that far off the mark. We have all heard the lies of our politicians. John Major, the British prime minister who talked so much about “family values” was engaged in an affair with one of his ministers. We have also heard about the political favors bought in cash-for-questions scams, and the fraud and deceit of major companies who have seemingly put money before morals. Enron, WorldCom, Citibank, and Arthur Andersen are some of the more recent business giants who have been accused of such behavior. We have all gotten a little wiser to the fact that money and self-service often do seem to make the world go around, at least in the marketplace. The most unfortunate part is that this does not surprise or shock us anymore. *Si bon ki ra*, as they say in Haiti: “the good is rare.”

For the Haitian slave, the achievement of Power was paramount, since he had so little of it in his daily life. It was a necessary commodity,

as well, because lack of Power—spiritual resolve as well as physical and financial strength—would often mean death. To gain it, the follower of Vodou needed to make strong ties to his protective spirits in order to deal with enemies, illnesses, and challenges and attract into his life the healing forces that would help him overcome adversity.

The Marketplace is not all bad, though. In many Haitian and African villages, the market is the center of the community. It is a place for laughter, for catching up on news and gossip, for flirting among the village girls and boys, and for sharing a drink with friends. Furthermore, as with all places where people meet, the loa and the ancestors also move within the Marketplace and through their communion with the living seek to raise the consciousness of human beings beyond that of mere exchange and the fight for survival.

### *Nature: The Spirit of the Middle World*

On the other side of the middle world is a spiritual dimension where the invisible energies of all things reside. This is the place of Nature, of the elementals and nonhuman spirits, who also have sentience and life force and can communicate with their human relations. In Haiti, these energies are known as *djabs*.

North American shamans have a saying, *mitakuye oyasin*, “for all my relations,” which signifies the unity of humankind with these other forces. By this they mean that everything is alive. A rock, a tree, a stream, a cloud, a flower, the Earth beneath our feet—all of these are our relations just as much as is our human family. Everything is sentient and has the same rights to life as humans or animals or other physical beings that we consider to be living.

In Haiti this sense of teeming life and awareness of consciousness all around us is expressed simply in the words of one of the Vodou songs:

*Nou tout se yon O!  
Divan Bondye*



We are all one  
Beneath one divine God

In this invisible middle world there are places of Power and things of Power, which can also be a sense of support and advice for the believer. Included in these things of Power are plants, which are used extensively in Vodou healing.

Vodou often employs plant medicine to good effect, though it is rarely about herbalism per se. For most healers, in fact, the pharmacological properties of the plants they use are much less important than the spirit that is held by the plant. It is the spirit that heals, while the plant itself is secondary, acting only as the home of the spirit.

Loulou Prince is the *Medsen Fey* (leaf doctor, or herbalist) of the Roots Without End Societe, the spiritual church of Mambo Racine. Loulou serves a community of around fifteen hundred people who live in the vicinity of Jacmel, close to the border of the Dominican Republic, and in his daily practice deals with a range of health problems typical of the area—from the cuts and bruises symptomatic of the hard toil in the fields through which most of his patients make a living, to more serious complaints such as HIV and AIDS, diseases as prevalent in Haiti as in other third world countries.

“The Medsen Fey is a person who knows how to talk to the loa and to use leaves and other plant parts to promote health and cure illness,” says Loulou. “Most people have some general knowledge of plants. For example, people in the West know that citrus fruits are good for colds and chamomile tea helps a person relax—things like that. Here in the Caribbean the plants are different, but folk knowledge is passed along in the same way, by word of mouth and family recipe.

“There are no written manuals for a Medsen Fey, and no organized schools of botanical knowledge. But some people take an interest in plant medicine and pick up every detail they can. A lot of this knowledge is in the hands of the Medsen Fey, since we are called to do this healing work and many of us have loa who help us in this.”

Often these spirits appear in dreams and advise the healer directly on the treatment for a particular client. “I receive a lot of my knowledge in dreams,” says Loulou. “If I am treating a sick person, very often I have a dream and I see the leaves I should give that person. In these dreams the loa come to me and tell me what to do, or I see that I am in the woods and leaves are pushing up in front of me. Once I have this

knowledge I use my training as a herbalist to make tea or infusions in rum for the person who is suffering.

"Once I was treating a man who had body aches all the time, and diarrhea and congestion. The man had no money to pay a doctor, so he came to me. I talked with him and told him, 'Go home, and come back tomorrow.' That night I slept and I had a dream. In my dream a loa came to me with leaves in her hand. She said, 'These leaves, boil them and give them to the sick man.' When I woke up I went into the forest to look for those leaves and I found them straightaway. I boiled them as I had been shown and gave them to the sick man. Within a day he was returned to full health."

There are very few illnesses that cannot be healed—or at least alleviated—with the plants of the forest. Loulou treats people with digestive disorders, sexual problems, fevers, and colds, and has medicine to clean and purify the blood and restore balance and order to the physical body.

He also treats people who are ailing and children who are not growing well due to persecution by evil spirits. Here the medicine is of a more magical nature and designed to bring balance to the human spirit and emotions.

"There are specific leaves, strong-smelling leaves, which help children who are under spiritual attack. I mix these leaves with special magical items which I have been shown by the loa, and then I take some raw rum and sea water and make a bath for the child. I soak some of the leaves in rum and set them on fire to heat the bath up. Before I bathe the child I pray, and I bless the leaves. Then while I am bathing him, I sing songs for the loa and the ancestors, and ask them to come and help this child.

"The rest of the bath that is left over, I put in a green calabash bowl or a bottle and before the child goes to sleep I have the parents rub his arms and legs with it. When that is done no one can curse that child or do evil magic to them."

How this evil magic comes to infect the child in the first place bears similarities to the almost universal belief in *mal d'ojo*, the evil eye. The magic comes through the judgments of others and through jealousy.

As an example, Loulou was once asked to perform magical work



for a woman who had four children, two of whom had already died as a result of the actions of evil spirits that would come to her house at night and frighten the children, sucking the energy from them. The woman was a market trader who had been able to amass a little money (a rare commodity in Haiti), and her neighbors were jealous of her.

"One of these neighbors had sent spirits against her to kill her children. The lady lost two children that way and another was getting sick and skinny, so she came to me. I gave the child exactly what he needed. I bathed him and broke the bad magic. Then I gave him leaves to make his blood bitter, so it would taste and smell bad to the spirits, and they would go away. After that the child got better; he got fat and he grew. That boy is a young man now. He lives near me and he calls me Papa Loulou because he remembers what I did for him."

Loulou also works with people who have chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, hypertension, and AIDS. While he is realistic and honest enough to admit that he cannot always cure these diseases, there is much that he can do to help the sufferer live a longer, healthier life.

"If a person has diabetes, there are leaves I boil and give him to drink. The same for high blood pressure. If a person has AIDS, there are leaves for that too. They are not always going to save that person's life, but my aim is to make that life as pain-free and tolerable as I can, so they are not held back by the disease and can enjoy the life that is left to them. I stop their diarrhea, for example, or if they have sores in their mouth, I can make them better. If the person has become skinny, if their blood is very poor, I make a tonic for them, with herbs in red wine. They drink a few spoonfuls every day, and they put on weight, they build back up. But it's not a cure. I pray that I might find a cure, but that is in the hands of God, the saints, and the loa."

Every person is born the "child" of a particular loa, (his or her *met tete*) whether or not they recognize that and formalize the relationship through initiation. This loa lives in the blood and is a guide and protector to his or her children throughout their lives. But the blood also attracts other spirits who may use the fluid to possess or infect that person, as was the case in Loulou's example of the sick child.

Therefore, a lot of the leaves that Loulou uses have to do with the blood—"building up the blood," cleansing it, or making the patient

"throw off" blood. If, for instance, she is pregnant with an unwanted child—a situation that is frequent in Haiti, with low usage of contraception and sufficient poverty to make large families untenable—Loulou has medicines that can help her painlessly abort the child by changing the spiritual constituents of the blood that reaches the fetus.

"I find the leaves in the woods and in the pastures around where I live. I know them because my mother taught me ever since I was little. There are secrets to how I pick the leaves, secret words I have to say, things I am not going to reveal. Sometimes I dry the leaves and powder them; sometimes I use them fresh. It is not my job to judge when a patient comes to me; my job is to make them well again."

Loulou also deals with less spiritual, more mundane injuries, and once treated Mambo Racine when she was kicked by one of her horses.

"She is too nice to her horses. She is always praising them and petting them, and it makes them swell-headed; they think they are so wonderful they can do whatever they want. So this big mare kicked her. It was a bad kick, high up on her leg, and Mambo Racine was in so much pain she couldn't walk or even talk.

"People carried her back to her house and called me, so I came running. I saw the leg wasn't broken, so I started right away to massage the place with a special oil we call *livil maskrati*, which is made from a dry fruit, like a nut. When I massaged Mambo Racine's leg, she hollered! It really hurt. She even said bad words to me, but I just kept right on massaging her leg no matter how much it hurt. That's what you have to do.

"Then I took some leaves and I pounded them to make the juice come out, and I made a bundle out of them and tied it on her leg, to pull the bad blood out. I gave her tea to drink, and leaves to stop pain, and then leaves to make her sleep. All the time I talked to God and the loa, and I told them that we need Mambo Racine, and that the loa should help me to get her better quick.

"When I had done all that, she quieted down and went right to sleep. She slept all afternoon and all night, and in the morning she woke up better. Her leg was still sore, and her skin was showing a lot of different colors, but after a few hours she could walk around by herself again."

Magical healing in Haiti is often very practical. There is no division,

in the Western sense, between good health and good luck—if you are in control of your own life and the things around you, you are automatically Powerful and it is more difficult for spirits to enter your body and do you harm.

Further, it is recognized that all things start with the individual. Before anyone can live a worthy life or pursue loftier spiritual ideals, the basics of living, such as a fulfilling love life, food, shelter, and enough money to live on, must first be taken care of. There is no point aspiring to the sainthood if you are dying of starvation, and no point pursuing spiritual enlightenment if your physical body is wasting away.

Loulou went on to say, “If your wife or husband leaves you, the medsen fey can work a *wanga* [charm or spell] to make them come back. Or if you love someone and want to attract them to you, I can do magic for that. Of course, I can only do so much! Once the person you want is aware of you in your daily life, it is up to you. If you are kind to them and treat them right, they will love you; if you ignore them or treat them bad, then all the magic in the world will not help you.

“Everyone has their own spirits, and they can help you as well. So I will also call your spirits and talk to them, right there in front of you. Maybe they will come to you in dreams and tell you things too, which will help you find the person you love. They will tell you how you must behave, the things you must change, and so on. It is up to you whether you take that advice, but love is never one-sided; it is always a meeting of souls!

“Then when you are happy, you will feel able to be kind and loving to others. Through this one simple act, more love will be created in the world.”

### *The World Tree: Center of the Circle*

At the very center of the circle is the *porteau mitan*, the Vodou equivalent of the World Tree that connects all of the human and spiritual worlds. The World Tree is a sacred motif that occurs in many traditional societies and early religious writings. It is generally viewed as the very center of the universe, and is connected to the attainment of knowledge through interactions with the gods. Adam and Eve achieved wisdom by eating from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden.

In India, Yama, the first man, drank with the gods beside the cosmic fig tree *Asvattha*, which represents eternal life and the cycle of life and death, while the Buddha achieved enlightenment beneath the magical *bohi* tree.

The World Tree is also associated with birth, rebirth, and fertility; something coming into being that was not there before. In Africa the Fon, Nuer, and Sandawe peoples all believe that the first human emerged from the cosmic tree. In Greece, Zeus fashioned men from the cosmogonic ash tree, while in Celtic lore man was born of elder and woman of mountain ash.

The memory of these creation myths is retained in our May Day fertility ritual of dancing round the maypole—the Tree of Life—which in druidic ceremonies was once a real tree used to embrace spring and the return of life to the fields.

Countless traditional peoples revere the tree in this way. The Yakut believe that an eight-branched tree stands at “the golden navel of the earth”—the very center of the world—and rises out of paradise into the world of man. The Tungus believe that the souls of unborn children perch on the branches of the Cosmic Tree, waiting for the shamans to journey there and find them so they can be born.

Among the Osmali Turks, the Tree of All Life has a million leaves, on each of which is written the fate of a man. For the Mongols, the World Tree is called *Zambu* and the gods (*Tengeri*) feed from its fruits. The branches of this tree touch the sky, while its roots go down to the underworld, offering the shaman a means of passage to the spirits of both domains.

In the Buryat consecration ceremony of *kharaga-khulkha*, the shaman must prove himself by climbing nine birch trees and cutting nine notches at the top of each while in ecstatic trance. Eliade says:

This birch symbolises the World Tree, the Cosmic Axis that connects sky, earth and underworld. Among the Buryat the shamanic birch is called *udesi-burkhan*, “the guardian of the door,” for it opens the entrance to the sky for the shaman. . . .

Several religious ideas are implied in the symbolism of the World Tree. On the one hand, it represents the universe in continual

regeneration, the inexhaustible spring of cosmic life, the paramount reservoir of the sacred (because it is the "Center" for the reception of the celestial sacred, etc); on the other, it symbolises the sky or the planetary heavens . . . In a number of archaic traditions the Cosmic Tree, expressing the sacrality of the world, its fertility and perennality, is related to the ideas of creation, fecundity, and initiation, and finally to the idea of absolute reality and immortality. . . . The Cosmic Tree always presents itself as the very reservoir of life and the master of destinies.<sup>8</sup>

The *porteau mitan*, the World Tree of Vodou, stands at the center of the peristyle, at the very heart of sacred ceremony. It is always painted with the symbols of two particular loa—Dambala and his wife, Ayida Wedo—the aquatic snake-gods who are the progenitors of life. They curl around the pole, making their ascent to Gine, like the caduceus of Western medicine, signifying their healing Powers.

Snakes and dragons like these are traditional symbols for the flow of life force or energy. In Tantra, it is the awakening of the coiled serpent energy, *kundalini*, at the base of the spine that creates enlightenment as it travels up through the chakras to the Third Eye and the crown. In this belief system there are two channels, *ida* and *pingala*, spiralling around the spine, just as Dambala and Ayida Wedo curl around the *porteau mitan*, corresponding to the masculine and feminine energies that are united during the ascent.

The Aztec and Egyptian cultures also regarded serpents as symbols of Power and life, while in Celtic tradition Cernunnos, guardian of the underworld and the unconscious and the spirit of healing and Nature, holds a snake staff in one hand and is surrounded by life in the form of young animals and plants, as well as the skulls of the ancestors who have lived before us and now live on in spirit.

Indeed, so frequent and universal is the serpent motif in traditional spirituality (and, interestingly, so often does this symbol also appear, unbidden, in the mystic visions induced by sacred plants such as ayahuasca) that one writer, Jeremy Narby, has suggested that what we are actually tuned in to, through our attachment to this imagery, is our own ancient cellular memory of prehuman life on our evolutionary

path from reptile to *Homo sapiens*, via the serpentlike curls of our DNA: "The two chains of DNA resemble two snakes curled around each other in some elaborate courtship ritual."<sup>9</sup>

Narby, interestingly, quotes an article by Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, who explored the beliefs of the Desana shamans of the Colombian Amazon. In this belief system the human mind and imagination are the porteau mitan of the body, the doorway that connects us with spirit. Reichel-Dolmatoff says that within the human brain "two intertwined snakes are lying, a giant anaconda (*Eunectes murinus*) and a rainbow boa (*Epicrates cenchria*), a large river snake of dark dull colors and an equally large land snake of spectacular bright colors. In Desana shamanism, these two serpents symbolize a female and male principle, a mother and a father image, water and land . . . In brief, they represent a concept of binary opposition which has to be overcome in order to achieve individual awareness and integration."<sup>10</sup>

This description is strikingly similar to the beliefs of Vodou in regards to Dambala and the rainbow serpent Ayida Wedo, who represent the unity of male and female and the generation of life force and consciousness that comes from that union. But they are also more than this. Since they are aquatic snakes, they connect the water (lower world, the land of the ancestors, with the sky (upper world), the home of the loa, through their ascent of the pole. By linking the worlds they therefore also represent unity within the cosmos, as well as man's connection to the Infinite. "The pole resembles the tree of life, around which the voodoo dancers whirl," writes Professor Laennec Hurbon of Quisqueya University in Port-au-Prince.<sup>11</sup>

Sacrifices are laid around the base of the porteau mitan in order to call in the spirits. Grilled corn, cake, eggs, and water are common because these are the preferred foods of many loa.

Dambala's specific function in the Vodou pantheon is to bring Power, luck, and wealth to his children through the cosmic principle of goodness. His sacred color is white and, like all aquatic snakes, he is to be found in trees and in springs and rivers. His sacrificial preference is for food that is also white, such as egg whites, rice, and milk. Those possessed by Dambala cannot speak (for a snake has no vocabulary) and cannot walk or use their arms (because a snake does not have legs and arms); instead

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they crawl on their bellies over to the offerings and lick up the milk or raw egg white with their tongues. The Catholic counterpart of Dambala is Saint Patrick, who banished the snakes from Ireland.

The loa are, in many ways, like us. They marry, have families and other relationships, get on with some loa and not with others. Ayida Wedo is the wife of Dambala and shares many of his preferences (as husbands and wives often do). As in Desana shamanism, she is also represented as the rainbow that links Water, Fire (the sun), Air, and Earth, so that all the elements are included. Her Catholic counterpart is Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception.

The porteau mitan, like the World Tree, is "the post that links the heavenly and earthly worlds. As such, it represents the royal path taken by the loa to meet with humans."<sup>12</sup> Although the snake-gods circle this post, signifying their importance to Vodou, they are not the most important of the spirits. That honor goes to Legba. In order to "activate" the porteau mitan so that it becomes a gateway for the other loa, Legba must first be invoked in any Vodou ritual.

There is a Vodou song that serves to remind the Houngan of this fact, which is often sung during ceremonies:

*Legba non baye.*

*Si ou ki porte drapo;*

*Si ou ki para sole por lwa-yo.*



Legba is the gate.

It is you [Legba] who carry the flag;

It is you who shield the sun for the loa.

According to Vodou mythology, Legba so loved humankind that, like Prometheus, he stole one of God's secrets in order to pass it on to humanity. That secret was the knowledge of other worlds and the means of contacting them.

In Santería Legba is known as Ogu or Elegba, in Brazilian Candomblé as Eshu, in Catholicism as Saint Peter, who guards the gates of heaven, or as Lazarus, who was raised from the dead. He has a special affinity for crossroads (the meeting place of the worlds), gateways,

and the entrances to churches and houses; anywhere, in fact, that is a "betwixt and between" place that requires the crossing of a threshold.

Combined, the energies of Dambala, Ayida Wedo, and Legba are what make sense of the universe by bringing all of the worlds together and allowing the loa to travel between them. Through them we may also travel the spiritual universe and bring its gifts of healing and empowerment into our lives.

In the Vodou lessons that follow, we begin to work with these energies by exploring and embracing some of the spiritual gifts of the Vodou cosmology.



## THE VODOU LESSONS: 2

### CONNECTING TO THE ENERGIES OF THE UNIVERSE

Initiation into Vodou is about stripping away the familiar, the faith we have been indoctrinated into that tells us the world operates in a certain way and within known parameters. Vodou is about exposing ourselves to other options, sweeping away the past, and coming face to face with a sea of energy once again, as we did when we were newborns, before we assembled our worlds from instructions given to us by others.

There are many trials and challenges along the way, all of which must be overcome so this new sense of reality can be integrated into our minds. Before we can work with energy, as healers do, we have to see it and sense it. We must experience it to trust it and have faith that it is there. There are three key ceremonies in Vodou that allow us to intuit the existence of this "otherness" around us: the sacred baths, the bat guerre, and the djevo experience.

#### The Sacred Baths

As Loulou Prince makes clear, plants have an energy beyond their active ingredients. In Haiti this is recognized in the bathing ceremony of initiation, which immediately follows the bat guerre. During the bathing ceremony the candidate is given a series of purifying baths in order to cleanse her soul and wash her clean of past associations and conditioning, so that her mind can become open to a new experience of reality.

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When this is done, we are free to explore the universe to see how it really works and what part we play in this.

The bathing ceremony in Haiti is a communal and quite beautiful experience. The priest-to-be holds a single white candle and protects its flame so it remains always alight as he walks toward the sacred bath, which contains magical herbs that are known to do more than simply clean or have medicinal effects. These herbs cleanse the soul and whisper to the body, starting the process of changing the initiate's perceptions. The initiate is bathed by the Houngan or Mambo, who pours the sacred waters over him, singing blessings and protections as they do so. The bath is taken seven times a day for a period of three days in order to "open the head" (open the mind) for Legba, who will then bring the loa to visit.

Symbolically, this is about stripping away the past and becoming open to a new order of the universe, just like the Catholic baptism. But it is more than this; it is a healing in its own right. I often suggest this bath to clients who wish to be healed of negativity and disturbing associations with the past. Every client who takes this reports that after they have bathed they feel refreshed and are aware of a new vitality and energy.

One client told me how she had actually watched a spirit entity leave her body as she took this bath. The entity had the shape and form of a man, a past lover, who had betrayed her and left her with a great deal of pain. She had not realized she was still holding on to this energy until it stood up and walked out of her as she lay in the healing waters. This bath, then, is about cleansing the body totally, so all that is not serving you can leave.

What follows is an adaptation of the Haitian bathing ceremony. To take this bath you will need the following herbs, all of which grow wild and plentifully throughout Europe and North America. Use a small handful of flowers or four or five leaves or sprigs from each herb.

**Vervain** (an herb sacred to the Celtic druids and Anglo-Saxon shamans for its ability to drive away evil spirits)

**Valerian** (healing for all nervous conditions, including anxiety and insomnia)

**Thyme** (the word *thyme* means "fumigation," and the herb is an excellent spiritual cleanser and one of the favorites of the gods. According to the herbalist Culpeper, it is also very good for sending away "that troublesome complaint, the nightmare," which shamans know to be a spirit itself)

**Elder flowers** (the spirit of the elder tree is strongly protective of those who call upon it with respect)

**Sage leaves** (another favorite of the spirits and sacred to Native American shamans, who use sage smoke for purification and spirit communion. According to the herbalist Gerard, "Sage is singularly good for the head and brain, it quickeneth the senses and memory")

**Saint John's wort flowers** (long held sacred as a protection against witchcraft and harmful spirits, its Latin name, *Hypericum*, means "having power over apparitions." It is also useful for removing fears and for promoting lucid dreaming, wherein the dreamer is able to interact with the spirits and with the unconscious world to receive healing and guidance for the future)

**Chamomile flowers** (according to the ancient Anglo-Saxon text the *Lacnunga*, chamomile is one of the nine sacred herbs given to us by the god Woden and is an excellent relaxant that will promote restful sleep)

**Oats** (for relaxing the body, opening the pores, and helping to relieve the symptoms of stress)

**Peppermint** (for spiritual vitality and to refresh the mind and body)

**Fresh forest leaves and pine needles** (any type of fresh forest leaves will do).

Prepare your bathtub in advance, filling it with water that is as hot as you can bear. Add the herbs, rubbing each between your hands, to release their spirit into the water. Bless the water and ask that its spirit and those of the herbs fill you with vigor, health, and energy and take away the pains of the past. Ask for the Power to direct your dreams and determine the course of your life. Then leave the room for fifteen minutes. Go into

another room and before your altar meditate quietly on what you want to release from your life. Ask the loa to help you with this.

When you are ready turn off all the lights in the house and light a single white candle. Remain focused on your intent, and protect the flame as you walk to your bath. Place the candle in a holder and step into the water.

Lie still, allowing the waters to wash over you for ten to fifteen minutes. Then press handfuls of herbs against your forehead, the top of your head, the back of your neck, the insides of your elbows, the backs of your knees, and the soles of your feet (all of these are key areas for magical attack and spirit intrusion). Then stand up and scrub yourself with the herbs, always from the head downward. State your positive desires for the future as you do so. Then soak for another ten minutes or so.

When you are ready stand up again, and this time turn completely around in a clockwise circle (the direction of positivity and increase) three times. Then quickly get out of the tub, clap your hands, and with all of your Power and intention say, "I am healthy! I am strong! I am Powerful!" Immediately extinguish the candle and turn on the lights.

Allow your body to dry naturally, leaving any remaining herbs on your skin and hair. Take the rest of the herbs out of the bath and make a bundle of them and your candle. The following day take them to a place in Nature and bury them at the base of a tree, along with an offering to the spirits of that place.

Remain quiet and reflective for the rest of the evening and try not to interact with anyone else. Take this bath for three consecutive nights.

### The Bat Guerre: Finding Your Spirit

In Haiti the bat guerre, the "battle for the spirits," is a tough ritual that takes three nights to complete. The priest-to-be sits before a *bila*, a ceremonial altar space comprised of a large blue denim pillow that is stuffed with magical and aromatic herbs. For hours on end (usually four hours a night for three days), the priest will rhythmically beat this pillow with a machete, the symbol of the loa of Power, Ogoun, in order to release the aroma of the *bila*.

Eventually, through a combination of exhaustion and the effect of

the herbs, he will enter a trance state in which the spirits can talk to him directly. He is then pushed beneath the pillow while the other initiates continue to beat it, so that he becomes the very center of the ritual magic that is going on around him.

Whereas the baths are about releasing the construction of the world that the initiate has been holding on to through force of habit and years of indoctrination, the bat guerre is about replacing this sense of the world with a new, purer vision that is his own and communicated to him through his direct communion with the forces of the universe. It is about finding his spirit and a true vision of his life.

In Haiti the bat guerre takes place before the entire community, for it is also about demonstrating commitment to this new spiritual vision of the world. The sweat of the priest and his blistered and bloody hands are proof to the people that he has the dedication and strength to bring this vision into being on the Earth.

Thankfully, however, it is not essential for you to undergo this entire ritual in order to sense a new reality, because we all enter the dreaming universe every night when we sleep.

Most people understand that herbs and scents influence us subtly in many ways, and some in the West sleep with a pouch of lavender next to their bed, or with rose- or primrose-scented sheets, for example. They find that this relaxes them and changes their mood in slight but perceptible ways. The herbs of the bila are, in this respect, no different.

To create a bila pillow for yourself with ingredients you can easily find in the Western world, mix together small handfuls of marjoram, rosemary, sage, fennel, and geranium petals, then sprinkle the mixture with neroli, orange, and patchouli oils (aromatherapy oils are fine) and a little rum and water. Put your intention—that these herbs will help you to sense a new order to the universe—into all stages of the process. Be very aware of your every action, and grateful to the herbs for their work on your behalf, so that a partnership is developed between you—of their magical effects and your strength of will.

Allow the mixture to dry naturally for a few days, in a place where the sun and the moon will both shine upon it, such as a windowsill or a glass conservatory. When it is dry crumble the mixture into a pouch

and place it on your altar for three days and nights. Ask that the loa and the ancestors infuse it with their Power to bring you the spiritual certainty and wisdom you seek. On the fourth day take the bila and place it in your bed, beneath your pillow.

When you go to bed that night ask that the loa come to you and teach you the nature of the spiritual universe as you sleep. Keep a dream journal next to your bed and, as soon as you wake up the next morning, immediately note your dreams and your first waking sensations.

Repeat this ritual for nine nights, then dispose of the bila in Nature, as you did with the herbs for the ceremonial bath. You may repeat this ritual any time you wish, making up a fresh herbal mixture in the same way each time.

### The Djevo: Seeing through Blindness

It is no accident that the priest-to-be is blindfolded when he enters the djevo or that he remains in this state for the first few days. He is becoming a child again, and he must enter the world unseeing, as we all do, in order to truly understand it. When he emerges he is a spiritually mature adult and sees the world through eyes that have been washed clean by the dark.

Great sages and mystics the world over have merged with the darkness in this way in order to break with their past lives of socially prescribed reality and the conditioning of the world outside. In the solitude of Japanese, Indian, and Tibetan caves, English groves, *fogous* and *sidhs*—the dark places of the Earth—spiritual seekers have always found the solace and introspection necessary to reflect upon the nature of reality. Paradoxically, they arrive at enlightenment through immersion in darkness. Such a time of inner seeing is in the Buddhist literature; it is also part of the initiation practices of Africa, from which the djevo experience stems.

Simon Buxton, the U.K. Faculty for Dr. Michael Harner's Foundation for Shamanic Studies, reflects that the use of ceremonial darkness as a shamanic tool "is a classical method the world over for stalking the self, accessing invisible landscapes, and embracing deeper aspects of unconscious and super-conscious states.

"Being in darkness over several days brings about a remarkable stillness of mind, and from this pool of quietude the oft-hidden gifts of intuition and creativity dramatically arise. These include unusual phenomena, such as remarkably lucid levels of dream consciousness, where the borders between dreaming and not dreaming diminish and then disappear altogether. The chatter of the mind ceases and we are able to explore our own luminosity and experience the world as a sea of energy.

"The experience of prolonged darkness appears to be unique for each person. The gifts that are given include renewed energy, the ability to move past obstacles of self-limitation, to cross the bridges of life's challenges with greater ease, and to step into the unknown without fear."

The experience of darkness, particularly as part of a sacred ceremony, is extremely potent. With no visual distractions from the outside world, the mind is forced inward toward self-examination and the questioning of the material universe. The imagination is fired and unbridled and reaches out to the spirits, who hear this call and begin to bring their gifts of insight and intuition, of seeing the world in a way that the original body remembers. We all saw the world without eyes during our first year of life, both within the womb and immediately afterward. Before our eyelids opened and we were taught how to assemble reality, we never needed eyes; we just *knew*.

Thus, those who reenter the darkness become children once again, innocent poets of the soul and explorers of the Infinite; seers who witness the world not with the eyes, but with the entire body.

The Houngan knows that anything seen in such a way is always of the spirit. It is not just an image plucked from the air that enters the mind in darkness. There are no images plucked simply from air. Every image has meaning, resonance, and purpose in our lives. Everything we sense has information. Images, like myths, are always real. They are what is true about us. They hold our spirits, and have their own separate forms. However we define them, images are *beings*; they are real because we experience them. The Houngan will make it his business to discover which of these beings have real Power and information for him.

Since this is about him, his life, his vision, and his future, the Houngan's agenda is to find out which of these beings can help him, and in what ways. For we will all go, sometime, into a longer, darker night. The question is, What we will find there, and will we go with a whimper or a roar when the destiny of our very souls is at stake?

Thus, darkness becomes a vital tool to connect with an all-important other reality; a reality that will affect us all, whether we like it or not, for we all have an appointment to keep. Will you die in ignorance, without really having lived? Many do. They are blinded by daylight—by the assault on their senses of ten thousand advertisements and soap opera dramas, until even hearsay becomes plots within plots from old TV series.

The psychologist Carl Jung spoke of the “dark night of the soul,” after which everything in life appears brighter. He surely meant this as a metaphor, but it is also biologically true. The world looks different when you emerge from the dark state, and is sensed as pure energy, where forms and shapes are fluid and structureless, since it is only our habitual way of seeing the world that actually gives them shape and meaning.

There are also less transcendental reasons for the impact of the darkness upon us. In the biochemistry of the brain, the neurotransmitter serotonin is produced by the body in reaction to light, and enables us to inhabit normal waking consciousness—to see reality as it is normally experienced. In darkness, however, melatonin is produced instead and is then converted into pinoline, which is the biochemical that creates dreaming and new states of consciousness, so that we see reality in a wholly uncommon way.

Once pinoline is released into the brain the production of another biochemical, DMT, is stimulated. DMT represents the body's natural ability to create any reality we choose and, interestingly, is also one of the main active ingredients of many psychotropic plants, such as ayahuasca, the visionary Amazonian “vine of souls.” Simply being in darkness, therefore, will naturally lead to another sense of reality.

The effects of darkness are cumulative, its Power increasing the longer one remains in this state. In the *djevo*, it is maintained for several days. In the *Darkness Visible* workshop that I teach with Simon

Buxton, participants remain blindfolded for four days, which broadly reflects the djivo experience.

You do not need to remain four days in darkness to achieve a shift in your perceptions, however; sometimes even minutes are enough.

Before you begin this exercise make sure you have someone with you who can take care of you and your needs during the time you remain in darkness, because even the simplest things, like making a drink or finding the toilet, will become difficult once you give yourself over to the dark.

Ask that your friend be present in your home in case you need her, but it is best that you sit alone in your altar room so you do not feel inhibited by her presence. Set a time limit between you of, say, three or six hours, during which you will be blindfolded and remain in a darkened room. Ask your friend to tell you when this time is up. You can build up to longer periods of darkness if you wish.

It is a good idea to have a tape recorder with you so you can record your insights, feelings, and reflections during your time of seclusion, as you will definitely sense the world in a new way.

What is the darkness telling you—about your life, about who you think you are? What spirits (or images) visit you, and what do they have to tell you about how you are living and the authenticity of your life?

Do you hear the darkness whisper? What is it saying? Let the rational mind twitter—"This is rubbish. Nothing's going to happen. Give it up and watch TV. What would other people think of you? What a rotten host you are to the poor friend who's come round to mind you. Blah, blah, blah." Let it twitter, let it twist, let it protest and scream. All this is healthy. It is merely the mind's way of releasing the toxins of its prior conditioning. Sometimes the mind will make you physically ache—anything to stop you from discovering the one essential truth about yourself that the rational world has no answer for and your socialized self does not want you to know. Your sacred duty is to continue. It is your agenda we are concerned with, not that of the material world.

Get beyond it; it will not last long. Then listen for the voices in the dark. See the world as it really is, for only the second time in your life.

Then when the blindfold is removed, what do you see? Does the

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world look beautiful to you? Does it look "real"? Do you see beneath reality to the one essential truth? Ninety percent of the universe is invisible, unknown, so what is the stuff that our world is really made of? What is the secret about you that your rational mind was holding back?



*Mystery and imagination arise from the same source.  
This source is called darkness. . . . Darkness within  
darkness, the gateway to all understanding.*

—LAO-TZU



*The average man follows not reason but  
faith and this naive faith requires necessary  
illusions, and emotionally potent  
oversimplification by the myth maker to  
keep him on course*

NOAM CHOMSKY



## 3

# ACTS OF FAITH AND POWER

## Spiritual Strength versus Material Gain

*Anonse O zanj nan dlo  
Bak odsou miwa  
La a we, la a we*



Announce the angels in the water  
Beyond the mirror [beneath the  
water's surface]  
He will see, she will see

—VODOU SONG ANNOUNCING THE  
ARRIVAL OF THE SPIRITS



*One day the jungle will eat what is left of Jacmel. It has already made a good start. The old white colonial mansions, now bullet-riddled and crumbling, stand as a testament to some archaic system of power where men thought they could own other men, control other countries, and even have authority over Nature. Now their palaces are in ruin, the jaws of the jungle stand open,*

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and tendrils of vines and grasses wrap themselves around once stately homes and symbols of office.

When it is done and Jacmel has become an organic thing once again, the people here will not care. They are the jungle, living manifestations of it, and, surrounded by the visible spirits, they are well aware of the impermanence of the human condition. The bones of these buildings mirror the bones that they are, and the jungle is the world they will return to when all is said and done.

There is a signpost at the center of Jacmel, erected by a madman or a mayor who once sought to anchor the town within a framework of the civilized world, I suspect, and to ward off the jungle by giving an air of belonging to an ordered universe. A close inspection of this signpost unveils this lie of belonging, for it points nowhere. Or, at least, it does not care where it points. One arm directs us to the heart of the jungle and has the word Cuba painted on it. Others point into the depths of the sea and are signposted Africa and America. There are no kilometers given, and, in any case, I doubt whether following any of its directions would lead you to the places it advertises. We are all on a journey and nobody knows the destination. We must become god's fools.

At the peristyle people I do not recognize, villagers and strays, are drawing veer in the dirt. We stood watching them, marveling at their artistry in creating such beautiful symbols, rolling flour and ashes between finger and thumb to trace intricate designs on the ground, each one a call to a particular loa, like a welcome mat for him or her. Soon the designs will be blown away by the wind or danced over, just as Jacmel will be claimed by the jungle.

These things are offerings to the gods and are never meant to be permanent. They are a giveaway of beauty, not a possession to be owned as art or property by a lucky few, but by everyone whose feet touches them in the electric ecstasy of the moment. That they will be danced into dust is the point.

The first veer was for Legba, a highly involved design that featured the combined motifs of several individual loa, as befits the gatekeeper who is summoner of them all. The second was for Erzulie, a very feminine symbol, comprised of a large heart sur-

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Mambo Racine was not so impressed. As we stood watching the veve, almost entranced while working to create our own ritual objects for the initiation ceremony to come, she had stormed down to the peristyle and trampled the designs into the earth.

"Didn't I tell you not to go anywhere without me!" she railed. "You have no idea what some of those symbols are! They are veve to drain your Power from you. This is the Marketplace, remember, and everyone is after Power. Look at you all—wake up!"

Bizarrely, this whole event took place just a few feet from one of Jacmel's beautiful old mansions, its estate separated from the world by an ornate iron gate that carries the legend *Tout Ici Respire Paix Dieu Agape*, "Here You Breathe Peace and Love of God."

We all came out of our trances pretty quickly—god's fools.

—HAITIAN JOURNALS, JANUARY 2000



There are two concepts of power in Haiti, just as there are, generally, in the rest of the world. One of them, a very Western notion no doubt adopted from the French, English, Spanish, and American invaders who have sought to rule Haiti and its people, is about taking something from someone else—whether this is property, wealth, status, or energy. It is a very human concept.

The other concerns the use of personal Power, which is more like an energetic strength and comes from communion with the spirit world. In Vodou, this is known as *Ashe* (a-Shay).

You will have noticed that I have differentiated between the two in this book by referring, until now, to the first of these as power (with a lowercase *p*), and the second as Power. From now on, I will call the latter by its proper name, *Ashe*.

The desire for power, in any culture, stems from fear—a fear of scarcity, that there is not enough, that we are missing out on something.

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The desire for power, in any culture, stems from fear—a fear of scarcity, that there is not enough, that we are missing out on something.



This triggers a deep inner pain, expressed as the hatred we project onto another for having more than we. This same mechanism is behind the robberies and killings and gang warfare we see on our city streets, as well as the colonial mentality that wants to own and rule the world, and the ethnic cleansing that wants to wipe one race off the face of the Earth so another can claim their "rightful" ownership of the former's land.

Such an approach to the world is deeply ingrained in our political and social institutions; a documentary shown recently on Channel 4 in the United Kingdom reveals just how much. The program looked at the process of elections to the student representative council (the Union) at Oxford University, a body that has long been recognized as a training ground for future political leaders, including British prime ministers and American presidents, and followed one of the candidates throughout her campaign. She spoke openly, honestly, and depressingly, about the need she saw to betray others in order to claw her way to the top and win the election. She talked of the lies necessary during the campaign in order to get the voters on her side and about her suspicion of the other candidates and the deceit they would also be using.<sup>1</sup>

What a wonderful training ground for our future leaders. As soon as people set out to achieve power in the West, it seems that they just know the code and what it involves. It is the first instinct of our politicians to lie and deceive, and I doubt it is much different for the other institutions that guide and govern us. We have, after all, seen large-scale economic deceit from some of our major financial organizations in the very recent past, while one of our most powerful religious bodies, the Catholic Church, has had to introduce its own internal "police force" to stamp out the child abuse that has now become almost endemic within its ranks.

The attempt to acquire power in such a way goes on in Haiti too, of course. Perhaps it is more justified, however, or at least understandable, for people in a third world country to behave in such a way because they have so little—unlike the power-hungry of the West, who often already live privileged lives and act, through fear, only to preserve their current status.

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What this translates into is an often understated but always present focus on gaining more personal power by taking it from others. Some of these attempts can be quite humorous at times. The following extract from my journal in Haiti gives a flavor of this.



*Heat and dust. When you make the journey to Haiti, the first thing you notice as you step off the plane at Port-au-Prince Airport is the heat. In January, when the initiations are held, the temperature rarely drops below eighty, even at night.*

*The next thing you notice is the dust. Haiti is an old slave colony, a place of political and civil oppression, now in poverty. According to official figures, unemployment is around 70 percent, but those are just the official figures and the true unemployment level is probably much higher. There is no money here for the niceties of life—like decent roads, sanitation, and drinking water. The roads are dirt tracks because they have to be, and spew dust into the air, which is pointless to clean up since the next truck along will immediately undo your work. That is just the nature of dirt roads.*

*And so layers upon layers of ancient dust add years of texture to the grand old buildings and roadside shanty huts of downtown Port-au-Prince. There is something almost romantic about it, as if the lines of dirt are hieroglyphs that would reveal the history of this country if we could only read them.*

*There is a quiet chaos at the airport and a hum of activity as people try to part you from your money for services rendered—even when they have not actually been rendered! The ingenuity*

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He gestured toward the building (he tells me), as I stepped onto the tarmac, which in Port-au-Prince apparently constitutes an act of uncommon service. I give him ten dollars just for the story.



Such scams are as frequent in Haiti as they are in other third world countries. They are attempts to gain power in one form or another, which can be a minor irritation for Westerners unused to traveling in such countries, but they rarely go further than that.

The search for Ashe, however, can have much longer and more wide-ranging implications for personal health and well-being, for to be Powerful is to have the guardianship of the spirits, to be healthy, protected from illness, and to enjoy good luck throughout the whole of one's life. Working with the loa and the ancestors to acquire Ashe, therefore, is considered much more important in Vodou than the short-term gains that may come from a ten-dollar scam at an airport.

Among shamans of all races and lineages, this belief in the curative and protective abilities of the spirits is a taken-for-granted law of magic. As Michael Harner remarks in *The Way of the Shaman*: "Shamans have long felt that the power of the guardian or tutelary spirit makes one resistant to illness. The reason is simple: it provides a power-full body that resists the intrusion of external forces. From the shamanic point of view, there is simply not room in a power-filled body for the easy entrance of the intrusive, harmful energies known in ordinary reality as diseases."<sup>2</sup>

According to the shamans, we are all born with a strong connection to these tutelary spirits, who watch over us throughout our lives, just as the loa and the ancestors do. If we feel Powerful and dispirited in mod-

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According to the shamans, we are all born with a strong connection to these tutelary spirits, who watch over us throughout our lives, just as the loa and the ancestors do. If we feel Powerful and dispirited in mod-

ern life, it is not because the spirits have left us, but because we have left the spirits and allowed the connection between us to die.

Although we are born with this infinite potential, however, we can lose our Ashe in ways that are as individual as we are. It may take years for a particular set of circumstances to come together so that our Power can be taken from us—a series of abusive relationships, for example, which act cumulatively on us until the one single relationship that coincides with our most vulnerable and weakened state. Once the circumstances are right, however, Power loss can take place very quickly and often as a result of actions taken by people in our immediate vicinity. We may even attract it by repeating the patterns of our past and seeking out the same sort of people with whom to begin relationships; people we know, at some level, are destined to hurt us once again. The voice of our experience would tell us so, if only we would listen to it.

Before we are tempted to become drawn into blame and recrimination toward such people (which in itself would be giving away our Ashe by attaching a sense of who we are to the actions of another person), we must therefore consider our own role. It may be that we are not entirely blame-free ourselves if we have set up or encouraged the relationship in the first place, and it is certainly true that the most powerful person in the world may try to take our Ashe but they will fail unless we allow them to do so.

Furthermore, and quite paradoxically, those who hurt us most may often act not out of malice, but because they truly care for us. Their actions may be misguided but they still originate from a sense of love. In almost every life, in fact, the people who first take our Ashe are the people who love us most: our parents.

### **PARENTS AND OTHER "EXPERTS"**

They fuck you up, your mom and dad,  
 They may not mean to but they do  
 They pass on all the faults they had  
 And add some extra just for you . . .

These lines from Philip Larkin's poem "This Be the Verse"<sup>3</sup> impart the

essence of what Vodou calls a *wanga* (one-Gar) and what the native Celtic shamans called a *geis* (gesh).

A *geis* or a *wanga* can be interpreted either as a curse or a sacred challenge, depending on how you look at it. When a *geis* is laid on you or a *wanga* made against you, you may be compelled to do certain things against your will or, perhaps, forbidden from doing other things that you would otherwise have had the Ashe and probably the inclination to do. Celtic tales and folklore are full of such examples: the mother who refuses to name her child or allow him to marry until he has performed certain actions; the wicked stepmother or witch who sends her young rival into a deep sleep or trance; the king who banishes his knight until a particular challenge is met. In answer to such curses, the path of the hero is laid and a holy quest must begin to undo what has been done so the person cursed may once again live in freedom.

In Haiti if you choose to accept the *wanga*, you are cursed from the moment it is laid and your Ashe begins to drain from you until you become the living embodiment of somebody else's will. In the most extreme cases this leads to zombification, in which you have no will left at all to undo what was done to you. You become, in effect, a slave, neither alive nor dead, but a walking shadow with no sense of self.

In the Western world such "curses" may be the case for children born to extremely strict parents who control their every action. I have also seen it in people from very privileged backgrounds who have had the classical upper-class upbringing, common in the United Kingdom, which starts with a nanny, continues with a boarding school, progresses to university and then the military or a professional career. At every stage these children must follow the dictates of others and bow to the will of the establishment. This is their curse, and to escape from it and find their true selves beneath the weight of indoctrination is their sacred challenge in life.

The first *wanga*, then, is the one our parents lay on us by creating a life script for us to follow. Typically, the process begins with idle comments: "Isn't he like his father?," "She's so like her grandmother," and so forth. Already, your identity is being unwittingly drained from you, and your life is being defined in terms of another and usually in terms of the past.



The process then escalates and becomes future-looking, so that idle comments become unconscious instructions to the young mind on how to develop: "You'll never amount to anything," or "You're so caring. I can just see you as a fine doctor one day," and so on.

It begins early and is often not based on any knowledge of the individual child. The psychologists Smith and Lloyd found that the scripting of a child's life begins on the day of its birth, just hours after its arrival in this world.

The erosion of our Power begins with our parents, who are effectively subtracting from the sum of all we are or might be, the one Ross Heaven, John or Jane Doe, that they want us to be. Even though this is usually done without malicious intent, it is their behavior toward us that determines the amount of personal Ashe (the essential "us" that is left) we have and that we carry into our interactions with the world.

Your parents may have seen you as a delicate or artistic child, for example, or sporty, or bookish, or whatever—all of which will have set up particular social interactions and paths for you to walk. These wanga do not in any way reflect the real you, who may be all—or none—of these things. What they may do, however, is provide you with a comfort zone as you engage with your script and the parameters for living that have been given to you and that you remain, unthinkingly, within.

One of the dangers of wanga is their ability to take hold of the mind so that only their reality is important to us. By becoming habituated to them, we cannot see an alternative and so stay within the box. "You cannot escape from prison until you are aware that you are in a prison," as Gurdjieff wrote.

And so we often seek confirmation for the things that have been said about us, so we do not have to challenge ourselves in life. Knowing that we are "stupid" means we never have to access our intelligence and do the work to prove our teachers wrong. We are satisfied with the D grade because that way we don't have to create a whole new reality for ourselves by believing ourselves capable of straight As. We accept what everyone has always said about us because it is easier that way; we never have to make an effort to find out the truth for ourselves. What would happen if we did? Our worlds would collapse. Because then we would know we have been living a lie. This is too dangerous for the

rational mind, and so we stay comfortably "stupid." All we have to do in return is give up our right to a life of freedom and self-determination.

Such simple beginnings can have a profound impact on us as we go through life. We learn from the wanga that we are only to behave in certain ways, and these ways then become habitual as we blend, like actors, with the character in our script, becoming self-important businessmen in our costume of suit and tie, dismissing all in the world that is not black and white, cut and dried, a known reality and a done deal. Or perhaps we play the role of self-pity, becoming a "poor-me" for whom the world is always a tough and dangerous place. But we slog on regardless, so we can suffer some more.

It is not that we do not want an alternative; it is that the character we play literally cannot see one.

I once met a wealthy landowner who was trapped in an unhappy marriage and would give anything, he said, to leave his wife. I asked what was stopping him. He could not afford to sell his estate, he said, because the property market was depressed and he would lose too much money.

The property market had nothing to do with his marriage! The two are completely unrelated. You can leave a marriage without selling a house. But it had become his excuse for inaction as he pursued the roles of wealthy man and trapped husband who must make a profit on everything and can never be free of responsibility for others.

I asked this man how much he would lose by selling his estate. The answer was ten thousand pounds (about sixteen thousand dollars). Here was a man with four or five million in the bank, but he would not allow himself a life in case he lost ten thousand. That was the price of his freedom.

To overcome a wanga we need permission to change—whether that permission comes from ourselves or from others who help us calculate the price of our freedom compared with the cost to our lives of the chains we often so readily wear.

Two of my healing clients come to mind as examples. The first, Clare, was a very sensitive and intuitive woman but was born the child of two scientists, one a medical doctor, the other a research chemist, who had practically beaten her innate personality out of her in their

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desire to see her become a scientist too. From the earliest age she had been forbidden to play with dolls, punished for daydreaming, and kept away from friends (especially "childish" friends who did not "apply" themselves). Instead of playing she was required to read books and study.

Clare had learned to put away her sensitive and intuitive self and had grown up, unsurprisingly, to be a doctor like her mother. But she still remembered her original self, before the parental wanga was laid, and now, thirty-five years later, her soul was screaming out for nourishment.

Even though Clare was very successful in her career and her life, when she first came to me she was in crisis and could not stop crying. Her tears were prompted by a report she had read in a newspaper a few weeks before, which had apparently stated "categorically" that scientists could now prove that the soul did not exist.

This had felt particularly hurtful to Clare, who had been told the same thing by her parents—that only science had the answers to life. Yet Clare knew she was in touch with something within herself that was greater than science. It was this conflict within her that was causing her pain.

The ways of spirit are always intriguing, and quite coincidentally, when I met Clare for the second time I had been out, five minutes before her arrival, to buy a newspaper. When she came in I had it open on the floor beside my chair, at a page that carried an interesting story—one claiming that scientists had now proven "categorically" that the human soul did, in fact, exist!

This simple reversal of 'known facts' was the start of Clare's healing journey, because it showed that our "experts"—our scientists, our media, our parents—really haven't a clue. Like the rest of us, they make up reality as they go along. What Clare realized is that she had the Power, the Ashe, to do the same thing for herself and to ignore the script she had been handed for her life, if she so wished.

Clare and I went on to work together, and she was quickly able to reconnect with the spiritual dimension of her life. Two months later she wrote to tell me she had given up her scientific career and was moving to California to work as a volunteer in a spiritual community for a year.

When she returned she would decide what *she* wanted to do with her life.

The other client was Helen. Hers was an interesting case because it illustrates the fact that our ‘experts’ often cannot even agree on the script themselves.

Helen came to see me because she could never seem to keep a boyfriend and, in fact, had just broken up with someone she had been close to for more than five years and thought she would marry. It wasn’t the first time she had been in this situation; many men had asked her to marry them, but it had always gone wrong at the last moment. Helen felt there was some sort of bad energy or curse hanging around her that always doomed her relationships to failure.

What emerged during our discussions was that her parents were in unspoken opposition to each other. So silent was their antagonism that the real violence of their dislike for each other was more or less invisible behind their apparently loving suburban facade.

Helen was able to connect with the underlying tensions and dynamics of her early family life when I helped her enter a meditative state in order to look behind this facade (see pages 105–122 for a discussion of this technique).

Asking Helen to connect with her memories of her family revealed parents who were extremely loving in each other’s company and a model within their church community and circle of friends—how a good Christian family should be. When Helen connected with each of her parents individually, however, she remembered her mother and father telling her on frequent occasions not to get married, to have a life for herself, to not give it all away to one man/woman and regret it forever, to not make the same mistake they did, and so on.

What she realized is that she had been given two contradictory scripts: “Get married and be like us; be happy,” and “Don’t make the same mistake we did. Stay single and happy.” Human beings are creatures of habit and the rational mind is very good at accepting instructions. Helen had acted on both of these scripts without even thinking about them. In her life this had meant relationships that were passionate, loving, and fulfilling, leading to the point of marriage (“get married . . . like us”), but that always floundered at the last moment because of

her own inability to commit to them ("stay single . . . don't make our mistakes").

Sadly, Helen was never able to disentangle herself from the parental script. Her love for her parents went too deep and her comfort zone of "unlucky in love" was too safe a place for her to leave. By doing so she would be betraying her parents on too many levels. The wanga was therefore too powerful to break, and five years after our meeting she is still single, now with a child from another failed relationship, despite her continuing desire to marry and settle down.

Of course, it is not just our parents who make wanga against us. Our social institutions, such as schools, churches, and legal systems, all have their own prescriptions and proscriptions for and against certain behaviors. Inasmuch as we unthinkingly go along with these, we allow our Ashe to be taken from us.

There is a big difference between accepting a point of view because we have thought it through and agree with it and accepting it simply because it is the norm. The former allows us to retain the Power of our individuality; the latter makes us drones within a social order that, in the words of John Keats, "will clip an Angel's wings, conquer all mysteries by rule and line, empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine, unweave a rainbow . . ."

## ZEN AND THE ART OF CHINESE WHISKEY

Because we are so conditioned to accept the word of authorities and experts, there is a tendency in the West to rely on the wisdom of a great teacher or guru and give away our Ashe to the beliefs of others. This is our contribution to the wanga.

I have experienced this myself. Because I have written books people often contact me looking for answers, believing that I somehow have the Power to make everything right for them. Such "gurudom" is not the way of Vodou, which is concerned with *self*-empowerment rather than dogma and instant fixes that require no personal involvement in the process. Those clients who expect me to solve all their problems for them are frequently disappointed when they realize they can only be helped if they will commit to playing a part in their own healing.

Ekun, a priest of Santería, puts it well in his following observation about the conditioned Western mind and how it can lead us to seek instant fixes from gurus, with little effort on our part:

Long before I embraced *Orisha* [Santería], like many college aged American men, I became interested in Zen Buddhism. I was lucky because I was living in an area where there were several Tibetan groups. Most of these were started by someone native to the land in which Buddhism or Hinduism was predominant, but all their students were American.

What I noticed is that the students forced their own views of what a Zen Master should be onto the Masters. They wanted their Zen Master to be serious and to recognize in them that they were the prodigies who would carry on the lineage for him. What they got was a short Korean man who answered most of their theological, spiritual, and personal questions with: "Be quiet! Sit! Meditate!" People would come to his Dharma talks on Fridays and would ask questions, and often be told: "Stop thinking!"

Sometimes one of them would be invited to dinner with us after the talk, and would ask how come we ate meat and why did the Zen Master pull out a bottle of Chinese whisky? Sometimes, they would get upset and say, "That is not the way a Zen Master should behave."

They wanted a Zen Master who was like Jesus, wore robes, said pithy, slightly inscrutable things, and was loving and caring. With a Zen Master, you are likely to get someone who answers deep questions by telling you to wash the dishes, sweep the floor and peel the potatoes. Most Westerners get discouraged because they do not understand what washing dishes or sweeping the floor has to do with enlightenment and having their questions answered immediately. They idealize their heroes and demigods and want to turn them into the mothers and fathers they did not have. They want to have someone to project their ideal or archetypal parent onto.

There is a story I was told about an American anthropology student who went to South America to study with a native shaman. He goes into this village and asks an old man wearing tattered clothes if he knows where the great shaman don Diego is?

The old man answers: "That old drunk? What do you want to see him for?" The hopeful anthropologist was stunned: "How can you say that? Don Diego is a great shaman!" The old man responded with "Diego is an old fraud." He then begged money from the American to buy beer.

This pattern repeated for several days, with the young man looking for don Diego and the old man insulting the great shaman. Eventually, after two weeks of this, the anthropologist packed up and prepared to leave. As he was packing, his host asked him why he was leaving. The young American said it was because he had spent two weeks looking for the shaman don Diego and could not find him.

His host was dumbfounded. "But you have been talking with don Diego for the past two weeks!" he said.

The anthropologist had expected some wise, refined character from some movie instead of the earthy man who had been teasing him and hustling him for beer money all week. The young man's own presuppositions and expectations had prevented him from learning.

To learn a new way of being, you really have to drop all your suppositions and accept things on an experiential level. Try to force the experience into the boxes you brought along and you fail. You have to experience it on its own terms.

Communion with the spirits offers you this experiential perspective, in contrast to the ordinary reality of socialized "givens." It links you, via the bridge of imagination, with all those aspects of yourself that continue to exist within you, despite the best efforts of those who raised and conditioned you.

As soon as we begin to use our spiritual, intuitive selves, we reconnect with something vast and Powerful within ourselves: our membership of an Infinite universe, in which we can begin to undo the wanga of our past to once again achieve the pure state of Ashe that we had when we entered this world.

This is the case whether or not you believe in a spiritual world. In strictly biological terms the two hemispheres of the brain—left and right—are separated by a bridge of nerves called the corpus callosum.

One half of our brain controls rational, analytical thought and is the part of us that, in Western societies, is given most (if not all) support during our formative years. The other half controls intuition, imagination, and awareness. The intuitive is the side of us that is trained to become a passive spectator of life, so that these mental muscles atrophy during our development. We in the Western world are, by definition, at best using only half of our brains. Furthermore, the half that we choose (or are conditioned) to use is the half that is least observant of life and most reliant on habit.

You can test this assertion very easily. Use all the faculties of your rational mind to concentrate on the following questions. Answer them instantly without using pencil or paper.

**QUESTION 1:** You are participating in a race. You overtake the second person. What position are you in?

If you answered that you are first, then, sadly, you are wrong. If you overtake the second person, you take his place. You are now second.

**QUESTION 2:** If you overtake the last person, then you are . . . ?

If you answered that you are second to last then you are wrong again. It is physically impossible for you to overtake the last person.

**QUESTION 3:** (Do this in your head, without using paper, pencil, or calculator.)

Take 1,000 and add 40 to it

Add another 1,000.

Add 30

Add 1,000

Add 20

Add 1,000

Now add 10

What is the total?

Did you get 5,000? The correct answer is 4,100. Check it on a calculator.

**QUESTION 4:** Mary's father has five daughters: Nana, Nene, Nini, Nono. What is the name of the fifth daughter?

Nunu? I'm afraid not. Read the question again. The fifth daughter's name is Mary.



**QUESTION 5:** Study the sentence below. Don't worry about what it says; all you have to do is count the number of Fs it contains.

The ability to feel good about yourself is a formula distilled from decades of scientific study combined with the shaman's experience over many thousands of years, suggesting that it's all just a matter of knowing yourself fully.

If you said seven, look again. There are ten. If you got this one wrong you might like to reflect on the fact that the rational mind just allowed you to miss 30 percent—almost a third—of the information available to you, even when you were concentrating on what was directly in front of your eyes.

The rational mind does not always work in our favor. It is not the ally of the intuitive self or the soul. Sometimes, in order to *be*, we must stop making sense, at least in the way that *sense* is defined by the rational world.

In my experience, it does not take much to get the muscles of our full mind working again. Even after just a weekend of the workshops I run, everyday miracles of clairvoyance and spiritual connection start to become commonplace—and this Power, this innate Ashe, is always stronger than people think.

Imagination is the energy we use to enter into communion with the spirit world. It is like a call to the spirits who are most attracted to this energy, and who also happen to be the spirits that can help us most. Imagination is the bridge on which we meet the gods; it is the human part of the human-spirit equation.

## THE ROAD TO ASHE

In Vodou the journey to Power begins with opening to the loa, the ancestors, and to Nature, the spiritual shadow of our material world. We must reconnect with these forces and with the sense of wonder and awe that comes from seeing the world afresh. Only then can we revert to the state of balance and potential we had when we first came into this world and tap back into the unconditioned mind.

The way to reconnect with these forces is the same for many shamanic traditions. It is through a state of trance known as journeying,

in which the rational mind is set on hold and we enter into purposeful meditation so that the intuitive, imaginative, and creative aspects of ourselves are allowed free reign. In Vodou this state is known as the *danse-loa*, where the spirits “dance in one’s head.” It is a state similar to the shamanic notion of allowing the ego to fade into the background so that the person entranced becomes a “hollow bone” or channel for the spirits.

This is not always a comfortable notion for people born in the West, who are used to being in control of the physical world around them and, moreover, have been taught to control themselves from birth, as it demands the surrender of all that they think they are or have been conditioned into so they can view the world again through the eyes of a child.

A young child has no ego. It has not been tricked or socialized into believing itself separate from the flow of all things; it is still connected to the essential oneness of reality and is part of the interconnectedness of all life. As Dr. Dina Glouberman has written, “There is no distinction between mother and mothering, between rattle and rattling.”<sup>4</sup> An infant just is; it is the living embodiment of the injunction to be here now.

Even though this state is entirely natural and is simplicity itself for a child, letting go of the ego and reconnecting with our essential selves can seem a frightening proposition to many adults because it means casting off all that we have learned, over the years, to become. But it is not so daunting to live authentically within our own truth. We all managed it as newborns, after all.

In traditional societies that do not share our hang-ups over personal control issues, this reconnection with divine energies is not feared but revered and aspired to. The ancient Greeks, for example, recognized and enjoyed two forms of inspiration (literally, the “breathing in” of spirit): *ek-stasis*, where the seeker is “beside himself” with ecstasy, and *enthousiasmos*, where his communion with the otherworld becomes so deep that he is possessed by the gods themselves. In their desire for this holy state the Greeks would use music, dance, alcohol, and sexual practices to induce such communion, leading eventually to the cult of Dionysus.

In Haiti similar techniques may be used to bring on the state of ego-abandon where the spirits may move through the people. Professor Laennec Hurbon, an authority on Haitian Vodou, writes that "the appearance of the loa [as a result of trance possession] is the hallmark of a successful ceremony. Without their protection, individuals are cast adrift and become the toys or targets of all the unknown spiritual powers . . . that their enemies could muster against them."<sup>5</sup>

In Haiti these unknown spiritual powers are interpreted as "souls of the dead [and] unregulated evil spirits."<sup>6</sup> In the Western world we are as much threatened by the unregulated anxieties and negative energies of people who are trapped in unfulfilling life scripts, stressful jobs, and discordant relationships. These people vent their anger in explosions of unfocused energy and illogical actions that can have depressing and damaging effects on us all. We are all the victims of life scripts, some of which leave us unsatisfied or incomplete, and whenever we vent our frustrations we send more negativity out into the world.

The first step in creating a healthier environment is to gain mastery of our passions and create more joy in our lives; the first step toward greater *Ashe* and well-being is to cast off our scripts and take control of our destinies. This is what the *danse-loa* can give us.

Moreover, we are probably all used to relinquishing control in one way or another. In the passion of the moment we just forget that this is what we have done. Or perhaps we simply do not define it in spiritual terms and thereby miss the point.

The trance dancer *Amoda* reminds us:

We do it when we fall in love and lose ourselves. We do it at the peak of a mind-blowing orgasm. Some of us do it wearing Nikes, mindlessly pounding the pavement mile after mile, until the world stops turning and we disappear into infinity. Sometimes we just do it watching the sun set on an endless horizon, so still and so silent that time stretches into eternity.

Getting out of our heads is as natural as breathing. It is part of being human. Most of us did it when we were little, spinning round and round until we fell into a heap on the floor. We didn't think to question why we did it. It just felt good. . . . "Getting out of it" is

second nature. The desire to let go of our heads is a longing for freedom.<sup>7</sup>

Amoda's book, from which this quote comes, is about trance dance, the modern urban form of tribal dancing that is at the heart of the danse-loa. If you have ever "lost yourself" on a dance floor by moving into the rhythm of the music and allowing your body to become the beat, you have already experienced a form of possession. It is as simple as dancing.

When we dance we do not use our brains; we allow our bodies to move and our spirits to blend with the things outside ourselves—the atmosphere, the mood of the evening, the pulse of the dance floor beneath our feet, the Power of the music. Eventually, we achieve a state of trance, wherein we are no longer fully present, in the sense that our ego no longer vetoes our actions. We are not concerned about how we might look to others or whether we are getting the moves right; we are simply going with the flow.

This is the state of ecstasy—of being "beside oneself" with joy or passion. In this new state our energy can flow freely through our whole bodies, because it is no longer blocked by the censor of the mind.

In this state, "Heaven and Earth are reunited [and] a real transformation can occur. When the physical becomes spiritualized then consciousness evolves . . . By inviting Spirit into our bodies, we change the way we perceive reality, we expand our senses and so we honour ourselves and each other . . . This is how real change happens—by being totally present here and now."<sup>8</sup>

All of this has probably already happened to you in a smoky London nightclub, a rave-field in Glastonbury, a New York club, or at a festival in the Nevada desert. If this did not scare you at the time, there is absolutely nothing to be frightened about when it comes to the trance state of danse-loa.

## **DANCING WITH THE DEAD**

In Haiti and other tribal societies, dance is used as a means of getting outside the body, or, at least, outside the conditioned mind. The dancers

whirl in the night, “sweating their prayers,” as Gabrielle Roth puts it, with the intention of losing themselves so that spirit may enter their lives. It is in that moment that healing and empowerment begins, as new and uncommon forms of energy illuminate their bodies.

The music of Vodou is the drums. Every song the drummers play is a call to a particular loa, all of whom have their own special drum signatures. The dancers know this and are open to the loa who is called at that moment.

When the loa manifest they do so in particular ways that are expressions of their own archetypal purpose.

Gran Bwa, the spirit of Nature personified, brings with him a knowledge of the healing properties of plants and herbs. His dancing has the Power of a giant redwood or other ancient tree that has seen the world change over centuries. His steps are rooted and forceful, echoing around the peristyle as he moves among the people, offering them healing and comfort.

Erzulie is the goddess of Love in all its forms and may manifest as a young coquettish woman who is shy of the dance floor and moves in a very stylized, almost self-conscious way; as a passionate vamp intent on finding as many men to dance with as possible; or even as a mother figure escorting her children to the center of the dance and caring for them as they take their first steps. Throughout all of this she is concerned with emotional and relationship issues and always brings a sense of love and blessings with her, making herself available for practical consultations on matters of the heart, community, and belonging.

Ogoun represents warriorship in all its forms—from diplomacy and the art of negotiation through strategy and the art of war. His dancing can have the refined air of a mature diplomat hosting a dignified gathering or the wild energetic leaps of a young warrior expressing his strength and Power.

My favorite dancer is Baron. Baron is the head of the gede (the dead). Like some other loa, he has a dual function. He is the guardian of the cemetery, connected with the end of life, a party-throwing host who welcomes the dead, and a gentle protector of the children who have just come into this world. He captures the essence of the circle of life, the place where the living and the dead meet, which is always *now*,

for we are always alive and, in this moment, on a journey toward death.

In celebration of this journey, Baron reflects back to us the physicality of life—we are all spiritual beings, but we are living in a material body—as well as the creative role of sexuality in life, its essential purpose in generating and regenerating the species we are a part of, thereby also giving birth to the spirits who wish to be born to this physical plane.

Recognizing this, Baron appears as a very earthy spirit who dances his own bawdy dance called the *banda*, which is full of pelvic thrusts and explicit hip movements. He is the Elvis of the dead!

"They are phallic loa," Laennec Hurbon remarks of the gedes. They "tell dirty stories, perform lascivious and obscene dances, and spend their time playing jokes on the voodoo faithful . . . The eccentric behaviour [of Baron] actually expresses the art of turning death into satire. Playing death in order to outwit it—this may be their scheme, for if death is unavoidable, outplaying it with life lets one face it successfully."<sup>9</sup>

In this way the loa have a psychological function as well as a cosmic one, offering a person possessed the Ashe to deal with fundamental human issues of love, adversity, healing, belonging, and, finally, with death itself by making it a comical part of life.

Dancing and drumming are important parts of the trance experience and help the ecstatic seekers move out of their minds in order to reconnect with the Infinite—the god energy of Bondye—and with the natural Ashe they had as children, before their lives were scripted for them and the first wanga laid.

The dance and the drum can do this for us because, as traditional societies know, they carry the spirit of healing within them. Modern science is now beginning to understand this too, and a number of interesting articles have been written on both topics in recent years. Medical and psychological research into stress, for example, shows that one of the key problems in modern life is that we are under increasing and more long-term pressure as a result of our way of living. Energy gets mobilized within us to deal with the stressful events we encounter in our urban lifestyles, but it is hardly ever released and so accumulates in damaging quantities in our systems.

The experience of stress, in more Nature-based societies, can actually be a helpful bodily reaction to a perceived threat in the environment, preparing us for the fight-or-flight response so that we can protect ourselves. The body goes through various changes during stress, all of them designed to move energy reserves from nonessential functions in order to prepare us for fighting off an assailant or getting out of our surroundings fast. Adrenaline and noradrenaline are released into the blood, more oxygen is taken into the lungs through panting and sharp intakes of breath, and blood is pumped into the arms and legs. The immune system is also suppressed, as we are less concerned at that moment with warding off disease than about fighting for our lives. All of these responses are healthy and useful to us.

The problems arise because the world has changed since we were originally designed in this way to deal with stressful conditions. We in the West no longer have to run from wild bear or the spears and darts of an enemy, for example, and in doing so allow our energies to be used positively and then released when we evade capture and our heart rates return to normal. Instead we are subjected to the longer-term buildup of stress when we are left sitting on crowded freeways for hours on end during the daily commute, or have to work in a job that drains us and leaves us anxious to meet deadlines and the demands of unforgiving bosses who have their own careers and quotas to consider. Our stress goes on and on, and our immune systems remain continually suppressed. This will eventually lead to illness, for we no longer have a natural defense against disease, and to a whole raft of physical and mental problems.

One of the solutions that researchers have suggested is body movement. Exercise of all sorts helps us use our stuck energy in a way that is helpful to the body. For example, the psychologist Holmes found that exercise leads to lower levels of depression and hypertension, while Jennings found that exercise produces significant reductions in heart rate and blood pressure.

As Gabrielle Roth puts it, "We're all scared. We're all angry. We're all sad. That's a given. The question is, what are we going to do about it?"<sup>10</sup> What tribal societies do—and modern science now recommends—is get the body moving. This is not only healing in itself; it also produces unexpected spiritual side effects because "the more you

dance, the more you sweat. The more you sweat, the more you pray. The more you pray, the closer you come to ecstasy."<sup>11</sup>

Drumming too yields interesting effects when it is studied scientifically. Research into the spirit dances of the American Salish Indians by Jilek and Ormestad, for instance, shows that drumming changes the brain wave activity of the dancers to induce a new, healthier, state of consciousness.<sup>12</sup>

Electroencephalograph (EEG) recordings show brain wave activity in the theta range of four to seven cycles per second when drumming is going on around us. This is the range of relaxed dreaming and light trance, which medical researchers such as the Simontons have shown to be associated with the Powerful imagery that can lead to all sorts of healing "miracles," including otherwise unexplained remissions from cancer. My book *The Journey to You* contains a full discussion of these researchers' work and that of others who are using imagery to heal in quite remarkable ways.<sup>13</sup>

It seems, then, that whenever we open ourselves to drumming and dance, healing takes place on four levels.

First, the drums, and second, the dance can, in themselves, help to alleviate the effects of stress by mobilizing our pent-up energies, releasing feel-good endorphins into our bloodstreams, and relaxing us so we feel the benefits of a refreshing meditative state.

Third, while we are in this state, our imagination and its intuitive healing Powers also become stimulated.

Fourth, if we accept that there is a spiritual dimension of life, the ecstatic state is one that allows the loa to enter our world and offer us their own gifts of healing and empowerment.

## FEELING ECSTATIC

The psychological intention of the bat guerre is to get beyond the chatter of the ego-mind so that the body becomes an empty vessel for the spirits to enter. The monotonous pounding, hour after hour, of the bila becomes rather like a moving meditation and, after several hours of hard labor, eventually lulls the rational mind to sleep so that the intuitive self is released. At this point the machete is taken from the priest-to-be and he



is pushed beneath the bila. The pounding with machetes continues, wrapping the person in the warm aroma of sweet-smelling herbs.

As I lay there, belly to the earth, I was aware of the outside world fading away and my self (which seemed somehow more than I thought it was) being taken by the spirits to a pristine rain forest, with beautiful vast waterfalls and giant jungle trees.

I wandered for days among the leaves and palms, past fast-flowing rivers and gentle streams, under blue cloudless skies, among animals and insects that were as curious about me as I was about them, and who welcomed me back to this place of peace that I remembered from a childhood dream. I knew, without words, that this was Gine, the home of the spirits, and that while my body was rolling in the dirt my soul had returned to the place it remembered.

I explored this strangely familiar terrain like a child, looking in awe at the magnificent scenery, part of life unfolding, and in wonder at the animals that I now sensed as brothers and sisters—all my relations. There was no fear, only Love in this place.

After days of walking, I came across a man, dark-skinned and dressed in the white clothes of a slave. "Welcome home, brother," he said. "All this is yours. It always was. And you are welcome here at any time."

Though I seemed gone for weeks, it felt like seconds. Then I became aware, vaguely at first, of another presence in this primal forest. Turning, I saw Mambo Racine, then I heard her voice calling me. Sound became light, so that Racine shimmered and sparkled as she called my name. Gradually, the sound became the most important thing in the world. It pulled me toward her; then I was back in the peristyle, beneath the bila, as Mambo Racine stood over me, calling me back to ordinary reality.

I had been with the spirits for more than thirty minutes; at that time, it felt like moments.

Your own experience will, undoubtedly, be very different from this. The key point, though, is that once we get through our ego-fear of letting go, the experience itself is a very beautiful one.

You may be shown scenes from the past that have been hurtful to you, in order that you may heal them now. Or you may be given insight

into current challenges, or offered observations on your future if you continue with a certain course of action. Always these experiences are given in the spirit of healing and they are not painful.

You may also be offered advice, often of a very practical nature and designed to help you in the here and now by suggesting actions you can take immediately to improve your circumstances. At other times, as with my own experience, you may simply be taken to a place of rest and renewal where you can recharge your spiritual batteries. This is a healing in itself.

How might this state of ecstasy feel to you? The experience will be as individual as you are, but if you'd like to get a sense of how you might feel by reading more about my personal experience of ecstasy during the bat guerre ceremony, see my book *Spirit in the City*.<sup>14</sup> The only way you will truly know what the experience of ecstasy means for you is to try it. This is what I would like to suggest now.



### THE VODOU LESSONS: 3

## JOURNEY FOR ECSTATIC COMMUNION

The key to a successful experience of ecstasy is an intention of Power. A journey to the spirit world is like any other journey you might take in ordinary reality; if you just get into your car and start driving, you'll end up somewhere, but it might not be where you wanted to go. Taking a few minutes to look at a map, no matter how eager you are to set off, is the most important thing you can do if you have a definite destination in mind.

In spiritual work, intention is the map *and* the destination. When we decide to set our spirits free from our usual ego control, we must be clear on what we intend our journey to achieve. So always have a definite purpose or question in mind and this will guide you to where the answer can be found.

### Expressing Your Intention

The next step is to open the sacred space you have created by sitting before your altar for a few moments. This allows you to relax, to med-

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itate, and to put aside your thoughts about the day. As you do this ask quietly that Papa Legba open the gate for you and allow you communion with the loa. Then light your altar candle for Legba. If you will also be working with the ancestors (as we will in this case), ask quietly that Baron make it easy for you to connect with these spirits, and then also light your candle for Baron.

As you perform this simple ceremony, think about the question you would like to ask these spirits who have known you all your life and are aware of the purpose you had when you came into this world. When you have a question in mind, find the words that allow you to state it unambiguously so it can be clearly understood by your spiritual allies; phrase it not as a question, but as a positive expression of your intention.

As this is merely an exploratory journey to familiarize yourself with the spiritual landscape and some of its occupants, a good statement might be:

I am opening myself to the loa and the ancestors so they can show me the spirit world and allow me to meet those spirits who can most help me at this stage in my life.

If you prefer different words or have a different intention for this journey, use that instead. Repeat this as many times as you need to as you sit before your altar, until you are absolutely fixed in your purpose for this journey.

In the workshops I run to teach these techniques the question always arises whether the spirits you meet are definite entities with their own separate identities or expressions of yourself at some deep unconscious level. My answer to both of these questions is yes!

When we take our journeys to the spirits, we use the Power of imagination to form a bridge to the otherworld. It is this that overcomes the rational, analytical mind that creates normal everyday reality for us, and enables us to enter communion with our deeper selves, who occupy a different sense of reality. It is in this new reality that the sentient energies of the universe move and take on the identity of spiritual beings. These energies are quite distinct from us and have a Power of their own.

Jo May, who owns the Caer center and its fogou in Cornwall, England, where we hold our Darkness Visible workshops, tells the story of one of his shamanism-influenced events, wherein a participant

brought back from the otherworld a sword that was given to her as a gift of Power by one of the spirit beings she met there.

As she passed this imaginary sword around the circle of participants, it began to take on an identity and reality of its own, becoming somehow more present in the ordinary space of the room. At that moment Jo's dog, Rosie, entered the room, and one of the group members offered the (imaginary) sword to her, (imaginary) blade first. Jo says, "Rosie, sniffing, examined a point in space where the sword tip would have been, then pulled back sharply with a snarl as if she had been pricked on the nose. Rosie's response was more than just surprise at nothing being there. She behaved as if she had been hurt and kept a wary distance." The "imaginary" had become quite real.

Based on his experience of episodes like this, Jo offers the following good advice for spiritual journeys of the kind we will be taking:

If you imagine you can see something, don't dismiss it as "merely your imagination." Act "as if" something out there is interacting with your capacity for generating pictures . . . Or, act "as if" your inner voice isn't just you talking to yourself, but something external to yourself activating your capacity for internal speech.<sup>15</sup>

Once you begin to trust it, you can use your imagination actively to contact spirit forms. Trust what leaps into your imagination. Trust what it seems to be saying to you and go with it as far as it will take you. Then afterwards, see if it actually makes any sense to you. Allow yourself the experience. Analyze it later.

In other words, keep an open mind.

### **Moving into Trance: Drumming, Dancing, and Vocalizing**

Once you are relaxed and clear in your intention, if you have a drum begin to play it now. In Vodou precise and elaborate drum signatures are used to call particular loa, but this is not essential on this journey. Very often the pattern in Vodou, whether drum beats, dance steps, or salutes to the spirits, uses the number three, representing the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost that in the Afro-Caribbean religion is reflected as Bondye (God), the loa (sons), and the ancestors (holy spirits). This three-beat rhythm is perfectly fine for drumming, for a sta-

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ble, monotonous beat is all that is really required to take the mind into a relaxed theta-wave state.

Many shamanic traditions recommend a drum speed of around 200 to 220 beats a minute, which seems most effective for entering the theta state. Your drum pattern should therefore be a beat of one-two-three-slight pause-one-two-three-slight pause, repeated at a speed of about two hundred beats per minute.

If you do not have a drum or find it difficult to drum and journey at the same time, that should not be a problem, as it is now possible to buy drumming tapes you can simply play in the background as you concentrate on your interaction with the spirits (see the Marketplace section at the back of this book for details). Alternatively, it is possible to work with the spirits using imagination alone, without the use of a drum at all, particularly if you are open to trance states or have some experience of channeling.

When you feel the presence of the spirits, stand up and begin to move your body. Start slowly, swaying gently as you stand in place. Then as the spirit moves you, begin to move your feet and your arms, bringing your whole body into the danse-loa as you hold fast to your intention.

I find that people in my workshops who are new to this form of journeying tend to move only a little. As with everything else, we need to get used to it, and this comes through practice. Our socialized ego-minds are initially very resistant to dancing in this way, to letting go, and we are scared that we might make fools of ourselves in front of others. In reality, of course, no one is actually watching you, as they are all on the same journey, eyes closed, making contact with their own spirits and inner resources. Those who have taken these journeys before are much more relaxed and freer with their movements, so once again I suggest that practice is the key to using this technique. It will also help, of course, that you are alone when you take this journey, because you will not be intimidated or distracted by what others may be thinking or doing.

At a certain point you will feel a buildup of energy within you, and at this time it is a good idea to vocalize what you are feeling and sensing. Again, what emerges from you will be as individual as you and the journey you are on. Some people make noises that only barely resemble words; rather they are like primal communication from a time before

we knew a human language. Although others do not understand it, when I have asked workshop participants what they were saying during their journey, it always makes sense to them.

Others find that they need to sing out the story of their journey, and quite beautiful songs or wordless chants emerge. In the Amazon these are known as *icaros* and *maris*, respectively. So once again there is a precedent for such vocalizations, and you need not be surprised if you also feel a need to sing out your experiences.

Still others seem quite capable of speaking aloud an exact description of the journey they are on.

For all of these reasons it is useful to have a tape recorder on hand so that you can record what you say and listen to it later for further insights into yourself and the nature of spirit.

### **Journeying Deeper into the Spirit World**

When you feel that a deep connection has been made between you and the spirit world, lie down before your altar and allow your feelings and sensations to sweep over you. This is typical of what happens in Haiti when, after a period of communion, those who “have loa dancing in their heads” are helped to lie down and relax into a trance so that deeper levels of information can be passed to them and healing can take place.

This desire to lie down is a quite normal and very practical stage of this type of journeying. Michael Harner points out, “The falling down or lying down of the shaman . . . is a very widespread aspect . . . One very good reason for this practice is that it is very difficult in a deep SSC [Shamanic State of Consciousness] to remain standing. But even in a light SSC, the shaman usually wants to lie down in order to see and experience the journey clearly by being fully relaxed and not having to be concerned with keeping himself functioning in ordinary reality by having to stand or sit. A Yarlde Australian tribesman eloquently described the need for lying down in doing seeing: ‘If you get up, you will not see these scenes, but when you lie down again, you will see them.’”<sup>16</sup>

Lie down, relax, and experience your journey. Stay with it, using your intention as your guide while you are in the otherworld, and the drumbeat as your anchor to ordinary reality. Like the Houngan you are now a “walker between worlds.”

Take note of the otherworld scenery around you. What is the sense of this place, its essence, its mood? Explore it. Where are the Power places, from where you can draw energy and healing? Who is here with you? What is their gift for you, and how can they help you in your quest? Ask for their names so you will know them when you return. What can they teach you about yourself? What is their archetypal essence—Love, Power, Healing, Protection? Find out and ask how you can draw from them the particular energies you need, and what you can do for them in return, remembering always that you are involved in a mutually respectful partnership with these spirits.

Use your intention to guide you until you are satisfied that you have achieved all you intended for this initial meeting. And remember that this *is* just an initial meeting. You can always return; you do not need to exhaust yourself on this first journey.

When you are happy that you have done all that you can or want to, return to the place in your imagination where you first entered this otherworld. There is always a starting point, an initial scene, a first sense of energy. This is the place to come back to, so make sure you pay careful attention to where you are when you first enter your communion with the spirit world. And then bring your awareness back to the room where you are lying.

As you leave the world of nonordinary reality and come back to our own, you will pass through a stage that scientists call hypnagogic. This is the stage you pass through every morning when you begin to wake up from your dreaming and merge with everyday reality. It is a place the Celts called the “betwixt and between,” a place of Power where the imagination and the unconscious rule and affirmations produce real results for the day. As you begin to come back to ordinary consciousness, use the Power of this place to plant a suggestion in your mind that you are refreshed, invigorated, more empowered with Ashe, healthier and happier than when you entered. Your conscious mind, so good at following orders, will hear this instruction and act on it.

### Recording Your Journey Experiences

When you are fully back in the present moment, it is a good idea to immediately write down or draw your impressions, as the rational mind can

close in very quickly and cause you to forget your experiences. (Interestingly, though, our unconscious minds do not forget and, very often, when we return to the otherworld on future journeys, we find, that we unintentionally begin at the exact point we left off, even when we have consciously forgotten the details of our previous experiences there.) Before you leave the sacred space of your altar, remember to thank the spirits for their help and to leave an offering in payment for their assistance.

Sprinkle a little water on your face, which will discharge any residual energies you have brought back with you, and then close down your sacred space by making the sign of the cross in front of your altar, which represents the closing of the crossroads and the "Powering down" of this doorway.

Sit quietly with your reflections for a few moments, then extinguish the candles on your altar and leave.



### SUMMARY OF THE ECSTATIC COMMUNION JOURNEY\*

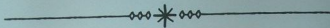
1. **Prepare.** Before you begin make sure you have everything you will need: your drum or drumming tape, a tape recorder if you are using one, a notepad and pen, some mineral water for your face, your offerings to the spirits, and the candles that will carry this energy to them.
2. **Open sacred space.** Move to your altar and begin to concentrate on achieving inner silence. Light your candle for Legba and ask for communion with the loa. Light your candle for Baron if you are working with the ancestors, and ask for his help in making this connection.
3. **Determine your question.** What do you want to achieve from this experience?
4. **Record.** If you are using a tape recorder, switch it on now.

\*It may be worthwhile to photocopy this journey summary and keep it near your altar until you are familiar with the journeying process.



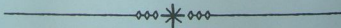
5. **Phrase your intention.** Frame your question as a clear statement of positive intent.
6. **Trust your imagination.** Keep an open mind.
7. **Begin to drum.** Or start your drumming tape.
8. **Move.** Start to gently move your body and allow this to build as it will.
9. **Vocalize.** Allow any words, songs, or noises to emerge naturally. Don't worry about this or pay too much attention to it. Your tape recorder is running and you can always listen to it later.
10. **Lie down.** When you feel the need to, lie down and relax, allowing yourself to deepen into trance.
11. **Explore.** Look around you as you travel through the otherworld. Ask any questions you have of the spirits you meet there.
12. **Return.** Come back to your original point of entry to the otherworld, and then, gradually, to normal reality.
13. **Make suggestions to yourself.** As you reach the "betwixt and between" place between worlds, make a positive affirmation to yourself of health and well-being.
14. **Keep a record of your experience.** Write down, draw, or paint all you have seen and experienced, including your feelings and reflections on your life before you took this journey, your original question, and your positive affirmation to yourself. Use this as reference material over the days and months and journeys to come, so you can see how your life has changed since you took this initial journey and made your decision to change the life you know.
15. **Make offerings.** Thank the spirits for their help and make your offerings to them. Remember, when the candle has burned down and the energy of your offering has been released, you will need to take the remains into Nature to bury them.
16. **Close the sacred space.** Make the sign of the cross and sprinkle water over your face to ensure that you are fully conscious and back in ordinary reality.

Once you have taken this journey a few times and are comfortable with the experience of the otherworld and the nature of the loa and the ancestors, you will be ready to use this technique for the recovery of Ashe. Remember, though, that the experience you have just undertaken is Powerful and healing in itself and will have shifted a lot of your energy. It is therefore advisable to leave a few weeks between your initial explorations before attempting the exercises offered in subsequent chapters.



*The world is created by magic. The first magician is God who created people with his own hands from the dust of the Earth. People originated by magic in all countries of the world. No one lives of the flesh. Everyone lives of the spirit.*

—HOUNGAN ANDRE PIERRE



# 4 BECOMING GOD'S FOOLS

## Journeying for Ashe

*Zye m kale! Zye m kale!*



My eyes are unveiled! My eyes are  
unveiled!

VODOU SONG THAT TALKS OF THE POWER OF  
CLARITY AND INSIGHT THAT THE SPIRITS  
BRING TO THE FAITHFUL



*Who knows what Power we may have within us; within the spiritual-emotional-mental-physical potentials that make up the substance of our humanity—before we even make an appeal to the gods or ask for 'outside assistance' in the form of spiritual possession?*

*Houngan Yabofe and his assistant are feeding the loa tonight. They sit before three huge pots of food—pork, corn, plantain, yams, beans—and countless bottles of cane rum and absinthe; enough to burst the stomachs of normal men. Before this night is*

out, under the huge full moon that hangs over Jacmel, these two men will devour it all.

There is no possession asked for, no call to the spirits to be part of this, no protection requested or assistance desired. The Houngans alone must force themselves to feed like gluttons on these sickening amounts of food so that its energy will reach the spirits through them as they become living sacrifices to the gods they serve.

Periodically, with bellies distended, sweet rum and pork fat dripping from their mouths and fingers, they get up from their stools and reel in some wild contorted dance that is a further offering to the spirits who so love to play and dance in ecstasy. The Houngans must not vomit. They must not become drunk on rum. They must never even look pained as they gorge, for that would be a huge insult to the loa.

Yabofe, lost in a moment of spiritual ecstasy, pours rum onto his arms and sets them aflame, lighting the peristyle as he spins, arms extended like a Sufi dervish at play. He dances laughing as the fire sears his skin. Then, as the flames burn down, he sits once again to gorge himself further on the remaining food. Throughout it all the moon looks down and laughs, vast and merciless, at this crazy ritual, so pointless, so necessary to ensure the blessings of the spirits upon this tiny jungle village—for if the spirits are not fed they will not have the energy to defend the faithful.

Sweat runs down Yabofe's face as he tears another huge mouthful of flesh from the thigh bone of the pig. He looks momentarily uncomfortable, then forces himself to smile and eat again, like a savage who has been denied food for weeks, like a glutton lost in feral greed.

Suddenly the night seems darker. I look up to see a shadow on the moon. A lunar eclipse. I had no idea such a celestial event was due tonight; I wonder if the Houngans knew. At precisely the moment that the light of the moon is extinguished their own ritual ends. The pots are empty; the food is gone; the gods are satisfied. The bellies of the loa are full now, the end of their hunger shown clearly by the death of the moon.

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The moon and the hunger of the spirits will return again tomorrow and grow once more in intensity until the loa must be fed again. Tonight, however, there are nods of approval and murmurs of happiness from the villagers who have witnessed this event. A simple ceremony, no more really than two men eating with gusto the meal of giants, but with that single crazy gesture the success of the village is assured. The people believe it so—and so it is.

—HAITIAN JOURNALS, JANUARY 2000



Terence McKenna's statement that we must become god's fools is meant to suggest a stripping away of the conditioned self so that we can experience the universe holistically once again. It evokes images of the divine fool in the tarot deck, who is so innocent and yet so at one with the world that he cannot be harmed by the forces around him. The divine fool takes actions that others, in their ignorance as conditioned beings, do not understand, so narrow-minded and blinkered have they become. Such is the ceremony of *manje-loa*—the feeding of the spirits—described above. To the outsider it is laughable, the action of an idiot, the gluttony of fools; to the faithful, however, this ritual is so Powerful that it links man and cosmos in direct, ecstatic, union, and so effective that its outcome may even be mirrored by the moon.

We see the same conflict on the world stage between those who have come to believe in—to *know*—the impact of their actions through their own experience of real-life results (the Powerful; the fools who are willing to explore and to trust what they personally have seen to be true) and those who are prepared only to accept secondhand wisdom from hand-me-down sources (the narrow-minded).

The narrow-minded trot out the party line and are so sure of what they "know" to be true, even though they have never experienced this "truth" for themselves, that they can never see an alternative. This leads them into truly idiotic relationships with the world.

Recently in the United Kingdom, for example, two school children were abducted and murdered. A man was arrested for this terrible

crime and held by the police for questioning. While this was going on, and before the trial even began, the elderly parents of the accused, who had never committed a criminal act in their lives, were forced to leave their jobs because the people they had worked with for years, their neighbors and friends, whipped themselves into a frenzy with the media reports of this crime and threatened to kill both parents. This is the narrow-minded and blinkered in action. These people were willing to take violent action against an elderly couple whose only "crime" was to give birth, thirty-five years earlier, to a man who himself had not yet been proven guilty of anything.

The fool looks stupid to people like these because his wisdom is so beyond their comprehension. Sometimes the fool acts and speaks controversially because he is stating a truth that is wholly unknown to the majority of people.

The Western world mourns its dead from the September 11 bombings, for example. God's fool will join their mourning for the three thousand Americans who died that day, but he will also see the deeper truth of his connection to the planet as a whole. He will point out the illogic of bombing an entire country (Afghanistan) and then occupying another (Iraq) in retaliation for this one event, which is then justified by the strange rationale that sees "fighting for peace" as sensible and the *imposition* of "democracy" as a valid counter to dictatorship. He will reflect also that on that same day in history, twenty-four thousand people died of hunger worldwide; there were fourteen thousand malnourished children in the world; ten hundred million people had no access to safe drinking water and twenty-four hundred million lived without basic sanitation; eleven hundred million African children below the age of fifteen were living with HIV; a hundred million had no access to basic education; and twelve hundred million were living on less than one dollar a day.

Tragic though the circumstances of September 11 were, the Western world's ability to divert its gaze from world problems and mourn only its own is an example of this narrow-mindedness and lack of creativity and imagination that can lead to distance and separation from the global community—to the extent that the last million years of human evolution seem merely footnotes to cave paintings. We are spacemen

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with burning spears, scrabbling for ideological supremacy in the dirt of our dogma, arguing for countries and oil like cavemen over scraps and bones. The fool, sublime idiot though he may be, sees the bigger picture because he is at one with the world as a whole and, in his Power, sees all people as his brothers and sisters, beyond the empty words and barely disguised agendas of our politicians.

As P. D. Ouspensky put it, almost one hundred years ago, in *A New Model of the Universe*:

Phrases, phrases, sympathetic, critical, ironical, blatant, pompous, lying, and, worst of all, utterly automatic phrases . . . But what can I say? It's all so tedious. Diplomats and all kinds of statesmen will gather together and talk, papers will approve or disapprove, sympathise or not sympathise. Then everything will be as it was, or even worse.<sup>1</sup>

As you might imagine, the fool makes as many enemies as he does friends. This too is the nature of Ashe. Just as we seek balance as human beings and the ability to live within and be part of all three worlds—upper, middle, and lower; the gods, the ancestors and the whole of humankind—so the universe itself seeks balance, and those who achieve Ashe are always targets for those who do not. This is the way of the Marketplace.

We do not really have a choice in moving forward, however, and creating more Ashe for ourselves, because there will always be people who want to take it from us, no matter how little or how much we have.

Perhaps you have met such people—the boss who always wants more from you because it makes him or her look good on paper when the end-of-year results are published, the parents who belittled you simply because you didn't see the world their way, the lover who so much wants you to be the one he or she is looking for that he or she tries to change you to fit a mold instead of accepting you for who you are.

Somehow we are always involved with someone who is not satisfied with who they are and can only be happy if we become what they want. All they actually do is create more misery as the rest of us are



dragged down to their level. Unfortunately, many of these people end up in positions of power because they are driven to make a mark for themselves in the world of ordinary reality, to achieve status and the admiration of others, so they can live this false dream and never have to face who they really are.

This is the difference between power and Power, between authority and Ashe. How many dictators do you know who were also spiritual people? How many politicians who truly acted for peace instead of votes? How many bosses who turned down the offer of a new Mercedes so they could pass on the bonus to their employees instead?

While we live in the Marketplace, we are always targeted by people who want our Power to fill the void created by their lack of communion with something greater than themselves and their inability to create balance in their own lives.

Our choice, then, is not whether we go on to create more Ashe for ourselves, but whether we face the onslaught as Powerful individuals able to resist it or as normal human beings caught in the cross fire of unresolved issues that drains our Ashe from us.

The Houngan knows the ways of the Marketplace and is quite clear on the answer. For him true Power comes from drawing upon all of the available resources, which also means making allies of the spirits of the upper, lower, and middle worlds. Each ally that he makes enables him to deal with his own issues so he can move closer to becoming one of god's fools; it also enables him to see the issues that are driving those around him so he can help with their healing or, at the very least, not get drawn into their dramas to the detriment of his own Ashe.

Incrementally, with each journey, the Houngan gains more Power. In the West we would expect this to make him more self-centered and focused only on his own good, as we are now used to the abuse of power by our own leaders. But this is not the way of the Houngan.

I remember sitting one night with Yabofe Danise, the Houngan who initiated me into Vodou, talking about his role as a leader of his community.

Yabofe is a rich man in Haitian terms. He owns a *lakou*, a community of the faithful, in his case amounting to twenty or more houses he has bought with his own money, yet he is always poor.

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THE LOA TO REC

The houses he has personally paid for are occupied by people who have nowhere else to go, many of whom stay there rent-free in return for basic ceremonial duties. Vast fortunes, in local terms, pass through Yabofe's hands from the people who come to him for healing, yet he never has money because it is his sacred duty to care for the people of his community in whatever way they need his help. If this means paying for an old man to receive medical treatment for a broken leg, he will pay for that treatment as well as transportation to the local hospital; if it means buying a school uniform for one of the children, that too is his duty as the "father" of the community.

"Look at me, Ross. I am the richest man in Jacmel and my pockets are always empty," he said. Then, drawing on his cigar as he looked up at the stars that night, he allowed himself a smile. "Ah, well, I am rich in other ways."

Becoming rich in the way of Yabofe Danise means finding a place of communion with the three otherworlds of Vodou: the worlds of the loa, the ancestors, and Nature, the spiritual equivalent of our own world.

Assuming you have left enough time and space between your exploratory journeys, I would like to suggest that we move on now so we may also find communion with these worlds. You will find three guided journeys in this chapter that are designed to help you make connections with the loa, your ancestors, and the Nature spirits. You will proceed on these journeys much as you did for the exploratory journeys into ecstatic communion presented in the last chapter, but each of the journeys in this chapter will provide you with a detailed guided visualization that will direct you in a specific spiritual direction. When you have taken these journeys to strengthen your connection to the spirit realms you will be ready to symbolically die to your old self and be reborn as someone new—as one of god's fools, who can see with greater clarity the truth of the world around you.

### **MEETING THE LOA TO RECEIVE THE GIFT OF LOVE**

As aspects of the god-energy that is a part of and connects all things in the universe, the loa are archetypal beings who stand for the experiences

of all humankind. They are both sacred and profane, a principle of holiness that exists above human actions, an expression of the energy that connects us all. At the same time they *are* this energy focused on the mundane affairs of the living world.

They are the Power that we use—for good or ill—in our daily lives, a universal battery from which we draw strength before we decide what to do with that strength and how to apply it. The loa would prefer you to act with love and compassion toward all other beings, just as the Jesus or Buddha would, but their main concern is to act lovingly toward *you*. They teach by example in this respect, and are concerned only with your needs when you make an appeal to them for more Ashe in your life. It is up to you whether you use that Power to attract a woman, to rob a bank, or to campaign for nuclear disarmament.

Some Westerners are surprised or disturbed by this. It seems somehow immoral to them that the loa should provide us with Power that we may use for good or ill and to meet our own agendas; they feel that the gods should be above trivial and immediate concerns for love or sex or money. It also seems something of an abuse by humans or, at best, unspiritual of them to ask for the gratification of these very basic human desires. But I can assure you that the loa do not feel that way—nor do many spiritual leaders who have been raised in non-Western cultures.

A few years ago I spent some time in the Amazon jungle with Javier Arevalo, a shaman-healer for a small community of fifty families in Nuevo Progreso on the Rio Napo river in Peru. Javier is a *Maestro* (master) of ayahuasca (also known as an *ayahuascero*) and has spent fourteen years exploring the spirit of this and other plants, which he refers to as the “jungle doctors.” The training of an ayahuascero is in some ways similar to that of the Medsen Fey, the leaf doctors of Haiti, but it is, if anything, more arduous, involving abstention from certain foodstuffs, from alcohol, and from sex, since the spirit of ayahuasca, while angelic and protective, can also express very human emotions, such as jealousy and anger. It can therefore turn vengeful, with unpleasant consequences for those who approach it in an impure manner.

Training as an ayahuascero also involves long periods of time spent in jungle isolation, “dieting” the plants, which means regular (often

...ingestion of ayahuasca healers. The shaman uses sugar, salt, alcohol, and honey for all of his food. He must remain in the jungle where he must remain for all of his life. Every plant has a spirit. He takes ayahuasca as part of his apprenticeship. The shaman tries another plant, to which you are cured by that. "You learn all this in the jungle, to which you are cured by that. You learn all this in the will of Christ."<sup>2</sup> Javier's own training has been a Banco (evolved from the word banco, a bank) is able to spend up to 100 years of the Amazon rivers, and he also saw a shaman on his path to becoming a shaman. He has healed many Westerners and is generous in sharing his knowledge. After all this time he understands that he does not claim to understand. When I worked with him he was about to take part in a ceremony from the members of his community so he could assist them. Being Westerners we people replied with spiritual peace and saving the world for people in his culture and immediate surroundings.

nightly) ingestion of ayahuasca, along with many others that are considered healers. The shaman must also follow a special diet that denies him sugar, salt, alcohol, pork, and other foods. In fact, the diet consists largely of rice, fish, and rice water—and even that might be considered lavish, for all of his food must be found locally or carried into the jungle, where he must remain for months at a time.

“Every plant has a spirit,” says Javier. “The shaman goes into the forest as part of his apprenticeship and spends years taking plants and roots. He takes ayahuasca too, and the spirit tells him what it cures. Then the shaman tries another plant, each time remembering which ailment is cured by that.

“You learn all this in the wilderness. The spirits there are the angels of each plant, to which you add your own will to heal your client. This is the will of Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

Javier's own training has taken place under the tutelage of his grandfather, a *Banco* (evolved shaman), who, with the protection of ayahuasca, is able to spend up to eight hours at a time beneath the waters of the Amazon rivers, communicating with the “biggest fish of the river.” Once he also saw a mermaid there, who is now a guardian and tutor to the old shaman. Soon Javier will begin his own “river training” on his path to becoming a *Banco*.

Javier has healed many Westerners during his fourteen years as an ayahuascero and is generous in sharing his knowledge and his medicine with them. After all this time he understands the Western mind-set very well, though he does not claim to understand it, much less agree with it.

When I worked with him he was hosting a group of Westerners who were about to take part in the ayahuasca ceremonies. Javier wanted to know from the members of the group what they really wanted from their lives so he could ask the spirit of ayahuasca to intervene on their behalf. Being Westerners and victims of their own conditioning, most people replied with spiritual or “cosmic” answers and spoke about world peace and saving the planet, for example. Javier looked bemused, for people in his culture are much more used to asking for practical and immediate help, such as the return of a lover or success in business. So he asked his guests once again what they *really* wanted the ayahuasca to help them with.

This time, after a little more thought and a good deal more honesty, almost everyone in the group replied that what they really wanted was love. This Javier could understand, as these requests were much more real and personal than the search for a solution to the problems of the cosmos.

He asked why the group had not requested these things to start with. Looking embarrassed, most people answered that they had not felt entitled to ask for such personal things or to seek gratification for themselves. It was as if they did not have the right.

This embarrassment is very typical of Western people who have been raised on a diet of "selfless" Christian charity that puts the needs of society and not the individual first. Yet paradoxically, these honest desires are where true world healing begins; if more people in the West were able to experience the love and acceptance they are longing for, there would be no need for the madness of developed society; the search for status, power, and material gain; and the destruction this often leads to. Consequently, there would be no need to save the planet, which would never be in danger, because no one would be selfishly taking from it in order to make themselves feel better. "These thoughts tangle up people's lives. Love solves problems," said Javier simply.

This view has been echoed by more enlightened Western academics over the years. In the 1950s, the psychologist Abraham Maslow, for example, sought to explain people's search for the spiritual, and why only some people achieve it.

He devised a "hierarchy of needs," in ascending order, to explain the mechanics of this quest. Lower-level needs must be satisfied before we can hope to move on to the next in our journey toward personal and spiritual evolution.

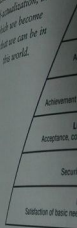
Maslow's hierarchy forms a pyramid, at the base of which are physiological drives for food, drink, sex, sleep, and so on. These are basic human survival needs, and if these are not met, we simply die without having achieved anything in our lives.

Next is the need for safety and shelter, then for human contact and community, and then for self-esteem and the love and respect of others.

Only after these have been met are we secure and healthy enough to become seekers of meaning. And even that is just the start of the

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Figure 4.1. Love is  
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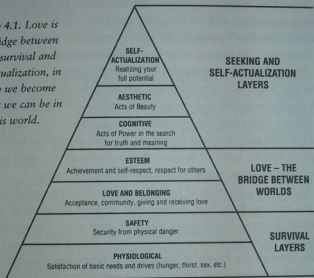
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journey, for our need to create, to be involved in acts of beauty and inspiration, must be met before we can ever hope to achieve self-actualization and arrive at our full potential as spiritual human beings.

*Figure 4.1. Love is the bridge between basic survival and self-actualization, in which we become all that we can be in this world.*



**MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS**

In simple terms, what Maslow is saying is that we can never achieve true spirituality if our basic needs are not met—if we are starving or homeless, for example. We just do not have the resources or Ashe to do so, and our other needs are, in any case, more pressing.

Nor can we create acts of beauty or love in the world if we are not loved by others and do not love ourselves, since we have no experience of what love means and no desire to love others. How can we become seekers of truth if we do not even have a roof over our heads? How can we solve the problems of the world if we cannot even get on with our neighbors or our kids?

In the Western world our basic needs are usually well met, and so we often make the mistake of leaping ahead to the top of the pyramid

and focusing on our desires for self-actualization, world peace, and so on. These "lofty" ideals may seem more spiritual than the Haitian's desire for money or sex, but that is an illusion since they still represent a drive for personal gratification of some kind, and we are still looking for something more in our lives. Our mistake is to try to obtain this missing something without doing the necessary work—the stuff in the middle of Maslow's pyramid. We are so anxious to get to the top that we forget that the journey must be made in incremental steps.

The problem is compounded for many Westerners because our cultures are based on a get-rich-quick ideology (however we define this richness for ourselves) and our spiritual traditions are founded on duality. We are either material or spiritual beings, "haves" or "have-nots." The Haitians and Peruvians do not make such a distinction between the physical and the spiritual because they understand that spirit exists in everything and even money is just another form of energy.

In fact, the attainment of Love is probably the most important thing on the spiritual path, as it makes a link between the material and the spiritual. Being in love is what makes us most alive. The world looks different. We value ourselves because we are valued, and we can transmute, through the Power of emotional alchemy, our own feelings of Love and acceptance into loving acts for and toward our beloved. Love is the force that unites the material and spiritual worlds.

Referring back to Maslow's hierarchy, we can also see that the energy of love is the force that impels us toward enlightenment. Material needs occupy the first two levels of the pyramid, while more spiritual pursuits occupy the top three levels. What gets us from one to another is the achievement of Love and belonging, from which self-respect and the search for meaning can flow.

What I would like to suggest, now, is that we embark on our first guided journey to the spirit realms to deepen our relationship with the loa. We will meet with the spirit of Love, Erzulie, and ask that she provide us with the gift of Love in our lives. Assuming that our basic needs have already been met, this is the most important step we can now take on our journey to become healers, for it is love, compassion, and empathy for others, that always guide the healer, and we cannot be loving if we do not know Love.

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And then you realize

is the Cosmic Mother

is the essence of Love  
for all human

for light energy



## Journey to Erzulie

*Begin this journey in the usual way by opening sacred space and meditating on your intention for this communion. A good statement of intent might be:*

*To meet with Erzulie to experience the sensation of divine Love and to ask for love and healing in my life.*

*Begin drumming and start to move your body to the rhythm of the drums; then, when you are ready, lie down and deepen into trance.*

*An exercise in visualization is sometimes helpful in order to make the initial connection with spirit, as this encourages the imagination to take over from the rational mind and creates a bridge you may walk across to the otherworld.*

*See yourself standing in a clearing in a pristine rain forest. There are jungle huts in front of you and a crystal clear stream at your side, where people are bathing and children playing in the waters.*

*A line of stepping-stones crosses the stream and you are drawn to walk across them, the gentle waters lapping at your feet, toward one of the huts that seems to be calling you to it.*

*Arriving at this hut, you bend low to enter the doorway and go in. In front of you is a beautiful woman wearing a white dress of cotton and lace. Around her head is a scarf of white silk, and bright beads of blue and pink, yellow and red, hang from her neck and wrists on silver chains. She seems the epitome of grace.*

*She is nursing a young child as you enter, whom she holds lovingly in her arms. All around her is a radiant light. You cannot identify a source of this light; it is as the light is coming from the woman herself.*

*And then you realize that this is no ordinary woman; this is Erzulie, the Cosmic Mother, the Goddess of Love, and the light you see is the radiance of Love from her heart. Love for you, for the universe, and for all humankind.*

*Her light envelops you and you feel it on your skin like the rays of the sun. In that moment you know that you are accepted and forgiven*



for any of the sins you feel you carry, and all of the little imperfections you feel to be yours are lifted from you. You bathe in the brilliant, perfumed Love of the perfect mother who believes in you—You as You Are, and the person you can become. She does not want anything from you. She feels no desire to change you. She accepts you and wants only the best for you.

Approach her and let her hold you and comfort you. Tell her your cares and let her ease the burden for you as she strokes your hair and sings to you of your own perfection, like a mother with her child.

Talk with her and tell her your needs and desires. Let her advise you, as a caring parent who wants only to see you happy and fulfilled. What is her advice? What suggestions does she have for you that can help you to achieve your heart's desire?

Sometimes the spirits have a gift for us. This might be a symbol of love, something meaningful to you, or a gift of energy and Power. If Erzulie has a gift for you take it graciously and thank her for her Love. Note what this gift is. How is it meaningful to you? How can it help you? Is it something you can use in your daily life on your journey to a more fulfilled self?

Stay as long as you want in the radiance of Erzulie's Love for you, asking any questions you wish and seeking her divine counsel. If you have a gift for her, or for her child, in return, offer it to her. Then, when you are ready, take your leave, knowing that you will always be welcome to return to this place of comfort and healing.

Follow the jungle path back to the river and cross over via the stones, then bring your consciousness back to the room and your altar space. Record your thoughts and feelings, make your offering (Erzulie enjoys luxurious foods, such as rich cakes with yellow, blue, gold, and silver icing, representing her sacred colors; yams and peppers; champagne and rum). Her candle should be blue or pink. After you have made the offering and lit the candle, close the sacred space.



The gifts the spirits offer us can come in many forms. When I teach this journey at workshops, I always suggest to participants that if

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appropriate they *ask* for a gift if one is not offered, especially for a gift that is practical and useful to them in everyday life. It is an excellent idea if you are given a symbol, for example, to actually make this symbol in ordinary reality by drawing it or modeling it, and so forth. You then get closer to it and understand its meaning and how it might be used. By the same token, if you are offered a ritual or ceremony to perform, act upon it as soon as you can.

Sometimes, however, it is not even necessary to make the symbol or perform such a ceremony, as the gift itself will materialize for you in ordinary reality as if by magic.

At a recent workshop, for instance, one of our participants, Gilly, was a woman of mixed English-Jamaican blood who had never felt close to either of the cultures she embodied. Consequently, she said, she felt as if she belonged nowhere, as if each side of her identity canceled out the other rather than enriching it.

She had a particular problem with her Jamaican half, as this came from her father, who had left the family when she was a young girl. Her mother had then remarried and given birth to other children of all-white blood, making her feel different even within her own family. Gilly had been quite emotional during the workshop, feeling unloved and unwelcome on the Earth.

The spirits do not like to see such sadness and, when we took this journey, they made sure they offered Gilly a gift. It was an unusual one at first sight: a slice of cake. In explanation the spirits showed her the cake being made, all the ingredients being mixed together, its baking and icing, and, finally, its presentation to her on an attractive, ornate plate.

As this was taking place Gilly began to understand that the ingredients that go into a cake are really only the basics and that the cake itself, complete and so much richer than its individual constituents, is what truly matters. A finished cake is a delicious and beautiful thing in the way that raw eggs and flour are not. In other words, it was *she* who was important, *she* who was beautiful and desirable, and what she had become was so much more important than where she had come from. Gilly was far more than just the sum of her parts.

This journey and the gift of understanding that was bestowed was

very important for Gilly, for it represented the beginning of her understanding that she mattered so much more than the color of her skin. But it didn't end there. I had, rather ambitiously, suggested to participants that they ask for a gift that was not just given in spirit, but would actually materialize in ordinary reality. This would be proof to them of spiritual communion and would validate their experiences in the otherworld.

As it was now lunchtime, during the one hour we had for break I had set them all the task of allowing this material gift into their lives. This was, of course, a challenge, to say the least! The participants, including Gilly, went away excited but skeptical.

When Gilly returned, however, she was all smiles. As soon as the workshop broke for lunch, she had walked downstairs to the bar to get a drink. Unknown to any of us, the venue had catered for a wedding that day, and when the bar manager had seen Gilly come in he had immediately offered her not just one but two pieces of cake that had been left over! One for each of the cultures she embodied.

Intending only to have a Coke, Gilly ordered a rum and Coke instead, in celebration of her Jamaican half.

## MEETING THE ANCESTORS FOR GRATITUDE AND FORGIVENESS

As Gilly discovered, we are so much more than the sum of our parts, what our parents have made of us, or what generations of history have led us to. It remains true, however, that our ancestors do play a significant part in our lives, both practically and spiritually.

On a very immediate level, the fact that you live in this country and not another; that you were raised to the standards of a certain lifestyle (as the son or daughter of a farm owner or farm laborer, pornographer or priest, cop or robber); that red hair, artistic talent, big hips, or athletic prowess runs in your family; that your grandfather was a multi-millionaire but disinherited your mother for marrying your father—all of these things are part of the mythology of your life and make a difference to who you have become and the privileges that have given you a start in the world.

Of course, none of these things need be *essential* to who you are

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now and how you choose to live, and you can accept or reject them as you wish. Red hair can be dyed, and you can make your own fortune, after all. But they still affect you at some deep inner level.

Perhaps you are still carrying the shame of a family scandal, for example, whether you know it or not. Or maybe you are benefiting from the inheritance of a famous uncle who was a big shot in the film business and gave you your first break on the road to stardom, even though you hardly ever think about him now. Whoever you are, you are always someone else too.

In workshops and in my healing practice I often see the influence of the ancestors—the gifts and burdens we are given by them—written in the lives of participants and clients. Often there is a generational cycle involved as well, which is like a wave of reflection and attachment across the ages.

Let me give you an example from my own family. My parents were working-class; my father, the eldest in a family of thirteen, pretty much had to raise the others single-handedly. My father and mother wanted to make more of themselves than this, and given the hardships and sacrifices of their backgrounds, couldn't wait to leave their class roots behind. They worked hard, made money, and found professional careers for themselves. From the slums of Birmingham, they eventually moved to a nice little cottage in the middle of the countryside, changed their car every second year, and took holidays abroad every once in a while. The typical middle-class dream.

Because they had worked hard to get where they were, they naturally wanted to give me every advantage in life and encouraged me in my education so I could get a good professional job, as a doctor or a lawyer, without having to struggle as they had.

And naturally enough, I rejected all of it and identified far more with their working-class origins and the values of my grandparents rather than the material lifestyle I had been brought up in. Far from becoming a doctor, my dream was to become an artist, complete with a garret in which I could starve and wallow in existential misery! Eventually, I gave up this dream, but only to replace it with one of becoming a writer and workshop leader, neither of them secure middle-class professions, but ones I was happy with.

Having gone through this journey myself and escaped what I saw as the prison of a professional lifestyle, I determined to give my children, Amelia and Jodie, a more holistic and less money-oriented childhood and to allow them the freedom to decide what they would do with their lives.

Both of my daughters attended a Buddhist school from an early age, where they learned meditation and yoga as well as the standard curriculum. They have been to numerous spiritual and music festivals with their mother and with me. They have taken part in parades and marches and workshops—far more than I ever did—and they are still only twelve and fourteen.

And, of course, they hate it! They loathe festivals and camps, dislike yoga and meditation, have no time for the spiritual, and think what I do is nonsense. No doubt they will grow up to become the doctors and lawyers my own parents prayed for.

Such a rejection of parental values is entirely natural and healthy; all children need to break with their parents and find their own way. This is the very purpose, in traditional societies, of rites of passage and vision quests, where the child is ushered into adulthood in a supportive way, so she can find and then live her own dream of the world.

It is also evolutionary. My children now carry the values of their grandparents *and* their parents and will be informed by both as they make their own way in life. If Amelia ever does become a lawyer, she will be able to take her spiritual values and tolerance into work instead of being motivated solely by money. And if Jodie becomes a doctor, at the very least she will certainly be a lot more fun than my own!

Inevitably, their children too will one day reject the values of their parents and identify more with their grandparents—with me. Indeed, in traditional societies this sense of connection across the generations is respected and accepted, with the grandparents often bringing up the children while the parents occupy themselves with the work of the tribe. In this way it is recognized that the tribal elders, so close to reentering the world of spirit once again through the doorway of death, may learn from the young ones who have recently been born from this place. Meanwhile the children may benefit from the wisdom of the elders on how to live authentically during the Earth-walk they are now on.

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It can be more damaging to us when our ancestral burdens are not rejected and we find ourselves living someone else's dream of us so we never have our own lives at all. Likewise, it can be destructive when there are no ancestral gifts to embrace and integrate into our lives, only the weight of the past to carry, or where the ancestral hold is still so forceful, even over generations, that it becomes dangerous and unhealthy for us.

Where our children are not allowed to make their own choices, we often see the same patterns repeated within families. Whether we (Western society) would see the outcome of these patterns as positive (the son of a successful businessman who grows up to become a millionaire himself) or negative (the son of an armed robber who also becomes a criminal), they are both still prisons we create for our young ones.

In healing we are far more likely to be dealing with people for whom the ancestral burdens they carry have had a damaging affect. For example, I have worked with adults who were abused as children and who, despite their best intentions, have grown up to become abusers themselves because they have never learned another way to give love to their children. I have seen the son of an alcoholic who was taught to drink at an early age and did not even realize the dangers until he was also hooked on booze. I have also met the daughter of distant and reserved parents who grew up to be so shy that she was unable to make friends or find a mate, and so starved of affection that she used sex as an outlet instead. And I have worked with the son who was a product of a marriage without love and who himself ended up divorced because he was unable to find fulfillment with his own wife. I've also come into contact with many other casualties of the past.

Linda, another of my clients, is an example of how deep the hurt can sometimes go. Linda came to see me because she had a problem of self-harming. She worked as a manager in an English stately home that was open to the fee-paying public. She enjoyed her job, but often found herself under stress at work for reasons she could not explain, as the pace of her job was quite leisurely and her surroundings—the gardens and animals—very relaxing. Whenever she experienced feelings of tension and anxiety, however, she would cut herself. She had no desire to do this,

though she often felt relief when she did; rather, it was as if she was unable to stop herself. Usually, these cuts were across her abdomen, over the area of her womb, where they would be invisible to others.

One of the loa I work with is Gran Bwa, the great healing spirit. Journeying to this spirit (in much the same way as we just did with Erzulie), I asked the reasons for this self-harming and how I could help Linda to heal whatever it was that was causing the problem.

What Gran Bwa showed me was a scene from many centuries ago, where one of Linda's ancestors had worked as a servant in a country house, not unlike the one Linda now worked in, for a mean and belligerent master who had raped her on a number of occasions. One of these violations led to a pregnancy, and fearing a scandal, the young woman had been dismissed from service to give birth to her child alone. Luckily, she had found a man who loved and married her, so she had someone to care for her and help raise her child. But she never got over the shame of that violation or her dismissal, which seemed to lay the blame for the pregnancy squarely at her feet. The child of that rape had gone on to have children of her own, and so on down the family line until we came to Linda.

All of these children, in one way or another, had been carrying the unconscious shame of that original encounter. With Linda the shame was focused on her womb, the place of the child, and this is where she would cut herself, as if somehow trying to remove her womb so that the shame would not get passed on to future generations and she would not feel the pain of it. What Gran Bwa advised was a simple ceremony of forgiveness and release. Linda was to write a letter to her ancestor, telling her that she understood the pain and guilt her distant relative felt, but that the shame was not hers to carry; it belonged to the man who had raped her. Linda added that she loved and respected her ancestor, even more so now she was aware of what she had been through. Her letter also made it clear, however, that Linda's life was her own and she could not carry the events of the past on into the generations of the family to come, but was releasing its energy so it could do no further harm to her or the children of the future.

We bound the letter with flowers, then walked down to the beach outside my healing room, where we offered the bundle to the sea. The

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ancestors live in the waters beneath the world, and the energy of Linda's intentions would be carried to them down the ages by the Power of the ocean.

This simple giveaway made a profound difference to Linda, and when she wrote to me some six months later, there had been no more self-harming and she was feeling relaxed and comfortable with herself.

Healings like this can, in my experience, sometimes be mythological events, with the spirits showing you a history that is symbolic of a problem rather than events rooted in absolute fact. Whether they're symbolic or not doesn't matter, for the healing takes place at an energetic level that also works through symbols, so absolute proof of historical accuracy, while interesting, is far from essential.

In Linda's case, however, she did some digging into her family history and discovered that she did indeed have an ancestor who had been a servant in a country house that was not so different from the home she now managed. This also made sense of why her self-harming had often been a response to stressful events at work, since the home she worked in was, in many ways, similar to the country house where the original violation took place.

Our ancestors talk to us through our cellular memory and through their spirits that endure across the ages. Sometimes we must embrace their gifts, but sometimes, like Linda, we must also give away their burdens if we are to be Powerful and healthy.

I would like to suggest such a journey now, which will again use visualization to help you connect with an ancestor whose gifts you may choose to accept, but whose burdens are no longer serving you.



### Journey to Meet with an Ancestor

*Open sacred space in the same way as before and make all necessary preparations, then take your attention inward, away from the outside world and into quiet reflection on your intention for this journey:*

*To meet with an ancestor at the point in my family history where damage was done and the flow of natural energy across the*



*generations blocked, in order to release the burdens of the past and accept any gifts that this ancestor may have for me.*

*See yourself back at the clearing in the rain forest, standing beside the same crystal stream as before. Allow yourself to relax and feel the sun on your face as you listen to the sound of the children's laughter.*

*Bend close to the stream, gazing into its depths and calling to the ancestors, in the same way as the Houngan who invites the spirits back to the community through the waters of life.*

*Which of your ancestors appears to you, rising up through the waters to offer you their gift of healing? Is it someone you know, a relative from your recent past, or someone you do not recognize, from a time more distant? Is it, perhaps, an archetypal ancestor who represents a pattern within your family's history that you have noticed recurring over the ages?*

*Whoever it is, welcome that person and tell him or her why you are here. Ask for your ancestor's help in understanding your present life by showing you the gifts and burdens that have been carried across the generations.*

*Thank your ancestor for his or her gifts, the things that have helped you in your life and that continue to serve you well, and accept these, if you wish, so that these gifts remain part of you.*

*Then turn to the burdens your ancestor carries and, perhaps unwittingly, has passed on to future generations. Ask what you can do to help your ancestor release these burdens and forgive those who have hurt him or her in order to finally let go of these attachments.*

*It may be that you are asked for a healing. Be guided by your intuition here as to how you can best help. If you need assistance at any time, remember you are just across the river from Erzulie, the spirit of Love personified, and she will be happy to offer you advice and support; she does not wish to see any of her children suffer.*

*If you are asked to perform a releasing ritual, like the one I carried out for Linda, pay careful attention to the details so you will be able to do so later, when you have returned to ordinary reality.*

*When you are ready, thank your ancestors for all they have given*

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*you and give them your love in return. Then make your farewells, knowing you can always return here if you wish to work with them again.*

*Come back to ordinary consciousness and close the space in the usual way.*



Despite the simplicity of this journey, it can be extremely Powerful and some surprising information can be revealed. One workshop participant realized that he had been trapped in a pattern of alcohol and drug abuse for years, having never before seen it as abuse, but as normal behavior for his family. As a result of this journey he made a commitment to never touch alcohol or drugs again, and has stayed clean for several months. Another participant finally finished her journey after three days of dealing with the issues raised, even though the journey itself had taken just ten minutes. She described it as one of the “most Powerful and moving experiences” of her life: “I wouldn’t say I enjoyed it, but it was very important and necessary.”

Approach each encounter with an open heart and be gentle with yourself and others. I truly believe that no one, especially not a member of our own families, ever really means us harm. But we are all human and we all make mistakes. Try not to judge, and be forgiving. This is the way of the Houngan.

## **MEETING THE SPIRITS OF NATURE FOR BLESSINGS AND POWER**

All things have spirit and the Houngan works with each of them. As Medsen Fey Loulou Prince and ayahuascero Javier Arevalo have both pointed out, the plants around us have a healing spirit that is extremely Powerful, and it is the soul of these plants, rather than the plants themselves, that always carries out the healing.

This perspective is very different from our Western understanding. Because of our deification of science, our drive is to identify healing plants but rather than working with them and their natural properties

directly, we feel compelled to synthesize them in our laboratories—a wholly unnatural procedure—in order to extract their 'active ingredients'. We then make them into tablets and lotions that better suit our habits of medication rather than healing. It is at this point that these plants cease to be natural medicines and become drugs, for the spirit within them has been killed.

Not only is this practice disrespectful to the spirit of the living plant, it is also self-defeating because all plants have at least thirty active ingredients—far too many and in too complex a combination to be completely synthesized. We are therefore denying ourselves healing by creating artificial substitutes for natural remedies. Furthermore, the drugs that these plants become will typically have side effects that are damaging. Instead of using willow bark to cure headaches, for example, it is now more common to use aspirin, which may ease our pain but also causes bleeding of the stomach lining. Other medicines cause different side effects, which our doctors treat by prescribing a secondary drug, which also has a side effect, and so a third prescription becomes necessary in order to counter that. Eventually, we are using three drugs, each with their own complications, in order to deal with one original problem that an herbalist may well have been able to cure gently, simply, and without any adverse effects.

There are limitations to synthetic medicines. Plants are the only things that have antiviral properties, for example. No man-made drugs have such natural abilities, so once again we deny ourselves part of the healing Power of plants when we turn to synthetic substitutes.

At the same time our crazy legal system outlaws plants that are known to have therapeutic effects by classifying them as dangerous or illegal. Often the reasons for this are economic, political, or self-serving, rather than the genuine desire to protect the public from harm. It is now acknowledged that the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century witch hunts were used to wipe out grassroots herbal practices, for example, in order to protect the financial interests of the professional medical guilds that were growing. We might expect things to have changed somewhat in our more "enlightened" modern times, and yet even now recognition of herbal medicine as a legitimate therapy is blocked by the French government, despite the fact that 20 percent of Parisian households use herbal medi-

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cines. Is it coincidence that some 11 percent of the French Parliament is made up of orthodox medical professionals? Every year there are more than three million pesticide poisonings and far more than two hundred thousands deaths worldwide as a result of the chemicals that are released into our environments, yet there are no clinical trials to determine the safety of these synthetics that are used on or near our foodstuffs. Naturally growing plants, by contrast, are labeled as dangerous.

Cannabis is a case in point. This plant has been revered for centuries for its healing properties as a relaxant and pain reliever. It is referred to in the *Papyrus Ebers*, an Egyptian materia medica that dates back to 1550 B.C. and is based on information that is much, much older than that. In the modern world cannabis has been used by people suffering from multiple sclerosis and other painful diseases, and more enlightened Western doctors have been happy to recommend it as a medicine for these complaints.

Yet those who take it for these conditions have still been labeled as criminals and drug users and have been subject to the full force of the law for simply using a natural substance—plant material—to help them ease their suffering.

Our Western minds, in fact, can sometimes seem paranoid about the spirit of Nature around us, to the extent that we can go to ludicrous and ultimately self-defeating extremes to try to control it and those who make use of its gifts.

On October 6, 1999, for example, the Dutch police kicked down the door of a church in Holland and arrested two ministers, Geraldine Fijneman and Hans Bogers, while they and their congregation were in the middle of a religious service. Geraldine and Hans were held by the police for three days and charged with leadership of a criminal organization and distributing the drug DMT.

Their crime? They were members of the Church of Santo Daime, a religious organization not too dissimilar from Catholicism in its ceremonial aspects, the significant difference being that the Santo Daime church is also informed by the principles of Brazilian Vodou (Candomble) and ritually uses ayahuasca, the sacred "vine of souls," to commune with its god. One of the active ingredients of ayahuasca is the now illegal DMT.

This turn of events is disturbing for at least four good reasons. First, ayahuasca is a plant, not a synthetic drug that might lead to addiction. In fact, all laboratory tests show that ayahuasca is completely non-addictive. Second, ayahuasca is not sold or trafficked; it is handed out freely as a sacrament in the Santo Daime church, in much the same way as Catholic Communion wine, and yet nobody's kicked a door down over that libation. Third, the active ingredient of ayahuasca, DMT, which so concerned the Dutch authorities, is already present in significant quantities in the human body. Following the legal logic, if you ever decide to make babies you will be, by definition, a major drug trafficker. Expect the door of your bedroom to be kicked in as a preventive measure. Fourth and, to me, most important, the members of the Santo Daime congregation that October evening were hurting no one and doing nothing of an aggressive or harmful nature—indeed, they were at prayer when the police arrived at their door.

Many ordinary people shared these concerns, and on November 20, just a few weeks after the arrests, a large crowd gathered in the center of Amsterdam to protest against the raid and demand the legalization of ayahuasca.

So troubled were the prosecution lawyers by this backlash, and so embarrassed were they about the raid on a church, that they soon made it known to the Santo Daime lawyer that they would happily drop the case if the church would just accept a quiet warning about its “drug-taking” activities.

Upon hearing this, however, the church itself decided to take the case to court because it wanted a clear decision on the legal status of ayahuasca to avoid similar state intervention in future.

On May 21, 2001, the ministers for the Santo Daime church were acquitted by the court. Judge Marcus ruled that Mrs. Fijneman had indeed owned, transported, and distributed a DMT-containing substance (which she would also have done had she been pregnant and then given birth, by the way), but as there was no proof of a public health risk from ayahuasca, her constitutional right to freedom of religion must come first. Since ayahuasca is the holy sacrament of the Santo Daime church, he ruled, it was essential to the defendant's faith that she be allowed to use it.

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This case raises interesting questions about civil liberties and our rights to self-determination. But it also prompts more spiritual considerations, as the shamanic traditions of many cultures have long used holy plants such as ayahuasca as a means of moving out of ordinary consciousness and into nonordinary reality where spiritual communion can take place. When used in this fashion, and in a respectful way, these plants can be exceptional allies and teachers, opening doors into other worlds and new areas of consciousness. Just about as far as you can get from drug-taking, in fact.

In other, perhaps better informed, cultures, plants like these are revered, not feared or controlled. In Mexico, for example, sacred mushrooms known as *Teonanacatl* ("the flesh of the gods") are often used in rituals and healing ceremonies for the sick. Mazotec shaman and healer Maria Sabina tells us something about the reverence in which these mushrooms are held when she remarks that "there is a world beyond ours, a world that is far away, nearby, and invisible. This is where God lives, in a world where everything has already happened and everything is known. The sacred mushroom takes me to the world where everything is known."<sup>3</sup> These plants are considered holy precisely because of the spirit they contain. In the middle world, the spiritual shadow of our own reality, all plants and all things have souls.

It is not, however, necessary to take hallucinogens in order to make contact with the spirit of such plants. In fact, it is not even necessary that the plants are ingested in order for them to have a therapeutic effect. The only requirement is that you are open to the possibility of connection with them.

If that sounds a little strange, we have only to reflect for a moment that both aromatherapy and homeopathy are now widely accepted for their healing abilities. The former relies merely on the smells of these natural materials, which have been prepared as oils that are heated in water, but can still significantly affect our moods and sense of well-being. The latter uses plant material that is diluted many thousands of times so that all that really remains is the energy or essence of the plant rather than its previous chemical properties. Even so, as someone who has sat in agony and sickness on a three-hour canoe trip down the rivers of the Amazon, only to have his illness taken away in seconds by a

single tiny nux vomica tablet, I can certainly vouch for the effectiveness of homeopathic remedies.

In Vodou plant materials are used in many rituals and in much of the healing that the Houngan will undertake. In Brazilian Candomble, for example, the author Morwyn tells us, "Plant materials enter into every aspect of ritual, including healing. Each herb is believed to possess an etheric force easily capable of absorption by the skin. Every botanical crystallizes a particular virtue such as fertility, peace, vigour, protection, longevity, courage, happiness, good fortune, and glory, and may also drive away illness, negativity, misery, and noxious fluids.

"During germination and growth, plants absorb and store immense energies from the earth and sky. When a person ingests a medicinal botanical, the energy is freed and circulated throughout the body and into the aura. The herbal energy both adds something of its own nature and helps release the patient's own pent-up energy to stimulate self-healing."<sup>4</sup>

Because food is so plentiful in the West we have tended to lose our connection with the effects of these plants and are quite used to eating foods from the four corners of the world without really noticing what we are taking into our bodies or the effects these herbs and spices are having on us.

The Medsen Fey, like the ayahuascero, however, will have "dieted" many plants over a long period of time, and in experiencing the subtle changes in his body will be well aware of the effects of these plants.

If you decide you would like to explore this further and begin to understand what it is that your body is absorbing in the foods you eat each day, you can follow the ayahuasca diet for a few days. This is a very bland and basic diet, the main ingredients being plain boiled white rice and mineral water. A little boiled unsalted fish can be added if you wish. This meal is taken once a day.

On top of this basic food, give your attention to one herb during the course of your diet. In addition to the daily meal described you might, for instance, choose to ingest fresh lemon balm (perhaps as a tea) or wild garlic or basil three times a day for the number of days that you diet (for a maximum of one week only).

Notice the subtle but nonetheless pronounced effects that the spirit

of this herb has on you. Lemon balm has a calming effect on the nervous system and is prescribed, even today, in cases of depression, fatigue, insomnia, or unsettling dreams. Garlic, meanwhile, can increase our capacity for dreaming and will also change the nature of dreams so that we are able to interact with our dream bodies in lucid dreaming experiences (see my book *Spirit in the City* for a discussion of this technique).<sup>5</sup> Basil, a wonderful cleanser and “disinfectant” for the energy body or spirit, is often grown near the entrance to Indian Hindu temples, and a single leaf is placed on the heart of the deceased prior to burial in order to take away their sins and offer them clean passage to the otherworld of the ancestors. It can therefore be used in your own spiritual cleansing as well as for added energy in ancestral healing work (see above).

As you continue the diet you will also be developing your relationship with the spirit of this particular plant, which can then become your ally. Remember, every plant knows the Earth, the sky, the weather, the soil, and the other plants of the field in a way that you do not. It also carries the cellular memory of its entire species, just as human beings share the same genetic material across infinite ages and cultures. It can therefore act as your guide as you explore the Ashe of plants and the energies of the Earth itself.

In many forms of Vodou, plants like these are used in special baths that are designed to achieve a particular purpose, such as a change of luck, the creation of good fortune, loosening of negative energies, or the achievement of Power, strength, and health. The Medsen Fey and the Houngan work together on the creation of recipes for these baths, and both are experts in the spiritual nature of the plants employed.

In Candomble, for example, specific baths called *abo* are used during initiation in order to purify the candidate for the ceremonies to come. There are also special baths (*banhos de descarga*) to neutralize and discharge any negative forces that have attached themselves to a person's energy body. The *amaci*, meanwhile, is a head bath that strengthens the connection between a person and the loa (*Orixá* in Candomble) that he or she works with, as well as adding Ashe to the aura or spiritual self as a shield against negative influences, in the same way as the sacred baths of Haitian Vodou that we encountered earlier.



Often the recipes for these baths are kept secret from all except initiates, and sometimes not even passed on to them by the Houngan or Mambo who has worked with the plants to devise them.

This is not a problem, though, because with a little work and dedication to your plant diet you will be able to discern the spiritual effects of various herbs very quickly and then create your own recipes. Your own medicine, created in this way of focused intention, is always the most Powerful.

Because we have been working with Erzulie in our previous journeys to the spirits, what follows is the recipe for a purification bath from Haitian Vodou, which is dedicated to and works with the energy of this loa.



### A PURIFYING BATH DEDICATED TO ERZULIE

You can use this bath any time you feel the need to cleanse yourself of negativity or stress—after a hard day at work or an argument with your spouse, for example. It also gives you a basic formula and approach around which you can start to devise your own healing baths.

Ideally, you will need the ingredients listed below, but don't worry too much if you can't find them all because you can always use your intuition to substitute and improvise. The key consideration in any bath for Erzulie is to reflect her grace and beauty by making the bathing experience as luxurious as possible. This also makes it more pleasant for you! Always use ingredients as fresh as you can find and of the best quality you can afford. You will need:

- Two or three sprigs of fresh basil
- A handful of rose petals (and/or a few drops of rose aromatherapy oil)
- Four or five leaves of lettuce
- A few cuttings of fresh aloe (and/or a small cup of aloe juice)
- Four or five orange leaves (and/or a few drops of orange aromatherapy oil)

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A glass of cham  
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A glass of coconu  
Four rose quartz  
A pink or white ca

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When you are ready, get o  
and bury them in Na  
to be washed in salt wat

- A few drops of Florida water (or perfume)
- A glass of champagne (or good-quality sparkling wine)
- A small can of evaporated (not condensed) milk
- Three or four drops of vanilla extract
- A glass of coconut milk
- Four rose quartz crystals
- A pink or white candle

All of the fresh ingredients, except the rose petals, should be ground together and added to a basin of warm water, then allowed to soak for an hour or so; their essence will infuse the water. Then strain out the plant material and pour the water, along with the other liquid ingredients, directly into a bath that is pleasantly cool or lukewarm. Scatter the rose petals on the surface and place the four rose quartz crystals around the bath, one at each corner.

Turn out the lights and bathe for a while by the light of the candle. As you do so ask that Erzulie bless the water and empower it to refresh and cleanse you spiritually so that you may attract happiness, luxury, and abundance into your life.

When you are ready, get out of the bath and dry yourself with a clean white towel. Do not use deodorant, but put on a little cologne or perfume if you wish, and dress in clean white clothes. If any of the rose petals remain on your skin or hair, allow them to stay there until morning.

There should be no sex on the night of your bath and, preferably, no contact with any other living soul. Instead, spend the evening in quiet reflection, meditating or listening to gentle music by candlelight instead of watching television or interacting with others.

In the morning take the remnants of your bath (the crushed plants and candle) and bury them in Nature at the base of a tree. The quartz crystals can be washed in salt water and dried in the sun for later use.



There is also another way in which natural materials and forces can be used in Vodou for empowerment and healing, which is interesting in

that it reflects spiritual techniques from the Celtic past, and particularly the folk medicine of the Scottish highlands and islands.

The *Carmina Gadelica*, a book of hymns and incantations from Scotland that was collected by Alexander Carmichael in the 1800s, shows how this approach was used in the old Celtic tradition.<sup>6</sup>

One of the incantations it includes, which Carmichael records as a Charm for Chest Seizure, is written in two parts. The first appears to be simply an aimless recitation of various Powers claimed by its author:

Power of moon have I over thee  
 Power of sun have I over thee  
 Power of rain have I over thee  
 Power of dew have I over thee  
 Power of sea have I over thee  
 Power of land have I over thee . . . of stars  
 . . . of planets . . . of universe . . . and so on

Note, however, that all of these are natural, living forces.

The second part appears, once again, to be a list of sorts:

A part of thee on the grey stones  
 A part of thee on the steep mountains  
 A part of thee on the swift cascades . . . the  
 gleaming clouds . . . the ocean-whales . . .  
 the meadow-beasts . . . the fenny swamps . . .  
 and so on

To the casual reader this appears to be no more than quaint nonsense, which makes little if any sense. To the "strong eye of the shaman," however, what is happening here is very plain.

We can become disempowered through the effects of other people upon us, when the force of their feelings toward us becomes an attack on our energy. The constant criticisms by a husband of his wife, a mother of her daughter, a boss of his employee, can all leave us unmotivated, dispirited, and drained.

To the Houngan what has happened is that the energy of our detractor has become a stronger force than our own Power to resist it and has eventually overwhelmed us. In the traditional terms of Vodou this force is a "spirit intrusion," or an *expedition*; a living energy that has become a part of our own system and will eventually make us ill. In extreme cases it may even kill us as it drains from us the will to live. (See the next chapter for more information on spirit intrusions.) Perhaps we have all heard stories of people who fall into decline or even take their own lives because the pressures of living with such demands and constant criticism have simply become too much for them.

To the eye of the Houngan the Charm for Chest Seizure is a method for removing such unwanted energies or spirit intrusions in order for healing to take place by restoring Ashe to the person.

In the first part of the incantation the healer is giving fair warning to the intrusion to leave his client's body. He is also drawing to himself the Ashe of the various natural forces he works with and names here (the sun, the sea, the land and stars, and so on) and enlisting their support for his coming battle with the unwanted spirit in order that he may exorcise it.

In the second part the Houngan has grabbed the spirit from the energy body of his client and, determined that it will never come back to cause further harm, has broken it into a thousand pieces, each of which is cast away separately to the safe keeping of one of the other natural forces with which he works (the stones and mountains, rivers and clouds, and the like). Once this is done the client's own natural Ashe can return to her, for her energy system is no longer blocked by something that is not in resonance with her spirit.

The Houngan will have developed his relationships with these natural forces and with the spirits that inhabit them in order to work in this way. Since each of the loa also inhabit different areas of the natural middle world, his relationship with them will also reinforce his connection to the Nature spirits known as *djabs*.

Of the main loa, for example, Legba is identified with the Power of crossroads, Azaka with fields, Baron with cemeteries and subterranean places, Dambala with springs and rivers, Erzulie with riverbanks, Ogoun with trees and bamboo, Agwe and La Sirene with the sea, and



ful to them and are gentle with your own presence.

When you feel that you have made a connection with one of these spirits, ask if he or she is prepared to help you in your quest for Ashe, if he or she will take some of your pain—the energy of another that has become part of you over the years—and discharge this energy back to Nature so it may be neutralized. Then ask if you may take some of this spirit's own healing energy so that you are strengthened and empowered by it.

Sometimes the answer is no, and if that is the case for you do not be concerned; simply thank the spirit for its time and move on to the next natural feature you see. Then repeat your question.

If the answer is yes, accept the blessing that is offered to you and ask what you might do in return. You may be asked to make an offering of some kind, in ordinary reality, to the Marketplace equivalent of this natural force—to offer flowers to a river or to hang on a tree garlands and crystals—which has the effect of balancing their energies in our own middle world.

Continue in this way until you have made contact with and received blessings and gifts from three elemental forces; three is enough. These are now your allies and your strengths in daily life and you can draw upon their Ashe whenever you wish. It is quite something in a situation of stress or confrontation to be able to call upon the Power of a mountain or, at a time of crisis, to have the enduring, timeless strength of a great oak on your side!

Return to the porteau mitan when you are ready to leave, and then bring your consciousness back to ordinary reality.

Make your observances at your altar and close down the sacred space.



In this chapter we have looked at some of the ways of the Houngan for helping the people of his community to live richer and more Power-filled lives. These methods will also serve you in your own quest for freedom and happiness.

In the next chapter we look at something of equal importance to us all: healing and the Houngan's approach to ensuring spiritual and physical

well-being. Before we reach this point, however, and begin healing ourselves or others, we must ensure that we are strong and have a clear sense of our own Power and identity. This is the purpose of the Vodou lessons that follow.



THE VODOU LESSONS: 4  
**THE AFFIRMATION OF SELF**

Much of what you have read so far has been about peeling away the old self so it can be replaced with something new: a more Powerful vision of your life. This is the same journey that is taken during Vodou initiation. The priest-to-be must first “die” when he enters the *djevo*. His experience there is like a burial and at the same time a reformation, a re-remembering as he again becomes a child in the womb of his mother the Earth. Finally, when he leaves the *djevo* he is reborn, with a second chance to become the person he would truly like to be.

So it is with the journey you are on. The Vodou lessons at the end of chapter 2 were about removing the social conditioning and negative influences that have become part of you over the years, so you can start to see the world as raw energy that can be shaped and changed as you will it.

True Ashe begins with seeing the source of that Power and then with the choice of whether or not you take it. The Vodou lesson journey presented in chapter 3 and the journeys in this chapter have developed your Powers of imagination, forming a bridge to the spirit worlds and opening your eyes to a new way of looking at reality. But to really see the source of Power clearly, and to exercise the choice of accepting it or not, you must first come back to *who you really are*.

By becoming aware of the subtle yet pervasive influences that have shaped you over the years, you have the option to work on removing those that do not serve you. This was the process we began in the earlier lessons. Now we must replace these influences with something else: your own vision of your life, so you can truly begin to live as the person you want to be.

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### **Fet Gede: Giving Yourself Away and Becoming Someone New**

*Fet Gede*, the Festival of the Ancestors, is the Haitian equivalent of Mardi Gras and the Mexican Day of the Dead. It takes place each year in October and November, corresponding with the Western celebration of Halloween. People dress up, take to the streets, dance their communion with the ancestors, and, to the wild, lilting music of colorful *rara* bands, walk in processions to the graveyards where they feed their ancestral dead to honor their spirits and gain their protection for the coming year. It is a time for celebration, for honoring the past, and for preparing for the future, with music, processions, sacred rituals, and spiritual observances taking place throughout.

I now take Westerners to Haiti so they can share in these celebrations and honor their own pasts and futures. One very important ceremony that takes place at this time is a ritual for grief and becoming.

The peristyle is arranged with an altar next to the *kay mo*, the house of the dead, where the spirits of the ancestors reside. On it are placed various sacred objects that have been charged with the *Ashe* and protection of the *loa*, particularly that of *Legba*, who is protector of the home, and that of *Dambala*, who is the *loa* of wealth, luck, and happiness.

Participants are asked to bring with them an image or a symbol of some kind representing who they have been; an aspect of themselves that no longer serves them and that they wish to give away to the safekeeping of the ancestors, who represent the past. This might be a photograph of themselves at a time of particular sadness in their life, or something symbolizing an addiction or a disempowering habit they want to be rid of. Whatever it is, it is welcomed. It is really the past they are giving away.

Those taking part stand at the opposite end of the peristyle from the altar. As the ceremony begins each participant is drummed for individually; a slow, mournful beat for a person who is about to die to her old self as she makes her journey across the holy ground to the altar.

Once she is there the drums fall into silence and the person stands before the altar and announces to the ancestors and to her peers what it is she is giving away and why. She then places this on the altar, where it is left, and picks up one of the sacred objects in front of her that



represents something new and better she wishes to bring into her life. Again she announces to the ancestors and other participants what she has chosen and why.

Upon hearing this the other participants shout out their joy and support for that person. As she begins the journey back the drums begin again, this time in a battery of celebration for the person who has been released and reborn in this way. Cries of *Ayibobo* ("You have been heard! Amen!") go up from the people as the newborn returns to the fold.

Psychologically, this ceremony is about making a commitment to a different future and disempowering the hurtful events of the past. The commitment is made before a congregation of peers who all witness the event, adding Ashe and support to the person who is taking this step. It is much more difficult to break a sacred oath to change when this has been made before the people and the spirits, just as it is more difficult to announce to friends and family that you will be giving up smoking, for example, and then make no effort to do so.

By giving away the symbol of her past disempowerment, the participant breaks the energetic connection to that event. By picking up something different and better, she creates a new alignment of energy and gives herself strength to face the challenges ahead. When I have led this ceremony among workshop participants in the West, its simple Power to perform miracles is always revealed. People have given away old attachments to failed relationships, represented as photographs, necklaces, and jewelry given to them by ex-lovers; to unhelpful relationships with money, represented as a few cents; to fears of moving forward in life, lack of creativity, concerns over intimacy—all manner of things. And in return they have lost weight, become fitter, found the strength to open new businesses or turn around existing ones that were failing, taken up new skills, overcome illness, and also found new freedoms, lovers, and ways of creative expression.

The basic format for this ritual is very simple. If you can replicate it exactly, among friends, then I encourage you to do so. If not, here is an alternative.

Spend some time thinking about your past and tracing back the person you are now to significant events in your history. What is it that is

... your present ...  
 ... wish to change?  
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 ... past lover that you are  
 ... you may one day return;  
 ... that you are now. "The  
 ... Kierkegaard wrote  
 ... give away your Power  
 ... these things close to y  
 ... focal point so you can  
 ... feel the energy they h  
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 ... refers to a tree that  
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 ... it is he wh

causing your present pain or your current view of life? What is it that you now wish to change?

There is always one event, one major cause, from which everything stems. Maybe it was the parent who told you "you'll never amount to anything," and now you find that you are, indeed, always the one passed over for promotion at work. Maybe it was the lover who left you, and now you feel unable to love yourself and unworthy of the love of another. What are your earliest memories that seem connected to the patterns in your life and the way you are living now?

When you are as clear as you can be on the cause, find something meaningful to you that represents the event or the person you have in mind. A necklace (a chain) that parent gave you, perhaps, or letters from a past lover that you are still holding on to, hoping in some way that they may one day return; all of these things are *not you*—not the you that you are now. "The terrible has already happened," the philosopher Kierkegaard wrote. Why cling to the past and thereby continue to give away your Power and repeat the mistakes of long ago?

Keep these things close to you for a week, and during this time use them as a focal point so you can relive all the memories associated with them and feel the energy they have been taking from you. Take back your Ashe from the memories that occur to you. Change the situation. See yourself answering that parent back, "Yes, I will make something good of my life; it just won't be what you want. It will be what *I* want." See your lover's faults as well as his or her rose-tinted perfection. Feel the energy that you now have back because you are no longer investing it in him or her. All of this is your potential for a more fulfilling life.

At the end of the week take a walk into Nature. If there are woods close to you, these are ideal. When the initiate is taken from the djevo at midnight on the third day, he is escorted deep into the woods, where he meets Papa Loko. The word *Loko* comes from *iroko*, which, in the Yoruba language refers to a tree that connects the sky and the Earth—the World Tree, in other words. *Loko* is therefore the loa who represents the unity of all worlds, as well as the spirit of the deep woods and the patron of initiates. It is he who gives the *asson*, the rattle that is the sacred symbol of priesthood, representing the rebirth of the initiate. The deep woods, therefore, are intimately associated with beginning a new life.

Walk as far as you can into the woods, away from all others, then find the tallest tree you can. Ask Papa Loko to take away the pain or limitations of your past and to replace them with something new. At the foot of this tree bury whatever you have brought with you that represents your past, then close your eyes.

Turn around three times in a clockwise direction, with your eyes still closed, then open them.

The first thing you see is the gift that Loko wants you to have. This might be only a branch, a stone, leaves, or a flower. How it appears is not what it is. All things are alive and have spirit. What you actually have is a living thing with an energy of its own that it is now offering to you as a sacrifice for your new beginning.

Thank the Earth for this gift, and when you return to your home place it on your altar as a focus for your new commitment to a better life.

### **The Pot Tete: Container for the Soul**

One of the secret rituals performed within the djevo is the ceremony of *pot tete*, the container of the head.

We are all born the child of a particular loa. This is your *met tete* ("master of your head"), and this ceremony is about strengthening that relationship. As in other magical traditions, the soul of an individual is considered an integral aspect of the body, and it lives in the parts of us that are subject to growth and regeneration, such as the hair, fingernails, and blood. In the djevo cuttings from these parts are taken from the initiate and placed into the pot tete, a small, lidded container that stands about four inches high. Certain items sacred to the particular *met tete* are also added to this container, and the lid is then sealed. The partnership with this loa is then formalized.

As you know, all loa are representative of certain attributes and types of Ashe. My *met tete* is Ogoun Badagris, the loa of Power and balance, and there are special mystical items within my own pot tete that are more than symbols of this loa; they *are* aspects of him. Our energies are therefore blended within the pot tete and we are linked together for life.

Psychologically, the container becomes a center of focus so that in

times of trouble or pressure I can draw from the archetypal strengths that it holds. Psychologists call this modeling. When I need extra resources in my life I am able to model my behavior on that of another simply by meditating and asking myself what I would do if I had all the Ashe and the sense of balance and focus of Ogoun. This is useful advice in its own right, and I can then, if I wish, address the problem from the perspective of someone stronger than I am. Ogoun, in this sense, becomes the inner hero who always has the answer to my needs.

There will be times in your new life when you also need the support of another if you are to stay true to your commitment. The pot tete gives you some of this vital energy.

To create your own pot tete you will need a ceramic pot or jug (do not use metal), which stands about four or five inches high and has a lid. You can often find these at Asian or Chinese stores.

Once you have it place within it something that represents the essential you. This can be hair or nail clippings or something more symbolic—an image of yourself, perhaps, from a time in your life when you felt truly happy, fulfilled, and Powerful.

Then spend a little time deciding what strengths you most need in your life. If you have completed the previous exercise, this will be clearer for you. In seeing what energies have been taken from you in the past you will also understand what energies you find it easier to give away and which must be most protected.

You may decide that you need love and support or happiness and security to really make a difference to your life. Or perhaps you need something far more immediate and less ethereal, such as money, good health, or world travel. Whatever it is, find something that represents it to you: a pound coin or a dollar bill for money, a magazine photograph of an athletics field for health and vigor, pictures of foreign lands for travel, and so forth. Add these to the pot tete.

When you are finished place the pot tete, still open, on your altar, and light a white candle in front of it. As the candle burns, focus on your desires and the energy of your intention that what you put in the container will come to you. Ask the loa to work with you on this to ensure that they do.

When the candle has burned down completely, add the stub to the container and then seal it. The Power of your intention is now formed in three-dimensional reality.

The pot tete, then, is your tangible link to God and the spirits, inviting their Power into your life and giving you a focus of commitment for the future so that you may achieve your dreams. Ultimately, this is all that the loa want for you—and for us all—that we overcome the mundane and relatively minor difficulties of earthly life and free our souls to evolve toward the godhead. In this way we may all, eventually, become one with Bondye.



*Were he already among the immortals—were he already there at the goal to which the difficult path seems to be taking him—with what amazement he would look back over all this coming and going, all the indecision and wild zig-zagging of his tracks.*

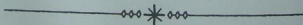
—HERMANN HESSE, *STEPPEWOLF*

The pot tete can be an important tool in achieving this clarity and so achieving your desires.



*We make real that to which we pay attention . . .  
Nothing occurs in your life—nothing—which is not  
first a thought. Thoughts are like magnets, drawing  
effects to you. The thought may not always be  
obvious, and thus clearly causative, as in “I’m going  
to contract a terrible disease.” The thought may be  
(and usually is) far more subtle than that. (“I am  
not worthy to live.”) (“My life is always a mess.”)  
 (“I am a loser.”) (“God is going to punish me.”) (“I  
am sick and tired of my life.”) Thoughts are a very  
subtle, yet extremely powerful form of energy . . .  
Small wonder you come down with a cold.*

—NEALE DONALD WALSCH



# THE POWER TO HEAL

Creating New Realities of  
Health and Well-Being

*Bokor ba w pwen*

*Li pa di w domi nan kafou!*



The Bokor [sorcerer] gave you a point  
[protective charm]

But he didn't tell you to sleep in the  
crossroads!

—VODOU PROVERB, WHICH TRANSLATES  
COLLOQUIALLY AS: "YOU ALREADY HAVE  
POWER. DON'T THROW IT AWAY!"



*The old man had been carried into the djevo, his legs withered and useless. For the past year he had been the victim of magical attacks from a rival, a neighbor who wanted his lands and wanted the old man dead so he could simply take them. There isn't a lot of paperwork in Haiti and little proof of ownership, so a dead neighbor is as good as a transfer of rights. Houngan Yabofe had agreed to help the old man with his healing.*

*At first nothing seemed to be happening. Yabofe merely sat, his*

head on his chest, as if he was sleeping. Then he began to mutter strange words that were probably not even language. The old man sat opposite him, looking tiredly at the dirt floor, the bottles and loose herbs, feathers and stones that surrounded them both.

After five minutes of this Yabofe looked up. Except it wasn't Yabofe any more. His face was different—younger, stronger. He began, shakily, to stand, and as he did so something remarkable happened. It seems unbelievable, impossible, as I write it now, but as Yabofe stood, it was as if the light in the djevo became distorted or staggered somehow so that my eyes registered multiple images instead of one. Because, just for a moment, the Houngan I knew remained seated and a second Yabofe rose and began walking toward his client.

I did a double take and strained to focus in the candlelit half-gloom. Sure enough, there was Yabofe, his head against his chest in his chair, while this new Yabofe continued his shaky approach toward the old man. The two Yabofes were connected by a half-visible thread of light that came from the head of the one standing and attached itself to the heart of the seated one. All around the djevo there were lights, like tiny blue-and-gold stars, sparkling, exploding, then fading and dying, as new lights took their place. No amount of double takes would make them disappear. And then, suddenly, the phenomena were gone and the two Yabofes became one again, just as the Houngan reached the old man and, kneeling, hugged him to his chest.

Another strange trick of light occurred as a wave of blue luminescence, beginning as a tiny bright shadow, grew slowly around Yabofe, pulsing from his chest, until it enveloped him and the old man like a liquid. The hum of insects and the baying of goats and cattle, ever present in Haiti, had stopped completely and the silence of the grave infused the djevo. It was as if time stopped and nothing in the village moved.

Then in one movement the Houngan, eyes still closed, stood and backed away from his client. His hands reached earthward and gathered up two chickens that had been immobile in the corner of the room. Even now they offered no resistance and actually

seemed to move toward  
them by their feet, be  
them, starting at his be  
sables, repeating the m  
Then in a single ac  
land, neck in the other,  
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from his client and sank  
The old man had bee  
all. For the first time no  
whose chin rested on his  
and no healing had take  
who had been carried by  
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uses the same principles  
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stem from the medical pro  
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seemed to move toward him to meet the Houngan's hands. Taking them by their feet, he began to pound the old man's body with them, starting at his head, one either side, and moving down to his ankles, repeating the moves ten or more times.

Then in a single action Yabofe took the birds, body in one hand, neck in the other, and ripped the heads from them both. The carcasses were thrown to the floor, and with that he stepped away from his client and sank back into his chair.

The old man had been silent throughout, as if in a trance himself. For the first time now he stirred and looked across at Yabofe, whose chin rested on his chest again, as if nothing had happened and no healing had taken place. Then this old man, this cripple who had been carried by his family to meet Yabofe, stood up and walked unaided from the djevo. Yabofe looked up weakly and smiled. The insects were singing again.

—HAITIAN JOURNALS, JANUARY 2000



Although you may not think it from the above description, healing in Vodou uses the same principles that many Western healers also employ. Its methods may seem rather dramatic to you, perhaps even brutal, but they are effective and they should not seem too unusual if you have experience with energetic healing methods such as reiki, faith healing, shamanic work, or crystal medicine, for example.

These approaches have in common that they all work to some extent with the energy body of the client. Even the more hands-on complementary therapies such as reflexology or massage do not just work on the physical body; they also seek to make changes at an energetic or ethereal level.

The other characteristic these therapies have in common, which separates them from the medical professions, is that they aim to identify and then treat the *cause* of disease and not just its symptoms.

Orthodox Western medicine tends to take the opposite approach and will intervene in illness at the point where the disease has become visible. It may treat cancer with chemo- or radiotherapy, for example,

or attack the tumor with a scalpel. For depression it may offer tablets—"happy pills"—that change the biochemistry of the brain and body. Or it may give you medication for your stomach ulcer so you do not feel its painful acidity.

These are all remedies that deal with the expression of disease but do little to address the underlying cause. They deal with the *what* of an illness ("What is the client presenting with and what medication can be used to treat it?"), rather than the *how* ("How has this problem come about, and how can we—the client and the medical professional—work together to resolve it and prevent its reoccurrence?").

Visiting the doctor and being given tablets for depression may help you in the short-term, but surely not if you are living in a slum with no money and fewer prospects, for as soon as you leave your physician's office you simply go straight back into the depressing circumstances that caused the problem. What is needed is a lifestyle change. Western medicine has been largely ignorant of this fact, unable to help, or too embarrassed to bring it up.

There is always a *how* to a disease, just as there is always a *what*. The *how*, though, is usually less visible and harder to get at for doctors who are under increasing pressure of time and growing numbers of patients to see. These days the average medical consultation lasts less than ten minutes due to these combined demands—which is just time enough for the doctor to listen to your problem and write out a prescription for it; to deal with the *what*, rather than the *how*.

Such quick fixes rarely do more than put a Band-Aid on the problem. What is really needed for true healing is:

1. An intervention at the point of *cause* rather than the symptoms of disease, so that the underlying issues are dealt with.
2. A complete break with the past, so that "old" diseases are seen by the sufferer as dead and gone, while the future is presented as a disease-free option for different, more empowered living.

To achieve these goals, we must not only change the mind, the thinking, of the client, but also we must develop empathy with the disease itself, listening to its messages so they are heard and the illness itself does not need to return—or become more virulent in order to be

noticed so that its wisdom may be acted upon. A stroke- or stress-related stomach ulcer is more than an organic problem, for example; it is a communication from the body that something in our world and way of life is not serving us. If this message is listened to empathetically, our lives can be changed, the stress that is causing our problem will be reduced, and our health restored.

The simple beauty of this healing approach is so often ignored in the West, which has built its medical practice, as well as its way of life, on a foundation of opposition to the natural flow of things. It is undeniable that our lifestyles in the unhealthy urban environments that we have built for ourselves conflict with Nature and contribute substantially to the types and incidence of illnesses from which we now suffer. Hunter-gatherer peoples, such as the Kung of Africa, are generally fit and healthy, for example. Viral infections are generally unheard of among these people, and cancer, cardiovascular problems, and chronic diseases are so rare as to be almost unique events. The eyesight of these people is so keen that they are able to see four of the moons of Jupiter with the naked eye.

Once we build cities around ourselves, however, and begin to live a synthetic life, we disturb the natural flow and modern diseases become prevalent. A recent study of rural Mexicans shows that the pattern of disease has changed substantially in the last forty years. As the city has encroached upon the people and urban living has become more popular, work-related injuries, basic infections, cancer, diabetes, hypertension, heart problems, and other modern ills have become frequent problems. It is the same story among Australian aborigines, in which strokes, heart disease, and diabetes, once unheard of, are now quite common. This has happened as the city, with its gifts of synthetic food, artificial light, and sugar-based processed diets has seduced the people as they have become urban dwellers. Despite millions of dollars spent on research, cancer rates increased worldwide by more than one percent a year during the seventeen years preceding 1990. Meanwhile, childhood eczema and other skin diseases are now at their highest of any time in history—as a result, our researchers tell us, of the use of synthetic cleansing agents, skin creams, and soaps made from a coal tar base. Instead of cleansing us these modern agents are actually making

us less clean, less healthy, and more damaged as we scrub away our humanity for the sake of fashion and conformity to an artificial and advertising-endorsed urban lifestyle.

Even classically trained medical professionals are now beginning to realize that the human body is programmed for health, not illness, and will naturally overcome such diseases. But once again, modern medicine has set itself in opposition to the body and its natural processes so that Western medicine is designed to *fight* illness instead of working empathically with the messages of disease. And yet there is one certain cure that is known in every medical school of the world as the one single method that will produce a guaranteed healing effect. In the modern world it is known disparagingly as the placebo, and medical professionals are taught to dismiss or ignore it. Every new drug released on the market, in fact, will have been tested against it in order to rule out the "placebo effect" and ensure that the drug itself is doing the work. How curious that the one thing we know will *guarantee* healing—the mobilization of the body's natural resources, activated through the Power of faith and belief—is the one thing our Western medical experts do not want to know about!

In Haiti, as in other traditional communities, the approach to healing is quite different from the model we are used to. The Houngan's job is not to challenge the illness but to listen to its message and inform his client of holistic changes that may be necessary to her life and the environment she lives in so that the disease does not return once it is removed.

The removal of illness is completed using whatever means are necessary to engage the client so that she is party to her own healing, her Powers of faith and belief are activated, and the energy of the illness—its cause rather than its effect, the how as well as the what—is defused, allowing the physical symptoms to also disappear. "I do not dismiss anything in my healing work. I am grateful to the loa for any and all Powers they send me that can help my patient," says Houngan Lucent. "I work with ritual and ceremony to 'bring the client in' to the work—I suppose this is what you mean by the 'placebo effect,' though really it is a way of empowerment so that the patient's faith in his own abilities and strength is changed—I use plant medicine, song, dance, the extrac-

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### CAUSE OF DISEASE

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### PHYSICAL

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### SPIRITUAL (HAI)

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tion of spirits from his body, the return of his soul, the magic of dreams, and the Power of the loa. I do not rule anything out. I am shocked that your medical people work only with one healing method—their pills and their drugs. Surely, we are supposed to be working to benefit the client, in whatever way this is most appropriate for him, not just following the procedures and the rule books of our profession?”

Far from following the rules, the Houngan treats every client as a unique and sacred being and will work with him at an energetic level to change his luck by realigning his energy body and thereby changing the nature of the events he draws to himself.

To understand the Houngan's approach in this, we must look first at the Haitian understanding of the nature and origin of disease.

## THE CAUSE OF DISEASE

In Vodou there are a number of ways in which disease may originate—the how of the illness. Underlying all of them is a belief in an unseen world where illness first comes into being and can migrate to the physical plane as a result of magical or spiritual actions. In this belief system, disease will always manifest along these lines:

### PHYSICAL (the seen world)



### MENTAL



### EMOTIONAL

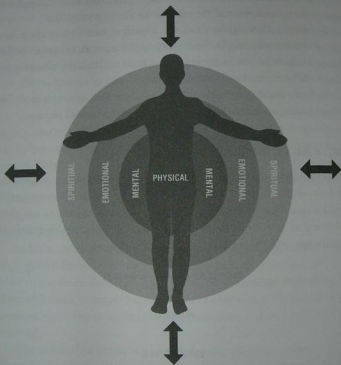


### SPIRITUAL (the unseen world)

All of these—the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical—are different bodies or aspects of self that each of us have. Together they make up what Western healers refer to as the “energy body” and what Vodou calls the soul.

The stratum of the energy body that comprises the spiritual self is farthest away from our physical body, beginning at a distance of about an arm's length from us and stretching into infinity. The emotional self

is slightly closer, in a band about eighteen inches thick, which begins about twelve inches from the body. The mental self is the space between the emotional and physical bodies.



*Figure 5.1. Bands of energy, veins of light: spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical layers make up the luminous egg of the energy body or soul. Arrows show the direction of flow for spirit intrusions (inward) and soul loss (outward), as the human being interacts with the living universe.*

At the root of every illness there is a problem that stems from the unseen world and affects our spiritual bodies first. Depending on how in tune we are with the invisible world, we may or may not notice that

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something is happening to us as the illness connects with this energy field.

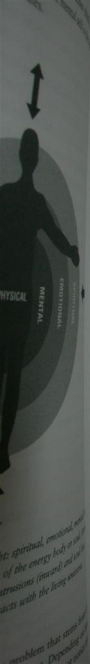
As the illness begins its migration toward the physical body, the problem will become more noticeable to us and start to make an impact on our lives. It will be registered first by the emotions, as these are our most subtle and sensitive organs of awareness. If we are in tune with our feelings, we may sense that there is something not quite right with us at this stage, though we may still be unable to articulate what the problem is or what we are really feeling.

As the illness becomes more solid and physical, however, we become increasingly aware of our emotions, our sense that something is wrong. At this point the illness is entering the mental self, and it is here that the mind goes to work on the problem so that we may become consciously aware of some event in the past that still haunts us and seems to have a connection to our feelings and our illness. Or perhaps our minds also become affected by the spiritual fallout from that event, of which we may still be unconscious. In these cases, mental illness can result.

Finally, the effect on the spiritual will create a physical problem for us. At any point along this continuum, the Houngan may be asked for help.

Stress is a good modern example of this process in action. There is no such *thing* as a stress. You cannot examine one or experience it in the way that you could a broken leg or a bodily wound, for example; it exists as a phantasm, in the world of the unseen. Yet many of us are affected by stress emotionally and mentally, leading to relationship problems, mental anguish, anger, panic attacks, depression, and so forth. Eventually, when our coping strategies run out and our emotional and mental selves cannot deal with it any longer, stress begins eating away at the body and is nowadays recognized, even by orthodox medical professionals, as a major contributor to cancers, strokes, ulcers, heart attacks, high blood pressure, sclerosis, and many other primary physical problems—as well as numerous secondary problems that also affect our health, such as increased smoking and drinking, eating disorders, and decreased sex drive, energy, and life force.

Stress is the invisible world making itself felt on the visible. If the



Houngan can intervene at the spiritual point of origin, he can therefore remove the cause of the disease and the entire process will collapse like a line of dominoes.

How this happens is so mystifying to the Western scientific mind, brought up to deal only with the physical world, that there is a great deal of skepticism about such "faith healing" and much ridicule directed at these healers by the media and others.

I can tell you categorically, however, that it *does* work, and I have seen people overcome cancers; diseases of the liver, lungs, and kidneys; and other physical disorders, as well as mental and emotional problems, using exactly this process of healing through spiritual intervention.

Because we are dealing with human energy, which is boundless and interconnected with all other energy in the universe, it does not matter whether this healing takes place in close proximity to the client or across vast distances. I have worked from the south of England with clients in America and Europe, as well as with people who visit my healing practice to see me in person, and always the results are the same. One client in San Francisco, suffering from residual lung problems as a result of pneumonia as well as obesity caused by being wheelchair bound, wrote to me a few weeks after her healing to tell me that "since you journeyed for me, I have lost nineteen pounds in just over a month. Even more amazing, the scar tissue on my lungs has completely vanished—my doctor could not believe it!" She added that her doctor, although pleased, was also quite irritated at the improvement of her lungs because he had no medical explanation for it. It was, he told her flatly, impossible. Another person wrote to me after I had carried out a distance healing for her mother. "Her doctors report an unexplainable improvement in her condition and say that an operation is now possible. Two weeks ago, two consultants said there was nothing else they could do for her."

These clients are ordinary people and not given to flights of fancy. Furthermore, in both cases their personal observations of improvements to their health have been supported (albeit with a sense of irritation) by medical professionals who have carried out tests on their patients before and after the healing.

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If we can accept that all illness has a spiritual cause and can also be cured in the same way, as these examples suggest, we have to ask ourselves how the spiritual problem arose in the first place—and how, practically, we can remove it so the client can heal.

In Vodou there are many ways in which spiritual problems can be caused. To understand these, we have to look first at the Vodou concept of the human soul, as this is the part of us that is attacked through spiritual means.

Again, the scientific and medical community is skeptical about the idea of a soul; it cannot be seen, quantified, analyzed, or measured by the physical sciences. But even the most hardened skeptic is likely to concede that most of what we think of as solid around us is actually bits of solid stuff held together by lots of energetic forces. The discoveries of quantum physics have taught us that much.

Human beings—indeed, all things—are basically comprised of unseen forces. If you were able to compress all the truly solid bits of your body together and remove the spaces between your atoms, your body would be a lump of solid tissue only slightly larger than your thumb. The rest of you would be, is, and always was, empty air—the energetic forces that hold your body together.

Scientists are used to manipulating this energy in laboratories and research establishments where they too are dealing with the unseen world. Only the terminology is different. The Houngan calls this energy *soul*, but his approach is in many ways the same as the scientist; he is manipulating energy that is invisible to the naked eye in order to create a material effect in the visible world.

The interesting thing about scientists compared to spiritual healers is that they look downward and inward, trying always to disassemble the world into smaller and smaller particles, whereas the Houngan looks upward and outward to the gods and the cosmos. The enmity between some scientists and those on the spiritual path is curious, therefore, since we are all effectively doing the same thing: looking for answers in the energetic world and creating reality through what we find there. We are all moving energy from the energetic plane into physical reality, literally dreaming our worlds awake.

## THE THREE SOULS OF MAN

After years of dealing with these energies, the Houngan has become expert in the nature and workings of the human soul. Based on this his concept of the soul is that it is comprised of three parts—three different types of energy, if you like. Every human soul consists of the *gros bon anje*, *ti bon anje*, and the *met tete*.

### 1. *The Big Good Angel*

The *gros bon anje* (“big good angel”) is the place within our souls that resonates with the god-energy of Bondye. It is the part of us that connects with the Infinite, the living universe, and the energy that infuses it.

If we have a good relationship with God, then this part of our souls is protected and we are filled with Ashe. Those able to attune their energies to this high level are also often able to bring this vibration to the Earth through their actions and the effect they have on others. They may radiate a sense of peace and calm, for example, and, since they know the mind of God, may be gifted with the Powers of prophecy, healing, and clairvoyance.

Usually, they are very holy men and women who, through a lifetime of refined thinking and intuitive action, have developed their spiritual Powers to a high degree. It is also possible to inherit this Ashe from the most extraordinary healers and spiritual leaders, so that the recipient becomes their reincarnation on Earth, capable of further evolution on this plane. They also have their own distinct personality, for they are not just spiritual “copies,” but also people of a changing Earth. Such is said to be the case with the Dalai Lama, Sai Baba, and Jesus, who was also an aspect of this god-energy on Earth—the “son of God.”

Attunement with an all-powerful God might seem the epitome of spiritual strength and protection, but this is not always the case. It means that we are highly developed *spiritual* beings, but that is only part of the equation; we are still also physical beings living on a material Earth. We must anchor our spirituality to the Earth in order for it to be of use to us or others. We must become “spiritual activists,” as the Dalai Lama has said, so that our Ashe is put to proper use in the dimension—the middle-world Marketplace—that we occupy.

The alternative is to drift as spiritual vagabonds who never put our strengths and talents to proper use. Perhaps we all know people whose "heads are always in the clouds," who see themselves as so spiritual that they no longer want much to do with the world, or find sex and other bodily pleasures distasteful.

In the United Kingdom we have a recent example of a vicar who has banned yoga classes from his church hall because he fears that such bodywork will lead people into unhealthy physical relationships and encourage the spread of "mysticism." Such "golf club Christianity," exclusive and conservative, with its implicit belief in a polo-shirted God with tasseled oxfords, is indicative of a confused relationship to spirituality that is ultimately unrealistic and unhealthy. It becomes "godology" rather than true spiritual communion. What, after all, does this vicar see when he looks at his own congregation, all of them mortal, physical human beings? If he does not see divinity in the human form, then what is he doing as a messenger of God in the first place?

Others who have too much of this god-energy are dangerous for quite different reasons. Once they become too unbalanced, they want to see "love" in all things and lose the ability to discriminate. They want to give you their love and to heal you and offer advice, often without your permission and without your request. Such people are easy to spot because they are always first in the group hug at New Age workshops and will approach you afterward to offer you "healing" (or worse, tell you they have already been "quietly healing you" because they "sensed your pain"). Their love is intrusive and unbalanced, having nothing to do with the real world. In fact, it is a form of energy vampirism, so hungry are they for your gratitude and so great is their desire to have you see things their way.

The important distinction is *balance*. No matter how spiritual we feel we are or how charged with god-energy, we must be clear that *we are not God*. We do not fully know Her purpose on Earth, but even if we did it would still be *for the Earth*, and we must recognize that we are also a part of this earthly reality. Our response must in turn be earthly or else it is valueless.

The desires of Bondye, of this god-energy, are communicated through the interactions of mortals with the loa and the ancestors. If we

have a strong relationship with these spiritual forces—and if we are able to maintain balance and see our true place in the world as spiritual beings living a physical reality—then this aspect of our energetic selves will be solid, will have boundaries, and will be inaccessible to the spiritual attacks that can lead to illness and disempowerment.

Frazer reminds us of the importance of this link with the ancestors in traditional societies when he writes of the Yoruba people: “Soon after a child has been born, a priest of Ifa, the god of divination, appears on the scene to ascertain what ancestral soul has been reborn in the infant. As soon as this has been decided, the parents are told that the child must conform in all respects to the manner of life of the ancestor who now animates him or her, and if, as often happens, they profess ignorance, the priest supplies the necessary information. The child usually receives the name of the ancestor who has been born again in him.”<sup>1</sup>

This naming of the child immediately initiates a strong bond with the ancestor, who will now act as a protector to the infant and a point of connection with the godhead. A similar ritual takes place in Haitian Vodou when, immediately after initiation, the priest receives his *nom vayan*—his “valiant” or sacred name—which confirms his relationship to a particular loa and to the whole of Gine, the pantheon of the spirits.

Note, though, that the child is not being asked to become a carbon copy of the ancestor; he is merely to act in the way, in “the manner of life,” of this spirit so that they share a connection. It is quite possible to act independently of the protective spirit and still respect his views and wishes, just as it is possible for successive Popes to act “in the way” of Christ but also have their own different styles and interpretations of Christ’s words. It is the connection with the spirit that is important.

## 2. *The Master of the Head*

The met tete (“master of the head”) is that part of the soul that is personified in the form of the one specific loa who is your “father” or “mother” and under whose protection you were born.

Many shamanic cultures believe that this guardian takes an animal form. The Yakuts of Siberia, for example, say that an animal takes a part of the human soul under its protection and in this way ensures that

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its human relation can never be the subject of a fatal magical attack, as his entire soul is never present to be damaged.

"Nobody can find my external soul," said one famous wizard, "it lies hidden far away in the stony mountains of Edzhigansk. Only once a year, when the last snows melt and the earth turns black, do these external souls of wizards appear in the shape of animals among the dwellings of men."<sup>2</sup>

In Nigeria the priest also unites, during initiation, with a particular wild animal that becomes the protector of his human soul. It is a *wild* animal because its spirit has not been broken through domestication, which makes it a more Powerful guardian. During the initiation rite the priest and the animal swap blood, becoming blood brothers as the human inoculates the chosen animal with his own blood and then drinks an amount of blood from a cut made to the animal's ear. In this way they are bonded for life, and the death of one will also result in the death of the other. They therefore have a vested interest in caring for each other and treating their complementary species with respect.

In Haitian Vodou this belief in an external soul has undergone changes since its origin in Africa, where the connection would probably have been made in a way similar to the Nigerian rite. Possibly because of the influence of Catholicism, the met tete is now regarded as humanoid rather than animal-like, and has characteristics in common with the Western notion of a guardian angel who watches over us whether or not we undergo a particular ceremony to create a relationship with the protective spirit. It is, however, considered a more Powerful union where such a bonding ceremony does take place. This is obvious and understandable, for we all relate better to and care more about people we actually know.

In Haiti the ceremony of kanzo consecrates this relationship. In the ritual the initiate sleeps in the djevo for the requisite number of days in order to form a bond with the met tete, whose identity has been previously determined by divination and by similarities between the personality of the initiate and the loa he will serve.

During his time in the djevo the initiate will also undergo the pot tete rite to extract part of his own soul in order to offer it to the safe-keeping of the met tete. In this rite the initiate's head is symbolically

removed and given to the met tete, the master of the head. In the darkness of the djevo, he is approached by the Houngan, who carries a machete, while the villagers outside scream "Off with his head!" As the machete touches his neck, a barrage of stones hit the tin roof of the djevo, creating a noise like thunder—the voice of the gods. Cuttings from the initiate's fingernails and hair are taken, as are drops of his blood, all of which contain the human spirit, and are then added to the pot tete and mixed with secret items that represent the loa who will watch over him. This consecrated container is then sealed forever to forge the bond between them.

When the ceremonies of initiation are over the new priest takes away the pot tete and uses it as a Power object as part of his altar. He may also use it to call the met tete when his or her help is required.

At the same time the initiate in the djevo has another part of his soul removed in the same ritual way, and this remains in the Vodou temple in Haiti, where it is charged with the Ashe of the peristyle and signifies that the priest is also part of a wider community, a family of the faithful, whose strength and practical support he may also call upon. No one who has undergone this ceremony may deny an honorable request from a parent or a brother or sister who is part of the same family. By formalizing the met tete relationship in this way, protection for that part of the human soul is ensured.

By simply being in good connection with the loa and the ancestors, then, most needs for health and empowerment are taken care of. There is another part of the soul, however, that is more vulnerable to attack, and most often this is where the real problems are found.

### 3. *The Aloneness of the Little Good Angel*

The *ti bon anje* ("little good angel") is the spirit of humans within the Marketplace and is therefore open to damage and attack from the dangers of this world and from the desires of people who wish to take our Ashe from us to satisfy their own neediness and greed.

The *ti bon anje* is also a moral principle for appropriate living. If a person has a good relationship to his community and to others around him, if he puts the community first instead of himself, he will be well because his profile is not so high that others become aware of his Ashe

and try to seize it. The community will also recognize him as one of its own and offer him its love, companionship, and protection.

If the person acts selfishly or immorally, however, the community will cast him out and he becomes vulnerable and unloved. He may also open himself up to attack from people who do not like his attitude and see him as a *gros neg* (a big shot who loves himself just a little too much).

In the most extreme cases, when the community feels itself threatened by the actions of a particular individual, the combined attack on him can be so severe that it will lead to his zombification, a state of powerlessness created by a Houngan acting on behalf of the entire village and administered through the use of plant and ritual magic.

Such episodes are very real—as I write this, there are at least two zombies on the island of Haiti—but, thankfully, also very rare. More likely, a person will have his Power eroded gradually through subtle and less dramatic day-to-day magic directed at him from individuals who mean him harm.

It is tempting for people in the West to feel complacent about such magic, believing we are immune from its effects and above such brutal and primitive attacks. We are actually the most vulnerable, in fact.

With the decline of religion in the West, most of us do not have a good relationship with God; many of us do not even believe in God anymore, since we have never been given any direct evidence by our priests. And even if we are churchgoers, orthodox religion does not teach us to develop a connection with a particular angel or guardian, leaving us exposed in our souls at the level of the *gros bon anje* and *met tete*, which, remember, are ways of energetic interaction with the world.

Our energies, in other words, become depleted because we have no battery from which to recharge them, and once we are Power-less it is very easy for our spirits to be stolen. We end up depressed and dispirited, two of the most frequent complaints in the modern West, where tranquilizers and antidepressants are now the most prescribed drugs.

Moreover, through the decline of Western community, we have little protection at the level of the *ti bon anje*, and many of us feel isolated, alone, and unloved, leading to self-doubt and anxiety. As we know from our earlier discussion, as well as from our medical doctors, such

stresses can lead to very real and damaging physical illnesses.

Two factors in particular have led to the erosion of community in the West: the culture of nationalism and the cult of the individual.

We are raised with a notion of national pride, to salute the flag each morning, to sing the national anthem, to stand for the Queen or President. We become habituated to this view of the world. But what, actually, is a national identity?

Does being American mean that a New York stockbroker shares the same values and outlook on life as a Texan cattle rancher, a New Orleans road sweeper, or a Californian reiki master? Does being British mean that people in the south of the country share exactly the same views and privileges as those in the north? That the Welsh are the same as the English, the Irish, and the Scots? Hardly.

Isn't it actually a myth that we have a national identity at all? Isn't *national* really propaganda from the capital—from London or Washington, where our politicians live and work—that taps into our need for belonging and can be stirred up in times of political or military crisis, rather than a real state of affairs?

The human soul calls for something more immediate and intimate than a mythological national identity. It cries out for community, small-scale connection with real people, a circle of friends, not a tenuous link with millions through a geographical accident of birth or a government policy.

On top of this, we are raised in a culture where the individual is revered—the person who takes on the odds, who overcomes the insurmountable, who retains the pioneer spirit and does what she knows to be right despite its effects on others. I believe that such individuality is vitally important within a system that would otherwise too easily devour us all, and certainly it is true that real change has only come from people outside the system whose creative genius and personal vision have led to numerous breakthroughs in social history. The way we are taught to achieve our personal objectives, however—by not caring who we step on during our climb to the top of the ladder—can be hugely damaging.

These two combined factors—nationalism and individuality—often mean that we become targets for others who are on their own way to

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## WISDOM: THE POWER

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the top and do not consider the needs of others in their quest for personal advancement. They have no real sense of community to protect them or to offer them perspective on their personal morality. The victim of their actions is anonymous when a national and not a local identity is promoted. And even if these climbers know whom they are hurting, it may seem unimportant and somehow only to be expected when it is set in the context of a socially approved climb up the career ladder or the attainment of personal riches and the "American dream."

We are therefore open to deliberate or unconscious spiritual attacks from people who are simply habituated to this way of the world. The effect is the same, and without the spirit to protect us, the *ti bon anje*—the soul we use most in our daily interactions within the Marketplace—is that part of ourselves that is most easily damaged.

The majority of these spiritual attacks are through the Power of the word or curse and the expedition mort, both of which result in spirit intrusions in which a malignant energy enters our bodies. It is this energy that must be removed if we are to overcome the physical illness that will otherwise inevitably result.

## **CURSES: THE POWER OF WORDS**

We all know the Power of words, and despite the old adage we are well aware of their ability to hurt us. Think back to a time when someone important to you told you a home truth about yourself, for example. Chances are you felt it physically, probably in your belly, which in the shamanic world is the center of your will and your sense of yourself and your Power. The words that were spoken felt like a blow to your solar plexus, the singular most important place of *Ashe* in your entire energy body. Words, then, can certainly damage us physically.

I have seen people who have had bad news delivered to them whose legs have simply given way as a result of pain and shock, as well as people in love who have literally swooned at one word from their beloved and "melted" before them. Perhaps you have experienced these sensations yourself?

Words spoken by someone in a position of power over us can be even more damaging. There are endless stories of people who have been

told by their doctors that they have a terminal illness, and within a few weeks they are dead. Before their visit to the doctor they had not had a day's illness in their lives, and were even out on the tennis court the day prior to their visit.

We knew something about the Power of words in the Celtic past. The training of the poet, one of the three sacred callings (bard, druid, and ovate) of the priesthood took twelve years, at the end of which all bards had "the power to enchant with words, they are also able to inflict damage—some of the tongue-lashings they give can cause physical hurt. Even kings are subject to their wrath. According to the *Book of Invasions*, Cairbre, the chief bard of the Tuatha De Danann, composed the first satirical invective ever to be heard in Ireland, attacking King Bres with such scorn that the king's face broke out in blotches."<sup>3</sup>

As a nervous reaction this is not so different from the sick feeling in the stomach and shakiness that come with any bad news or personal attack that leads to a stress reaction.

We are all living under the impact of words. We looked earlier at the wanga or geis, for example—the curse or challenge that parents and significant others inflict upon us in the choice of the words they use about us and the life script we therefore receive from them. Our names (simple words) are another case in point. Depending on our gender, it makes a difference to us if we are called Bill or Sue, and being misnamed would carry a profound implication for our lives, as Johnny Cash pointed out in his song "A Boy Called Sue."

If you are female your name is doubly significant, as it also labels you as property. You will go through life carrying your father's surname until you marry and take on your husband's name instead. Your identity, therefore, will never truly be your own, unless you choose to rename yourself, which many people on the spiritual path have done in recent years. This is also one of the reasons why the Vodou priest receives a new name—the nom vayan—after initiation, so he is able to claim a new identity for himself without the baggage of the past.

The Houngan well understands the Ashe of words and uses them to expert affect in calling the spirits and invoking their help during ritual procedures. The anthropologist Alberto Villoldo tells how he was once the subject of a magical attack by a Houngan in Port-au-Prince:

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"Voodoo was originally a healing practice from sub-Saharan Africa [which, in Haiti] was also used to harm one's foes, particularly the ruthless slave masters . . . The same practices you used to heal someone could be used to hurt someone. The same techniques that were used to stimulate the immune system to eradicate a cancerous tumor could be used to lay waste to the immune system so that your victim would die from pneumonia in a matter of weeks.

"Being in my early twenties, I was convinced that I knew better. Black magic, I conjectured, could work only on those who believed in it. If you did not subscribe to the belief system, it could not affect you."<sup>4</sup>

Armed with this conviction the young Villoldo accepted a bet with a senior anthropologist, who had been studying Haitian Vodou, that he could not be harmed by the magical Powers of a local Houngan. Together they went to the priest's house and arranged for him to perform a gentle ceremony a few days later, after Villoldo had returned to America.

On the appointed day Villoldo was having dinner with friends and laughing about how he was living proof that Vodou did not work unless you believed in it, because "that very evening the meanest Voodoo priest in Haiti was working on me, to no avail." And indeed, the allotted day passed without incident, as did the next. It seemed that Villoldo was right.

But "come Thursday midafternoon I developed a headache that by early evening had turned into a migraine. By eight o'clock my gut had twisted into a knot, I was having intestinal spasms, and I was retching uncontrollably."

At midnight that day, the phone rang. It was the senior anthropologist from Haiti, who told Villoldo that the Vodou priest had been unable to work his magic on the day they had agreed but had done so early on Thursday instead. He wanted to know if Villoldo had experienced any symptoms as a consequence. "I groaned into the phone and told him to go back to the Voodoo priest and ask him to undo whatever it was he had done. At that point, even death would have been a welcome relief."

Villoldo felt well enough next day to visit a doctor for tests, still believing that perhaps he had picked up a stomach bug that would

account for his symptoms. The doctor confirmed, however, that there were no parasites in his gut and no medical indication of what might have caused his discomfort. It cost Villoldo one hundred dollars and the worst night of his life to understand that well-aimed words worked into a ritual to focus the intention can have a major effect on our lives.

Unless we were born from a test tube, live in a tepee, and never encounter another living soul in our lives, we will all have experienced the negative effect of words on our life in "bringing us down," or making us feel bad about ourselves and the world around us.

Think back to your day at work and the explosions of anger or expressions of sadness around you. Remember your subway or car ride home and all the muttering, cursing, or horn-blowing from tired, frustrated commuters. What did all that do to your energy level?

Turn on the TV and count how much good news there is in the world and how much of what is reported is bad. It's bad not because nothing good ever happens, but because bad is what sells news. Someone chose it—*created the news*—selectively for you to paint a picture of a world of sadness, death, and disaster. How does all this bad news make you feel?

The impact of words is all around us. Often it is even institutionalized. Work appraisals, for example, are events where our performance is reviewed, assessed, and critiqued by our bosses, and words are used that will either make us feel good, secure, and hopeful about ourselves or depressed, insecure, and unhappy. They may even determine our future career, and through that, the rest of our lives to come.

All of this is meant to suggest that our energy is affected, in one way or another, by the words used around us in daily life. How much more impact does it have, then, when these words are delivered with force toward us, with the intention of harm?

In this case such words become curses, and the energy behind them can take actual form and attach itself to our bodies.

In *The Journey to You* I reported on a young woman who had become physically deaf because it was too painful for her to hear the words that were being spoken around her and about her by her family. She was able to regain her hearing only when a shaman journeyed for her to the time before she decided that deafness was a preferred option

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**EXPERIMENT MORT**

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and negotiated with the spirit she had allowed into her life at that point, making it leave her body. Once this was done she was immediately cured and her hearing was restored.<sup>5</sup>

## THE EXPEDITION MORT

Another form of spirit intrusion is the expedition mort. Here the energy behind words and thoughts becomes so virulent that it takes on a life force of its own, which is sentient and has the independent intention of taking up residence in your energy body, where those words and thoughts will most often do you considerable harm.

Sometimes these entities are deliberately sent and can be vindictive, their sole intention being to feed off your Ashe. At other times they are unintentionally conjured into being by people who are not working magic against you but nonetheless feel so negative toward you that their very thoughts and the words they use about you create a living entity that will attach itself to you and then begin to feed from you in order to preserve itself.

Sometimes these entities fully appreciate the consequences of their actions and continue to drain your Power in order to hurt you. In this sense they are evil. I know them as "feeders." Sometimes they are attracted to you only because there is an affinity between your energy and their own, just as ivy will wind itself around an oak tree not as a malicious act, but because it needs the oak in order to live.

Lucy was of a client of mine who exemplified the first of these situations, while Rhiannon is an example of the second.

Lucy came to see me because she felt constantly drained. She would often find herself approached by people who wanted to share their problems with her—even people she didn't know. At work she always felt driven to offer and do more. In her home life she was the one her family and neighbors always called on. All of these various demands were leaving Lucy de-energized, yet she felt unable to say no to the requests that were made of her. It was as if she wasn't in control of her own life.

As she sat relating these things to me, I became aware of the shadow of a man, a spirit entity, standing beside her, running his hand through her hair. I watched him for a moment, and he opened up a

scene for me of a dark night; then, in close up, I saw Lucy's head being forced backward into a pool of water. "She's mine," he snarled.

"Lucy, who's the dark-haired man, quite tall, wearing a dark suit?" I asked, interrupting her flow. "Do you know anyone like that?"

"My ex-husband," she said. She then went on to relate the circumstances of her abusive marriage, and how one night her husband had taken her to an abandoned quarry and tried to drown her by forcing her head into a pool of water, just as I had seen it.

In Vodou terms, she had given away her Ashe to her husband in the shock and trauma of that incident at the quarry, and the spirit or energy of her husband, which was stronger than her own, had taken over her life from that point. Though she had left her husband his energy was still attached to her. He still felt he owned her, and at a soul level she was willing to accept that he did. As a consequence she was being continually drained of Ashe by him, which was why she felt unable to block out the other energy vampires in her life. They, in turn, were drawn to her because of the affinity they felt between themselves and the energy that Lucy was emanating of "open to abuse."

The healing for Lucy was to remove the energy intrusion of attachment to her ex-husband and rebalance her energy system so she had a stronger connection to her own Ashe. (An explanation of this technique follows later in this chapter.)

Rhiannon was a different matter, and an example of a spirit intrusion that meant her no harm, even though that was the outcome of its attachment to her.

Rhiannon had suffered from debilitating asthma from childhood and often found it hard to breathe, even when she did not exert herself. Talking this through with her, it seemed she had had an extremely protected childhood, with overly cautious parents who were also tacitly critical of her. Really, they were just projecting their own paranoia onto her. They did not like her playing games at school, for example, "in case she hurt herself," and would warn her away from the athletics field in case she made herself tired and ill. Every time she became naturally breathless through normal exertion, therefore, she would identify this with illness, just as her parents had warned (conditioned) her, and panic would set in, prompting further shortness of breath.

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Energetically, this response to her parents had created a channel along which the "spirit" of asthma could travel, from the unseen world through the emotional and mental bodies and into Rhiannon's physical self.

At first I was aware only of a gray mist over her chest and face, a shadow on her energy body, but as I deepened into trance the spirit of her asthma revealed itself to me.

Usually, these entities show themselves in a form that is highly repulsive to the seer. This is not because they actually have a repulsive appearance—energy is quite formless and takes no particular shape—but so that there can be no mistake in the eyes of the healer that he or she is really seeing something. For this reason certain energies present in a standard form that most of the world seems to find distasteful—snakes, spiders, leeches, slugs, beetles, and fanged creatures with bared teeth are all very common in the literature relating to traditional healers.

This one looked like a giant gray tick. Its pointed, barbed legs were deeply embedded in Rhiannon's body, so that its back covered her chest and face, corresponding to the grey mist I had seen earlier. A feeding tube projected from its mouth and down Rhiannon's throat, effectively blocking her windpipe. No wonder she couldn't breathe; her throat was blocked with the weight of this entity on her.

Despite its appearance, an approach to the entity itself revealed that it had no particular awareness of Rhiannon and certainly no desire to harm her; rather, it was simply aware of a food source, her energy field, and was using it to sustain its own life. The situation was similar to that of a tick or a flea on a dog. Few of us would suggest that the flea deliberately meant to harm the dog or was even particularly aware of the dog's existence. It has simply found a source of food in the dog's blood. So it was with Rhiannon's parasite.

Unlike Lucy's situation, this spirit entity meant Rhiannon no harm and was happy to leave her when it was provided with a new source of food. (An explanation of this type of spirit removal follows later.) "For the first time in my life, I can breathe properly and am no longer gasping for air," Rhiannon wrote to me a few weeks after our healing session.

In short, then, we are subject to the actions of various energies in

the world, some malignant, some benign, some intentional in their attack upon us, some quite accidental and incidental. We can also attract these energies and have a natural affinity for them or, if we have developed our Ashe to resist them, can cast them off very quickly. Resistance to spiritual attack begins with spiritual strength, and this requires connection to our protective spirits.

As Morwyn writes in her book on Brazilian Candomble:

In the Afro-Brazilian magical system, it is believed that everything in the universe is exposed to the action of different energies. Some of these energies have been identified by scientists, and include gamma rays and the auras of animals and plants. Others, given our lack of scientific sophistication, have not yet been identified.

Practitioners claim that some of these emanations, known [in Candomble] as *fluids*, are so subtle yet powerful that they can bend or break physical objects. They range in density from the most etheric and spiritual to the almost physical . . . Disease is caused by corrupt fluids emitted from putrescent plants and animals and from astral entities of low order of development, such as the elementals and unevolved spirits of the dead. These noxious disturbances can impregnate the aura with physical or psychological illness . . . Harmful fluids can be expelled . . . by one's own holy guardian angel.<sup>6</sup>

If one's partnership with the guardian is not developed, however, then it can often fall to the Houngan to extract these harmful influences. This is particularly the case with the expedition mort, the most virulent form of spiritual attack.

Many shamanic traditions believe that the spirit of an animal, a dead person, or even an inanimate object can be bought in order to send it against another to do that person harm. In South Africa the *tokolosh* is a dead spirit resembling an ugly dwarf that will attack another if the right ceremonies and offerings are made. In Australia the energetic equivalent of a spear may be thrown against an enemy and will kill his spirit just as surely as a material spear would kill his physical body. Among the Shuar people of the Amazon, *tsentsak*, magical



darts, may be directed at an enemy in order to cause illness, and will then transform themselves into insects and worms on contact with the energy body so that they may burrow into the soul of the person who is their target. These are all forms of what are known in Vodou as expedition mort—the sending of spirits against a particular living target.

In Haiti an attack such as this must be done under petition to the loa Baron, who is the father of the dead and controls these spirits. Baron is identified in his Catholic mask as Saint Expedite, hence *expedition*. If Baron will not agree to the attack, then it is doomed before it even begins, so the proper appeals and offerings must first be made.

Assuming it is agreed, the Bokor (a Houngan or sorcerer who works with “both hands,” that is, one who will cast spells that may harm as well as heal) will summon or transform himself into an entity called a *lougrou* (*loup garou* in French). According to folklore, *lougrou* begin as people but are able to shape-shift themselves into animals, emerging from their human skins as new creatures. Frequently, they take the form of a large bird with glowing red eyes, which is able to fly through the night to attack its victims and drain them of life force.

In Obeah (Jamaican Vodou) the folklore is very similar, except that the shape-shifter will remove his skin completely, and rather than turning into a bird will fly, skinless, until dawn, at which time he must return and put his skin back on or be burned to death by the rays of the sun.

To defeat such a creature the Houngan must sprinkle salt inside the person's skin where it has been abandoned, waiting for its owner's return. The Bokor will then be unable to put his skin back on because it is too painful to do so, and will die at dawn as the sun burns him up.

In many ways both traditions echo what we know of the European folklore concerning werewolves and vampires—men and women able to change their form into a wolf or a flying parasite that uses the night to attack and drain its victims, but must return to human form before sunrise. This suggests a universal basis for the human fear of vulnerability, as well as an unconscious understanding that it is entirely possible for one's Ashe to be drained in unguarded moments, such as when the victim sleeps.

“It seems clear to me that this ‘flying’ is also related strongly to

lucid dreaming—*rev lisid*,” remarks Mambo Racine. “The ability to induce lucid dreams when desired will enable a magician to fly to places of power or to visit friends or enemies—to aid or harm them.”

Looked at psychologically, when our feelings toward a particular person are strong enough, we are able to focus on that individual and through shamanic flight or the Power of intention and imagination, interact with that person on an energetic level in order to change the events of their life. Such focused intention is the cause of much illness. When we wish someone harm and our Ashe is greater than their ability to resist our “magic,” that is when illness results.

It is wise of us, therefore, to keep our own emotions firmly under control so we do not unwittingly direct them toward others and inadvertently cause such changes, and to ensure that we are as protected as we can be from the intentional or unintentional actions of others.

## THE “VOODOO DOLL”: A FOCUS FOR THE INTENTION

The ubiquitous “voodoo doll” is probably the one characteristic most attributed to Vodou and seems almost unique to the religion. In fact, it is anything but.

The use of this method for sending spirit energy is, in fact, known to many cultures throughout the world. North American Indians such as the Ojibwa use a wooden image and attack it with needles or arrows in order to transfer the pain to a living enemy, or else they bury it in the earth if they wish that person to die. In Peru images of fat and grain are molded and then burned in order to destroy an enemy’s soul.

In Malaysia a wax model is made and empowered with nail and hair clippings from the intended victim, along with some of his or her body fluids, the parts of the body where the soul is strongest. The model is then scorched in a flame for seven successive nights while the sorcerer chants, “It is not wax that I am scorching; it is the liver, heart, and spleen of so-and-so that I scorch.” On the seventh night, the effigy is burned completely and the enemy dies.<sup>7</sup>

Harm is directed toward a person in this way by the medicine men and women of many cultures. Frazer tells us, “Perhaps the most famil-

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iar application of the principle of like produces like [which he calls homeopathic or imitative magic] is the attempt which has been made by many peoples in many ages to injure or destroy an enemy by injuring or destroying an image of him, in the belief that, just as the image suffers, so does the man, and that when it perishes he must die. . . . Thousands of years ago it was known to the sorcerers of ancient India, Babylon, and Egypt, as well as of Greece and Rome, and at this day is still resorted to by cunning and malignant savages in Australia, Africa and Scotland."<sup>8</sup>

Given the universality of such dolls, then, it is interesting that they are largely unknown in Haitian Vodou—the one faith most identified with them. In New Orleans Voodoo there is a tradition of using such effigies, but in both Haiti and New Orleans it is considered weak magic to have to resort to a doll like this. The Houngan or Bokor should have sufficient Ashe not to have to use such an intermediary device; rather, he should be able to send an expedition mort to his victim instead of jabbing pins into dolls.

Where such dolls are used, they act as a focus for both the *attention*—just as a photograph of a loved one may bring a rush of feelings and emotions to the relative or lover who gazes at it—and the *intention* to change the energy of the person it represents. The effigy contains some of the energy or soul of the person symbolized, and the Bokor is able to tune into this and then direct his energy toward that person, across space and time, through the channel of the image and the Power of his will.

It is not just in acts of aggression that such manikins are used, since the same energy that is focused in destructive acts can also be employed in benign and creative acts. Hence the people of Sumatra make a wooden effigy of a child, which is given to a barren woman so she may infuse it with her intention to have a child of her own. Such a dedicated focus charges the will of the woman, with the result that she does become pregnant.

Healing is also possible through the use of this method and is sometimes used in Vodou when the patient cannot be present in person. The Houngan will first create an effigy that represents the person to be healed, onto which he can project his feelings and healing intent. The

effigy is made stronger by adding to it any things that have been in contact with the patient, such as clothing, jewelery, or something they have written (or, ideally, something that was once a part of them, particularly hair, blood, and nail clippings).

The Houngan may also manipulate the doll in some way to signify a change in his patient's life or luck. If his client has a broken arm, for example, the effigy may be remodeled in order to heal it and make it whole again; if the person has cancer the doll may be "operated" upon in order to remove the disease. It is intention, the energy behind the words and thoughts, transferred through ritual actions, that produces the energetic effect.

Because in Vodou healing it is important to deal with the cause as well as the symptoms of disease, if the client has been made ill as a result of magical attack, most Houngans will consult with the loa or use methods of divination to identify who has sent the magic against his patient and then return the bad energy to the aggressor, so they "get a taste of their own medicine."

A friend of mine tells how he was once the victim of a Vodou attack sent by a Bokor on behalf of a lovesick ex-girlfriend. Of course, at first he had no idea that this magic had been sent. He was aware only of boils and skin irritations on his left side that grew increasingly worse until that side of his body was paralyzed and he was becoming weaker by the day.

Luckily, he was able to consult with a healer in the Philippines who divined the aggressor by asking him to write down the names of all the people he had met that year who might want to injure him. He then placed all of these, on tiny slips of paper, into an empty bottle. The healer held an egg, still in its shell, over the neck of the bottle for a few moments, and then gave it to my friend to crack. There in the unbroken yolk was a single piece of paper containing the name of his attacker. With this the healer was able to return the bad magic to the woman who had commissioned it.

My friend recovered quickly, but the next time he saw the ex-girlfriend it was she who had boils and red marks all over the left side of her face.

Note that I have been using the word *doll* in some of these descrip-

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tions, but an actual doll is not necessary for the technique to work. In fact, in the modern West it would be unusual (but not unknown) for a doll to be used.

What is more likely is that someone you know who wishes you harm will have a photograph of you or some personal item of yours. Perhaps an old lover who now has strong feelings against you as the result of your breakup still has some photographs, cards, or letters of yours, or something you have given him or her, or some remaining possessions of yours. All of these things contain your Ashe, and every time he or she looks at them and projects bad feelings onto you through them, more of your energy is eroded.

Spirit intrusions are thought forms conjured into being when people think badly of you in this way. It is important to protect yourself, therefore, by taking back from others the things that are yours—and return theirs—when a relationship with them ends.

## HEALING THE SPIRIT BODY

Spirit intrusions are Power intrusions; they are manifestations of another person's desire to have Power over you or to weaken you so they may take your Ashe.

As Michael Harner puts it: "Illnesses usually are power intrusions. They are not natural to the body, but are brought in. If you are power-full, you will resist them. Thus possession of guardian spirit power is fundamental to health. Serious illness is usually only possible when a person is dis-spirited, has lost this energizing force, the guardian spirit. When a person becomes depressed, weak, prone to illness, it is a symptom that he has lost his power . . . and thus can no longer resist, or ward off the unwanted 'infections' or intrusions."<sup>9</sup>

In Vodou terms the entity that invades you begins its existence as energy, but soon develops an awareness of life and the will to live, becoming more and more physical as it does so. If this drive for life is stronger than your drive or ability to resist it, it will soon develop a material presence.

This is not as fantastic as it sounds. Indeed, modern science offers some support for this traditional view. In a number of experiments, for

example, it has been shown that people who are weaker and less powerful are also less resistant to disease. The psychologists Holmes and Rahe found that the most stressful life events that bring us down, depress us, or leave us in a weakened state—bereavement, divorce, a change of job, redundancy, retirement, and so forth—always correlate with the onset of illness. In one experiment two groups of people, those under stress and those in a nonstressful situation, were asked to inhale a common cold virus. Those who were stressed caught colds within days, while those who were happy with their lives and sure of themselves did not get ill at all. Other experimental results showed that people under stress always developed throat infections when such a virus was circulating, and consistently did so within four days of exposure to it.

What modern science is acknowledging in such studies is almost a latent endorsement of the Houngan's view that being Powerful will prevent disease and ward off spiritual attack, while emotional and spiritual weakness will give the disease exactly the foothold it needs.

When physical illness does result, it is rarely the Houngan's primary concern, for he knows that by dealing with the point of origin and the cause of the disease (the intrusive spirit and the circumstances that admitted it), he will also heal its manifestations in the emotional, mental, and physical bodies.

The most important thing, then, is to extract the harmful spirit (or damaging energy) from the energy body of the client. When this is done the client's energy body will gradually reconstitute itself to close the gap left by the intrusion, and her own Ashe will begin to circulate again. An unpleasant but accurate analogy is that of the lancing of a boil. Once the pus is drained the physical body is able to regenerate itself and become healthy once again, without this poison in its system. The energy body is the same.

The method of spirit extraction is surprisingly consistent across many cultures and ages. Usually, it involves finding a replacement host for the spirit so the disease can be removed from the client's body. By virtue of this, extraction medicine will always necessitate a sacrifice of some kind, typically on the part of the new host.

Contrary to most stereotypes about Vodou, this need not be the sac-

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rifice of an animal. All things are alive, so even if the disease is given to a tree (as is the custom in India, where the patient is brushed with leaves and branches so that the wood absorbs the spiritual poison), then it is the tree that suffers while the patient is relieved of pain.

Thus we find in Timor that fatigue is cured by fanning oneself with leaves that are then thrown away so that the tiredness goes with them, while in the Solomon Islands the same problem is relieved by rubbing oneself with stones that are then cast into the ocean. Among the Baganda sickness is cured by the medicine man's making a model of his patient from clay or plantain. This is then buried, and the first person to step over it will absorb the illness from the patient. In these cases the new hosts and the sacrifices for the disease are the leaves, stones, plantain, and human being, respectively.

In some cultures, of course, animals are used as the sacrifice so that the illness is transferred to them. In Morocco, for example, evil spirits are removed by the medicine man and cast into the bodies of wild boar, while in South Africa a patient will confess his sins to the medicine man in the presence of a goat, which absorbs his sickness. The goat is then set loose in an unoccupied part of the veldt and the illness is lost in the desert.

In Welsh tradition, until very recently sin eaters were employed at funerals to eat a last meal of bread and salt from the belly of the deceased, thus absorbing their sins and ensuring a safe passage to the afterlife. In a similar way, among the Cingalese when a man is close to death, a "devil-dancer" is employed who will dance in the masks of the most powerful spirits in order to petition them for the man's life. Charged with the Ashe of these spirits, the dancer absorbs the illness into his own body, where he will fight it on behalf of the sufferer.

Even in the recent past of the United Kingdom we have memories of similar extraction methods: "A Northamptonshire, Devonshire, and Welsh cure for a cough is to put a hair of the patient's head between two slices of buttered bread and give the sandwich to a dog," writes Frazer. "The animal will thereupon catch the cough and the patient will lose it."<sup>10</sup>

In Haitian Vodou, as we saw at the opening of this chapter, the preferred method of extraction is to use a chicken as the new host for the disease. The bird absorbs the illness as it strikes the patient and the

disease is then released back to the earth through the sacrifice of the chicken and the burial of its corpse.

Earth is well known as a means of neutralizing energy, as anyone who has watched a lightning storm knows. The energy of the heavens is naturally drawn to the ground, where it is effortlessly discharged and transformed into a new form of Power, which the Earth can use positively in the regeneration of natural life.

Water performs the same function and is an excellent carrier of energy, hence the need for caution when using electrical equipment anywhere near it. Water is not so frequently used in Vodou healing, however, unless in a contained pool or bath, because other people bathe in or drink from streams and rivers and the disease can be easily transferred to them. Even with the baths offered as exercises in this book, the herbs that absorb the negative influences must be taken into Nature and buried at the base of a tree.

Extraction is not just a mechanical process whereby touching the patient with another host will deactivate the illness, however. Before the Houngan does anything at all he must ensure that he is completely Power-filled, for spirit intrusions are also energy forms and, like lightning or electricity, will find the path of least resistance. If the Houngan is weaker than the intrusion he is removing, he will simply absorb the illness himself.

In the healing that Yabofe carried out, he first called upon his healing spirits—the loa Gran Bwa and the others who work with him—and allowed them to infuse him with Ashe. It is also common in Vodou to use song, dance, and chanting to create the same energizing effects, as well as calling in the Powers of the Four Directions and the natural forces associated with them. When this happens it creates an effective barrier to illness by filling the energy body so fully that nothing else may enter it. Only then will the Houngan approach his client with the intention to heal.

Intention is the most important thing in Vodou healing. It is the Power of the will focused and channeled toward one specific outcome, in a way not too dissimilar to prayer, and there have been a number of interesting studies recently on the Power of prayer in creating changes in the physical universe.

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A pendulum  
At least four quartz crystals

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One, by an American medical center, asked people to pray for patients who were undergoing heart surgery, and then monitored the progress of these patients in the weeks that followed. Patients who were prayed for did 50 to 100 percent better, in terms of recovery times and general levels of fitness, than a control group who were not prayed for and remained only under normal hospital care during their recuperation. These results were significant, even though the patients themselves did not know they were being prayed for, so no placebo or other psychological effect could have accounted for this outcome.<sup>11</sup>



THE VODOU LESSONS: 5  
**CONDUCTING A VODOU HEALING:  
REMOVING UNHEALTHY ENERGY  
AND RESTORING ASHE**

The focus on self-empowerment and the intention to heal are the first steps in Vodou medicine. Only then should the spirit intrusion be addressed directly. It is also necessary before the healing begins to assemble the tools of extraction work that you, as the healer, will use. In Western practice, this may mean the following:

- A blanket and pillows for the client to lie down on
- At least two long feathers, or a number of smaller ones bound together to create a knifelike shape and length
- Incense and a holder for it
- A rattle
- A drum or drumming tape
- A pendulum
- At least four quartz crystals

The healing then proceeds in the following stages.

**1. Purifying and Empowering the Healing Space**

The healing ritual always begins with the use of incense to purify the client and healer, the room, and the healing tools. As each tool is purified the healer will start to enter the trance state of *danse-loa* and open the

sacred space before the altar, where the healing will take place. Remembering that all things are alive and have spirit, the healer will also ask each of the tools she will use for its help in healing the client.

As she deepens into trance and opens the gateway for the loa, she will begin to fill her body with the Ashe that is so essential to her success; if the intrusion she is to meet has a stronger will to life (more Power) than her, it is very easy for the healer to remove it from her client, only to find that it makes a new home in her own body.

There are many ways for you to ensure this state of Power, including journeying to your spirit allies to ask for their help with the healing, drumming or singing yourself into a trancelike state so you can strengthen your connection to these allies, and creating a strong connection with the natural forces or elements that will eventually take the spirit intrusion on your behalf—whether this is a tree, a field, a mountain, the wind, or the sea, as the *Carmina Gadelica* recommends.

Having followed these initial instructions, when you as healer feel yourself filled with Ashe—and *only at this point*—ask your client to lie down on his back and relax. Tell him you are going to drum for a while (or listen to your drumming tape). This is all he needs to know. But while you are doing so call in the allies and healers who will work with you, and make sure of your connection to the Power place that will take any intrusions you find.

During this period of reconnection with the spirits, most healers will also call on the Powers of the Four Directions, which are always saluted first, along with the Power places of the djevo, at the start of any Vodou ceremony. Although Vodou teachings do not refer to a medicine wheel per se, the qualities of the Four Directions do broadly correspond to those of the medicine wheels used by many shamanic traditions around the world:

East, where all life begins, is the place of passion, the spirit of infancy, the innocence and strength of the newborn, the sense of purity, of physicality, and the element of Fire. This element is represented by the loa Ogoun, who is the spirit of warriorship and brings strength and fortitude to the client.

South is the direction of becoming, of childhood and young adulthood, the emotions, and the element of Water. This is the element of

Erzulie and of La Sirene (the mermaid), who offer the client the blessing of unconditional Love and the Power to "wash away" illness and worldly concerns. The client is purified in the Ashe of these healing waters.

West is the direction of mature reason, the adult, the rational mind, the sense of perspective, the element of Air. This is the place of Sobó, the loa of the sky, who is also associated with wealth and prosperity and can confer these blessings on your client.

North, where all physical life ends and rebirth to the East begins, is the place of the wise Elder, of reconnection to the unseen world of spirit, of mature informed reflection, and the element of Earth. This is the realm of Baron, who stands between the living and the dead and is the ultimate guardian of the sick and the most Powerful force of regeneration.

In this petition all of the elements of Nature are addressed: Fire, Water, Air, and Earth. Also addressed are the guardians of the various bodies that make up the soul of the client—physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. You are therefore bringing the most potent forces in the universe to bear on the healing of your client.

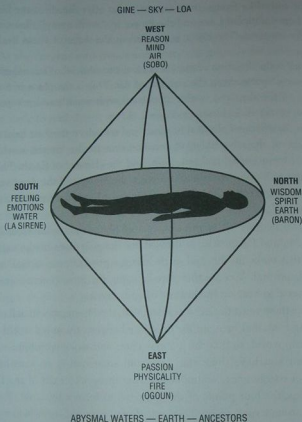
Once these spirit healers are assembled, the Houngan will call upon Legba and ask that he open the doorway between the spirit world and the human world, so that the loa may enter and work with him.

When you have done this, use your imagination to visualize a matrix of energy lines coming down from the sky to each of the Four Directions, the four points of the compass, to form a pyramid of protection around your client. Then visualize a pyramid from below her, up from the Earth, to link again with the Four Directions.

The client is then held at the center of a diamond of energetic Power. This is important because you are about to work with her soul and the spirits—all spirits—are aware of this. The force of your intention in creating this protective diamond ensures that you do not get any uninvited guests during the healing you are about to perform.

The words you use to call in these Powers are best drawn from the poetry of your own soul. In this way they are heartfelt and carry your serious intention for healing.

Since you will be in a state of light trance as you call these Powers,



*Figure 5.2. The energy matrix. Protecting your client in a diamond of Power to avoid spirit intrusion or interference during healing.*

you will find that you are automatically led by your inspiration and the exact words you use will vary each time. As an example of the sort of invocation you may find yourself using, however, the following is the sense of the words I use to summon these Powers to the healing space during the preparatory stages of my work with a client:

I call upon the Power  
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ictory in health.

I call upon the Power o  
the comfort and comp  
and understand that he is  
help him find healing an  
for himself and for others  
I call upon the Power o  
of the deep. Hold r  
his cares in your healing  
and whole again.

I call upon Baron. Emb  
now he is not alone and h  
between life and death, so t  
fully before it is time fo  
from the grave that was d  
I call upon Gran Bwa, m  
from my client, [nam  
may live in balance  
to thank.

*Legba non baye*  
*Si ou ki porte drapo*  
*Si ou ki para sole por*

Open the gate, Legba,  
So the loa may pass  
And work their healing t

I call upon the East, Pow  
passion for life and fea  
increase your strength  
and cases an

I call upon the Power of Ogoun, great warrior spirit. Take pity on my client, [name], and help him find the strength and Power to endure his battle for healing and find the peace of victory in health.

I call upon the Power of Erzulie. Hold your child, [name], in the comfort and compassion of your Love. Let him know and understand that he is valued and wanted in this world. Help him find healing and the peace to live his life with love for himself and for others.

I call upon the Power of La Sirene, the ocean and the mysteries of the deep. Hold my client, [name], and wash away his cares in your healing waters, so that he may be strong and whole again.

I call upon Baron. Embrace your child, [name]. Let him know he is not alone and help him understand that he walks between life and death, so that he can connect with Love and live fully before it is time for you and he to meet once more. Open the grave that was dug for him and let him live again.

I call upon Gran Bwa, most Powerful healer. Remove the pain from my client, [name], and restore him to health so that he may live in balance and in wholeness to better serve the Earth.

*Legba non baye*

*Si ou ki porte drapo*

*Si ou ki para sole por lwa-yo.*



Open the gate, Legba,

So the loa may pass

And work their healing for my client, [name].

I call upon the East, Power of infancy, of physical strength, passion for life and fearless adventure. Help [name] to embrace your strengths. Let your Fire burn away his illness and cares and leave him innocent and carefree, like a child once again.

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I call upon the South, Power of Water, youth, and vigor. Let [name] feel the touch of your vitality and courage. May your Waters wash him clean and sweep away his pain so he may connect again with life and forget his cares.

I call upon the West, the sense of mature reflection and Power of the Sobo, spirit of the Air. Let [name] achieve balance so he may see the truth of his life and illness in the context of mortality and make the right choices for the rest of his life. Let your healing winds blow through his soul and remove the fog that blinds his mind and the energy of illness that clings to him.

I call upon the North, Power of the spirit, Power of the Earth. Help my client, [name], to be grounded, to be part of the Earth, to be held and protected in your womb of the world. Let him connect with your spirit so he may understand himself and protect himself from the effects of others who are harming him. Show him he is valued and has the right to protect himself.

I call upon the Sky Father, Bondye, the Sun, and Sister Moon. Look down upon your child, [name], and hold him in your healing light. Let your light shine through him and illuminate his life so that he may know his purpose and achieve it in the future.

I call upon the Earth Mother to hold [name] in your healing embrace. Suckle him and comfort him so that he knows that he is not alone, but a much loved part of this Earth and is cared for.

I call upon the Center to unite these forces and hold [name] in your protection and in balance. I ask that a sense of certainty, equality, and equilibrium be experienced by [name] as a result of this healing.

Open the gate, Legba, so these energies may be present here.

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## 2. Repairing the Veins of Light

Once the preparatory work is done, the first task of the healer is to find out the state of health of the client's energy body. We are all comprised of different energies, represented by the four bodies (spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical) that make up the human soul.

In the mythology of Vodou the snake-god Dambala gave birth to the world from a sacred egg. Humans remember this original creative act, and so the bioelectricity of their bodies also creates a luminous egg shape around their bodies. This is the energy body.

A healthy human energy body, therefore, has an egglike shape that surrounds the physical body (and also runs through it) to a distance of about an arm's length in any direction. Throughout our lives this egg holds all of the energy that is us.

The energy body is weakened by the onset of disease, so that rather than resembling a healthy cocoon around the physical body it is knocked out of shape and may also be spread very thinly. If the energy body has been damaged in this way it must first be restored to its natural shape so that the client has access to the original Ashe she was born with, and in the configuration that is most effective for her to make use of it.

There are also areas of peak energetic activity within this field. In Eastern medicines such as acupuncture, these are known as the meridians. In Haitian Creole they are known as *ven-yo* (veins). Along them are the chakra points. *Chakra* is the Sanskrit word for "wheel," for this is what these areas look like: small, spiraling wheels of light. In Haiti the concept closest to that of the chakras is the *woulo* (from the French *rouleau*, meaning "wheel") or *sek* (from the French *cercle*, meaning "circle"), which are seen as areas of peak activity and Power in the veins that carry energy around the body. They may also be known as *yon boul limye* ("pools of light"), and are most pronounced at the crown, forehead (the Third Eye), throat, heart, solar plexus, perineum, and the soles of the feet (the base of the body).

The *woulo* connect, in the physical body, to the major organs and important parts of the endocrine system. In a healthy human being they spin in a circular, clockwise direction, which is the direction of all good energy.

Woulo are useful to us in healing, as each one is associated with a spiritual, emotional, or mental concern, and with a particular physical state or problem. The following is a list of associations for each. This should not be treated as gospel, but can be used as one diagnostic tool.

**Crown:** Concerned with issues of faith, hope, personal belief, and connections to the Divine and the Infinite. Physical problems associated with this area may include energetic disorders, depression, extreme tiredness, muscular or skeletal pain, or skin problems.

**Third Eye/Forehead:** Concerned with issues of consciousness, reason, and the ability to see our real/spiritual place in the world. Issues of lostness and lack of connection to others can be involved here. Physically, these issues may give rise to problems with the eyes, ears, nose, brain, or nervous system.

**Throat:** Involves issues of truth and inability to speak our minds in order to release the emotions within us. Physically, these issues may result in throat and neck problems or diseases associated with the mouth, esophagus, teeth, or gums.

**Heart:** Deals with the emotions, which may be either positive (love, compassion, empathy, forgiveness, and so on) or negative (anger, jealousy, control issues, hatred, and the like). Physically, issues at the heart area may affect the lungs, breasts, shoulders, arms, or the heart and the blood system itself.

**Solar Plexus:** Governs issues of self-esteem, self-worth, and personal Power. This is the seat of the will and of making things happen, of putting ourselves forward in life, walking our talk, and choosing our own path with heart. Physically, blockages in the energy system here may lead to problems with the stomach, liver, kidneys, adrenal glands, or spleen.

**Perineum:** Deals with issues of security and personal relationships, usually involving a Power exchange of some kind. Physically, these may lead to intestinal or bladder disorders or problems with the sex organs, pelvis, or hips.



**Base:** Involved with issues of grounding, understanding ('under-standing'), balance, our (normally socially conditioned) beliefs about ourselves, and the relationship patterns we attract. Physically, issues at the base level can lead to back or leg problems or a weakening of the immune system. Emotionally, they are implicated in a client's inability to move forward in life and may manifest as a sense of being stuck or caught up in old habits.

Before dealing with the would the energy body itself must be realigned. The use of a pendulum and quartz crystals will reveal the shape of the energy body to you. Hold the pendulum over your client and work your way out to the Four Directions of her body. At first the pendulum will be still, but it will start to move when it reaches the boundary of her energy body.

In normal circumstances of Power and good health, this will be an arm's length from her physical body, but in situations of illness and spiritual damage, might be only a few inches, a few feet, or even some yards away. Wherever you reach this boundary, place one of your quartz crystals (tip pointing toward your client, directing energy inward) to mark it. Continue around her body until all Directions are covered. You will then be left with an energy map made up of crystals that surround your client.

Vodou healers working in the West often use crystals in this way; in addition to their energetic properties, their ability to refract light and create a spectrum of color is representative of the rainbow serpent, Ayida Wedo, one of the progenitors and protectors of human life. Symbolically, then, quartz crystals contain the healing Powers of this loa, who also links heaven and Earth—as well as the four elements of Fire, Water, Air, and Earth—through the imagery of the rainbow, which is water held in air and infused with sunlight to form an arc that spans the Earth.

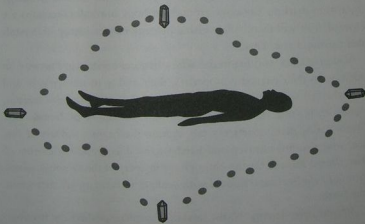
Interestingly, Jeremy Narby makes a similar connection between quartz crystals and the cosmic serpents of many other traditional peoples and spiritual faiths, including Australian aborigines, "who considered

that the creation of life was the work of a 'cosmic personage related to fecundity, the Rainbow Snake,' whose powers were symbolized by quartz crystals. It so happens that the Desana of the Colombian Amazon also associate the cosmic anaconda, creator of life, with a quartz crystal.<sup>12</sup>

In Haiti small stones are often used instead of crystals, but most precious of these are stones found naturally marked with a snakelike squiggly line, as these are also understood to contain the healing Power of Dambala in equal measure to any quartz.

However you mark the energy body, the map you create will tell you where your client's energy is located and where it needs to be moved to and from, bearing in mind that the energy body should only be a few feet away from her physical body.

It is useful to make a mental note of the shape created by this map, as this can sometimes provide you with useful additional information about your client's problems. I once worked with a client who felt disconnected from life and had issues about self-sacrifice and the giving away of her Ashe. Her energy body made the shape of a perfect cross.



*Figure 5.3. A human energy map. Crystals at the Four Directions and smaller stones linking them describe the energy body of the client and show where healing is needed.*

If the energy body is too far away from where it should be, use your hands to feel for it (you will often experience a temperature difference at the boundary, or your hands may shake or tingle), then push it back to where it needs to be. Use the pendulum again to check that it has moved, and then move the crystals to map its new position.

Now hold the pendulum over each of the woulo in turn and note if these are energized and spinning in the right (clockwise) direction. If they are the pendulum will also spin. If it remains immobile, moves to and fro, or spins in the wrong direction, these will need to be repaired.

This is done by pushing the palm of your hand down into the client's energy field, at the relevant woulo point, and around in a clockwise direction, like turning a wheel, with the intention of moving the energy in the right direction.

Nine rotations is usually enough ( $3 \times 3$ , a sacred number, representing the Trinity multiplied). Check with the pendulum to see if the energy is now moving clockwise. If it is, carry on to the next woulo.

If the woulo, or chakra, is not spinning correctly even after nine rotations, it is often because it is clogged. Our woulo are the mouths of the energy body, and just like our physical mouths they become choked if there is too much pollution around us. This may be spiritual, emotional, mental, or physical pollution; the effect is the same.

The solution is to dip your fingers into the woulo (it will feel like going against the current in a small whirlpool or eddy, or like a cool breeze on your fingers) and pull out the stuff—the buildup of pollution—that is blocking it. This will often feel and appear as a black tar-like substance.

Blow it away from your fingers, to the safekeeping of the allies you have made in Nature. Visualize it clearly as it is sucked toward and then taken in by the mountain or lake or tree that is your healing partner in the middle world, where this energy will be absorbed and neutralized. When you dip your fingers into the woulo again, it should feel warmer than before, signaling that this energy pollution has been removed. Now spin up the woulo again in the same way as before.

Once you have done all of the above, your client will have a properly aligned energy body, which also makes it easier for you to see any intrusions within it that need to be removed.

### 3. Extracting Negative Energies

The next step is to journey into the spiritual world in the way you have done before, but this time your intention is not to enter the natural landscape or the place of the spirits but the body of your client, to see if there is an intrusion to be removed and where it is.

With your eyes closed or only slightly open, scan your client's energy body, seeing and sensing any differences in color or texture and allowing yourself to become aware, at these places, of any creatures or entities that are attached to them. The spirits that work with us will ensure that these entities are very visible by making them appear in a form that you personally find repugnant. Black tar, ratlike shapes, swarming insects, snakes, and reptiles are common examples.

Once you see the intrusion, ask for confirmation from the spirits who are working with you. If they are in agreement with your diagnosis, get down next to that part of your client's body where the intrusion is localized. As repulsive as this entity may appear to you, it too has a right to life and to a fair chance to act honorably. Talk to it. Reason, negotiate, explain the bigger picture that the intrusion can't see—that it is part of a living organism (your client) that is suffering because of its presence, and ask it if it is prepared to leave peacefully and willingly.

If it is you must provide it with a new home. This is where the sacrifice always comes in. In this case we use feathers (the sanitized Western equivalent of the Houngan's chickens) as the sacrifice. In the otherworld, the energetic parallel of our own world, simple objects such as feathers take on a healing Power that is as precise and effective as a surgeon's scalpel. When dipped into your client's energy body the feather will pull the intrusion toward it, and you can then use the sharp edge of the quill to cut it away from the client. The feather will absorb the intrusion in exactly the same way as the Houngan Yabofe's chickens did in Haiti.

Your imagination and Powers of visualization are important here. As you focus on the feather, see the intrusion moving into it. *Intend* that this will happen and maintain this focus until all traces of the intrusion are gone. Your client's face is a good indicator that the intrusion has been removed; she will feel younger, lighter, less troubled when she is free of it, and her face and body will reflect this. Most likely she will

seem more relaxed, her eyes will be brighter, and a healthy glow will appear on her cheeks.

The feather must be disposed of later in an honorable and respectful way, by taking it to a safe place in Nature (ideally, to the physical representation of the spiritual landmark that is your ally) and burying it in the Earth at a place where others are unlikely to find it and become infected by the spiritual poison it carries. Offer a simple gift of thanks to the Earth and to the feather for agreeing to take this poison away and discharge it back to Nature. Offerings such as tobacco, peanuts, rum, or corn are usually acceptable.

If the intrusion refuses to leave, however, you will need to get tough. While it is true that all things are alive and deserve our respect, we must remember that we are here to work for our client, not on behalf of the intrusion.

The use of threats, in the way of the Charm for Chest Seizure ("Power of moon have I over thee,/ Power of sun have I over thee,/ Power of rain have I over thee," and so on) are classical methods for establishing authority over such recalcitrant intrusions. Another is to rattle at or near the intrusion, which has the effect of agitating it and loosening its grip on the client's body. You can then use the feathers to scoop it up and dispose of it in the same way as described above.

Once the intrusion is gone your client will be left with a sensitive patch in her energy field where a lump of energy is now missing, just like a wound to the physical body. It is important to apply an antiseptic to this wound in order to clean and protect it. The method of cleansing used in Vodou is to blow Florida water over the area. Florida water is a perfume made from the energy of plants that is held in very strong alcohol. Its name in Peru is *Agua Florida*, which gives a clearer indication of its use: it is "flourishing water" that helps the client to heal and to attract good energies into her life so that her luck is changed and she may flourish and grow strong.

The Florida Water is administered by taking a mouthful of it and then spraying it over the client's energy (and physical) body, a process known in Peru as *camaying*. This is not always recommended for Western clients, however, who are often less amenable to such methods. In these cases

sprinkling mineral water over the sensitive area can be a better solution. Mineral water works perfectly well since, as in much of Vodou healing, it is the intention to heal and purify that produces the results.

#### 4. Restoring Ashe

Because the intrusion has been feeding off your client's Ashe, part of his Power will have been taken from him by this entity. At this point most healers will carry out a healing to undo the damage caused by the intrusive spirit and fill the void in the energy body caused by the extraction. This healing is known as Power retrieval, and its aim is to return useful energy to the client.

The three fundamental methods for this healing all stem from the most basic principle of Vodou: that we are Powerful and protected when we are in communion with the spirits themselves, who delight in offering us their guardianship. In order to empower your client this connection to the spirits must be established or reestablished.

One of the following approaches will be most appropriate, based on what you know of the client and his healing needs. It is not necessary to use them all in a single healing, though it will do no harm if you choose to, or feel the need for extensive re-empowerment.



#### **Connecting Your Client to the Power of the Loa**

To complete this healing, journey to the upper world of Gine, just as you did earlier, to make contact with one or more loa (or the archetypal principles—Love, Power, community, and so forth—they represent), who are willing to offer their protection to your client. Ask if they have any information or advice for your client that may help him, and listen to what they have to say. As you discovered earlier, the loa often have a gift or a suggestion that can help to break the pattern of repetitive illness in your client's life.

When a spirit steps forward to claim the client as his or her "child," ask it to place some of its energy, representative of its Ashe, in your hands. Thank the spirit and return to your client, placing your cupped

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hands first on his solar plexus and then on his fontanel. Blow through your hands so that this Power is absorbed into your client's energy body.

When this is done shake your rattle around the client's body three times (for the Holy Trinity) in order to seal in this energy by creating a barrier of sound around him. Still using the rattle, make the sign of the cross over his body in order to close the protective seal.

### **Connecting Your Client to the Power of the Ancestors**

Journey in the same way as before to the waters beneath the Earth and make contact with one of your client's ancestors who cares for and loves him; call up the ancestor through the sacred waters. Ask that she offer her Power and protection to your client, and also if she has a gift of healing for the client.

In Vodou sacred songs are very important, and often the ancestors will offer you a song of Ashe for your client. When you have this song, sing it directly into your client's energy body as you continue to journey. The quality of your voice is completely unimportant, for it is the sound vibration that matters and is absorbed as energy by the client.

When you feel you have done enough, thank the ancestor and come back to ordinary consciousness, then rattle around your client in order to seal in the energy you have returned.

### **Connecting Your Client to the Spirits of Nature**

Journey as before to the landmarks of the middle world, all of which are alive with spirit, and ask each if they have a gift of Ashe for your client.

If the answer is no, move on and find one that does. If the answer is yes, gather this energy in your arms and then find another and another—three is enough—before returning to your client. Blow these gifts of Power into his solar plexus and fontanel, reciting what it is that you have returned: "Power of moon I return to you [blow]; power of sun I return to you [blow]; power of rain I return to you [blow]." Rattle around the client's body to seal in the energy.

When you have completed one or more of these Power retrievals, your client will need to understand a little about what you have done

for him and how he can maintain his new energy and the connection you have opened to his spirits.

Given the reticence of many Westerners to even consider Vodou as a respectable Way of Power, unless your client has approached you specifically for Vodou healing it is sometimes better to talk in general terms. Suggest, perhaps, that you have helped him establish a connection with a guardian angel or a loving spirit who wants to look out for him, and instruct him how to make an offering to this spirit in thanks for its help.

If you have returned Ashe from the middle world, you might advise him that he can enhance his healing and strengthen his connection to the healing Powers of Nature by finding something in the material world that represents the natural force you have returned. Encourage him to put a picture or a poster of the moon above his bed, for example, or to light a candle to represent the Power of Fire (the sun). Or provide him with the recipe for an herbal bath he can take, which will help him heal and connect him with the Power of Water.

Remember that you as healer will also need to make an offering to your own helping spirits for the assistance they have given you. As the healing ceremony ends, remember also to close the sacred space at your altar.

### **SUMMARY: A FRAMEWORK FOR VODOU HEALING**

A framework for spiritual healing using the approach of Vodou is as follows:

1. **Create the sacred environment and call in Power.** Open sacred space at your altar and call upon your spirit allies to empower you and assist in the healing work.
2. **Check and rebalance the energy.** Examine your client's energy body. If necessary, work on this to ensure that it is properly aligned and ready for the return of Ashe.
3. **Remove unhealthy energies.** If any extraction work is needed, that is, if you perceive a spirit intrusion (or "unhealthy energy") feeding on your client's Power, remove the unhealthy energy now.

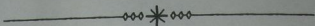
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- 4. Return Power.** The very action of removing negative energies will leave a gap in your client's energy body and lead to a reduction in his or her energetic potential because you are, in effect, taking part of the client's energy away. Even though that energy is unhelpful to the client, it will still leave a void when removed, just as cutting out a tumor will result in a material loss to the physical body. So if you have removed negative energies, it is necessary at this point to fill the void with positive Ashe to make the energy body whole again.

More extreme forms of Power loss—when part of the soul has actually been eroded or stolen as a result of abusive action—are also possible. This is referred to as soul loss, a subject covered in the next chapter. But even where a full soul retrieval (as opposed to a simple Power retrieval) is necessary, Ashe often needs to be returned first and the client given time for this energy to settle back into his system before soul retrieval is attempted. This gives the client the necessary energy to anchor the soul parts you will return to him later.

- 5. Sacrifice.** When the healing is complete make your offerings at the altar and close the sacred space in the usual way.

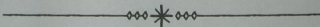


*Glendower: I can call spirits from  
the vasty deep.*

*Hotspur: Why, so can I, or so can any man.*

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE,

MACBETH



# THE TREE OF WEEPING SOULS

Soul Loss and Retrieval—Advanced  
Techniques of Power Return

*La Sirene, la balenn  
Chapo m tonbe nan lame  
M ap fe cares pou La Sirene  
Chapo m tonbe nan lame  
M ap fe cares pou la balenn  
Chapo m tonbe nan lame*



The mermaid [La Sirene], the whale  
My hat fell into the sea [i.e. I became  
possessed]  
I am caressing the mermaid [i.e. lost in  
the depths of the ocean, the deep  
unconscious]  
My hat fell into the sea  
I am caressing the whale  
My hat fell into the sea

VODOU SONG STATING THE EASE BY WHICH  
IT IS POSSIBLE FOR THE SOUL OR SPIRIT  
TO BE POSSESSED BY ANOTHER



"You may hear some people moving around outside during the nights when you are in the djevo. It has happened before," said Racine. "Be alert, but don't worry about it. We have guards here for your protection. They are armed with machetes and they won't hesitate to chop to pieces anyone who may try to harm you.

"The thing is, Vodou is Power and I am a very Powerful Mambo. So if one of my rivals can disrupt your ceremonies in any way, or hurt you while you are under my protection, it reflects badly on this temple. People will say I cannot be so Powerful if I could not take care of my children properly. Then they will find out who hurt you and go to his church instead. They will say he is more Powerful and can give them more. So Yabofe and I are taking no chances. We will have people sleep in the djevo with you and there will be guards outside at all times.

"I know you have all heard of zombies, and probably put that down to the movies, right? Wrong. There are zombies here—people whose souls have been stolen by sorcerers. Some of our rivals may even have that in mind for you—a nice little white boy they can use as their servant forever." Her words were spoken with a smile and I tried to laugh along but it came out instead as a sound somewhere between the croak of a frog and the yelp of a pained dog. My reaction sent Racine into fits.

"Don't worry!" she said, holding her sides and rocking backward and forward with laughter. "Yabofe and I love you. You are our children now. I am your mama and Yabofe is your papa. We won't allow you to be hurt in any way".

I wasn't worried, actually, more surprised. I had read the books of Wade Davis—*The Serpent and the Rainbow*, and *Passage To Darkness*—where he describes the special herbs and toxins used by the sorcerer to create the soul-lost zombi, but I—a middle-class white kid from the London commuter belt—had never expected to be personally exposed to the risk of zombification. Here in the jungle, I realized just how vulnerable we were.

The toxins used in zombification are effective and simple to

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... and walked to a  
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... night

deliver in food or drink, or even through the skin. You get sick, weak, and then vital signs pretty much stop. You are alive through-out this but you are unable to show it, trapped in a living death from which there is no escape without the intervention of the sorcerer himself, the one person who knows you are still alive. Sometimes, in this paralyzed state, you are buried alive so that the sorcerer can dig you up a few days later, in a spectacular display of his own Power. Bringing the dead back to life. You survive the burial because your nervous system is suppressed and your body doesn't need so much oxygen, but your mind, your will, and your soul are gone, lost somewhere in a dark place of shock and fear. Is it any wonder that a country born of slavery is so adept at creating slaves?

Sometimes the herbs themselves are not even necessary since souls can be stolen and zombies created through spiritual attacks and emotional trauma alone. I'd seen the same thing on the city streets of London and Brighton—half-dead pallid faces and vacant eyes, the walking dead whose juice had been sucked out of them by the boredom and stress of city living. Shamans call it soul loss or, in extreme cases, soul theft, where the life force is literally stolen from the body by the control-freak husband, nagging wife, dictator boss or overbearing nanny—or any one of the other energy vampires that modern life throws at us.

Racine hugged us, her children, and left. I wondered about the timing of her warning. Tomorrow we entered the djevo and I had hoped for an initiation that was joyous, celebratory, even fun. But then it dawned on me: Vodou is about realism, not fantasy; it deals with what is, not what we'd like it to be, and initiation is a warrior challenge, not some New Age label applied to a "process." Better get real then, I thought.

Ricardo, the gentle American who was to become my brother initiate obviously felt the same way. Quietly, somberly, he rose from his seat and walked to the door of this small chalet we shared at the edge of the jungle. Then, without a word, he locked it against the night and the rivals of Mambo Racine.

—HAITIAN JOURNALS, JANUARY 2000



In the Western world we are just beginning to recognize the connection between health and Power, which in Haiti has long been common knowledge. Our Western worldview, our "act of faith," is to see the world in material terms and to put our trust in science. It is not surprising, therefore, that it should strain credulity when someone claims to be able to steal a soul or cure a physical disease by an appeal to the spirits.

The most important advice I can give you is to try this healing approach for yourself, rather than dismissing it out of hand, and see what results it brings. Your own experience is always the most important, because when *you* experience something, you know it is real in a way that received wisdom can never be.

## THE VODOU HEALTH SERVICE

It is interesting, though, that Western medicine is now turning to Vodou to answer some of its own problems of healing, having recognized that in some circumstances orthodox medicine does not have the Power to heal that it has long thought itself capable of.

The U.K. Department of Health, for example, is now funding a 115,000-pound, three-year study on the role of Vodou in treating British Afro-Caribbeans who are experiencing health problems that seem resistant to Western cures. The study, carried out by the respected Maudsley Hospital in partnership with the Institute of Psychiatry in London, signals a sea change in the way that African healing is now coming to be viewed in Britain.

Dr. Edwin Gwenzi, a research fellow at the Institute of Psychiatry, makes the point that Western medicine has learned much from other cultures, and there is no logical reason why traditional Afro-Caribbean therapies should be ridiculed or feared while ancient Chinese and Indian techniques, such as acupuncture and yoga, now have mainstream credibility. The point is echoed by Dr. Rosemary Mallett, a medical sociologist who calls for greater understanding between the National Health Service, general practitioners, and practitioners of Vodou, Rastafarianism, and herbal healing. "People from the Afro-Caribbean community are more likely to desire that their religious

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beliefs and spirituality are incorporated into their treatment. They may ask for the presence of their spiritual leader on the ward, for example, or for the exorcism of a spirit they believe has possessed their house," she said. These holistic views should be respected, as they contribute to the healing.<sup>1</sup>

In its coverage of the Department of Health study, the *London Times* newspaper quoted Julia Head, a professor of religion and mental health at London University, who discussed evidence that suggests that Afro-Caribbean people who embrace their spirituality are more able to recover quickly from illness. "Spiritual matters are more a part of everyday life to African and Caribbean people. They have a more holistic understanding as to how religion works in the whole of one's life, and how religion relates to the self," she said. "To know that one is supported by a faith community, that one is being prayed for, has very positive effects."<sup>2</sup>

The various newspaper reports of this research also make a telling distinction between African medicine and more conventional Western treatments. Paul Adu, a Vodou priest quoted in the *Independent* newspaper, pointed out that one of the key problems with Western medical hospitals is the very fact that they ignore the spiritual dimension of illness and thereby contribute to the disease. "I have clients who have run away from hospitals because all the doctors did was restrain, and dispense tablets," he said. "My clients just ended up sleeping all the time."<sup>3</sup>

Given the Power of Vodou and the range of anecdotal and cross-cultural evidence of its effective use in healing, it is surprising that it has not been investigated thoroughly in the United Kingdom long before this recent study. America is light years ahead of the United Kingdom in this regard.

But then again, perhaps it is not so startling after all. Our worldview in the West is based on the central importance of physical reality; we do not like what we cannot see, measure, and analyze.

This has led our scientists to a number of wonderful paradoxes in recent years. After subdividing the atom into smaller and smaller parts, for example, they got stuck from the mid-1900s onward because they couldn't seem to divide the atom further but knew from their conceptual research that there *must* be something else holding up the universe

beyond the tiniest particles they had managed to find. So they invented a few. Quark, Strangeness, and Charm are the names given to supposed subatomic particles that “simply have to exist”—despite the fact that they can’t be seen—in an ordered physical universe.

In other words, science, like religion, has become an act of faith. Despite practicing their own form of faith, however, our scientists (with notable exceptions—Einstein being one) are still largely unable to admit to the Power of faith in assembling order in the universe, much less to its role in healing a human being.

My background in psychology has taught me the Power of the human mind to turn faith into fact, so that a deep belief in something being real can cause that thing to become real. Social psychologists call this effect “self-fulfilling prophecy.” It is one of the mechanisms behind the healing Power of placebos; we believe something to be helping us and so our bodies act as if it is, creating changes in the body’s chemistry that really do lead to physical healing. The lines between fact and fantasy, real and imagined, are thinner than we think.

My spiritual practice over the years has also convinced me that there are other nonphysical forces at play in the world, an energetic component to the universe that is around us and also a part of us, and these supernatural forces can be employed for our well-being (or otherwise).

Mind-body-spirit healing is, as far as I can tell, quite real, and the current research by the mainstream health authorities—who are more academically qualified than I will ever be—seems to recognize this fact. It is this union of the mind-body-spirit that gives the Houngan his Power. If you believe it is real, you make it real, and you will be able to create new healing states for yourself and for others.

## RESTORING THE SOUL

Sometimes an extraction, even combined with Power retrieval, will not be enough to fully return your client to health. This is the case when part of the client’s soul has been lost or stolen from her. In this situation the Houngan will need to do more: a soul retrieval, rather than a simple Power retrieval. This is a somewhat more complicated, delicate,

advanced healing practice learned under the guidance of a master healer. The method involves the use of the client’s own abilities and those of another person. The three human souls are either lost or even stolen, depending on the nature of the illness. Once the souls are located, they are brought back to the body and the client is usually fixed, provided the guardian spirits are able to maintain their protection. This is often achieved through the use of the loa and the ancestors, through the dance-loa, or through the use of certain colors and numbers. The human partner should, for instance, wear white. With some loa, such as the loa of the sea, fish are herded into the client’s bed instead. (Cuban Voodoo practitioners are required to wear white head coverings, and their heads covered with a white plate, and



and advanced healing practice, which, for the aspiring Western healer, is best learned under the direct tutelage of an established and effective Houngan-healer. The methodology explained below is therefore offered for guidance, but the reader should be very honest and clear about his or her own abilities and confidence before attempting soul retrieval with another person.

The three human souls are fragile energies that are quite capable of being hurt or even lost, depending on how they are treated. Normally, the *gros bon anje* and the *met tete* are most resilient to damage and more easily fixed, provided the relationship to God and the partnership with the guardian spirits is observed and the correct offerings are made to maintain their protection. These souls are like batteries that can be recharged by plugging into a universal generator. In Haitian practice this is achieved through the ecstasy of dance, song, and ceremony, in which the *loa* and the ancestors are welcomed back into the community and, through the *danse-loa*, fed with the foods and drink that they most enjoy.

There are also certain taboos that must also be observed if the *met tete* is to remain happy and loyal to the person with whom he or she works. All *loa* have certain foodstuffs they prefer and things they will not touch (*La Sirene* should never be offered fish, for example; as goddess of the sea, fish are her children, and this would be a massive insult).

Certain colors and numbers and days of the week are also sacred to the *loa*. The human partner of a particular *loa* must observe these taboos and should, for instance, never have sex on the day devoted to that spirit. With some *loa*, such as the jealous *Erzulie*, her human "husband" must even sleep in a different bed (preferably a different room) than his human wife, if he has one, on *Erzulie's* sacred days, so that the *loa* may share his bed instead.

*Santeria* and *Palo* (Cuban Vodou) both have similar taboos. New priests are required to wear white for a period of one year after initiation, to keep their heads covered, to drink from a special cup and eat from their own plate, and observe many other restrictions based on the preferences and prescriptions of their spirits.

One of my brothers in Vodou, Greg, is also a priest of *Palo* and has

a personal spirit similar to my own met tete, Ogoun. Having once been a violent man given to fighting, Greg is now forbidden by his spirit ever to fight, for it is the job of his guardian to protect him through the warrior arts. If this taboo is ever broken, his spirit will leave him.

All of these taboos and ways of relating to the spirits can be discovered for yourself over time if you maintain a practice of journeying to them to explore their needs and ensure that you feed them regularly at your personal altar to maintain a strong connection to the spirits themselves.

The met tete will assume that his human partner is not serious and devout if his or her taboos are ignored, and he or she will then return to Gine, taking his or her energy back to the universal pool. Without this strength a person is open to all sorts of illnesses and magical attacks. It is then the job of a Houngan to appeal to this loa to return, and to chastise his human client for his foolishness in the hope that the spirits will be appeased. Sometimes they are not, and the effects can be serious.

Normally, in Haiti it is not a problem to observe these taboos or to feed the spirits appropriately, because the entire Vodou culture revolves around the knowledge and partnership of the loa and the ancestors; the gros bon anje and met tete are therefore usually strong.

Once again, it is the ti bon anje, the soul of the man in the Marketplace, that is most vulnerable to harm and to loss. The ti bon anje is the most fragile of the souls because it has no Powerful guardian to watch over it, for it depends on the morality of the person who bears it and is rooted within the community of the Marketplace, where immoral acts are daily events. It is therefore subject to the human frailties of the person, as well as the frailties of those he comes into contact with and who may wish him ill.

One of the ways this soul can be weakened is by immoral actions taken by the person who carries the ti bon anje—the client herself. Such actions make the soul “glow less brightly.” In the West we would probably say that the person who has acted in such a way feels a sense of debilitating shame or guilt. This can cause problems on two levels.

First, guilt and shame sap the strength spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically if the person cannot come to terms with his behav-

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ior or release the shame of his actions. An awareness of this is bound up in the Catholic practice of confession, wherein moral transgressions and the breaking of Christian taboos ("Thou shalt not steal," and so forth) are spoken out in the presence of a priest in order to clear the ethical slate. Recognition of this phenomenon is also in the pre-Christian idea of the *anam cara*—the "soul friend"—who will listen to your confession without judgment.

Second, if the person cannot expunge his guilt, this chink in his moral armor can easily widen so that it becomes an opening through which evil may pass and take root in the soul. The moral sense is then lost to him, and a person without shame is capable of all sorts of evil actions. With each one, a little more of the soul is lost.

The *ti bon anje* can also be weakened by the immoral actions of others toward us and especially by those who so badly want our Ashe that it goes beyond the theft of energy and becomes soul theft instead.

## WHEN THE SOUL IS LOST

We all have an amount of energy within us that comprises the totality of our souls. In cases of Power loss, some of this energy has been removed from us through the impact of life or the specific actions of others, but this can normally be returned quite easily through the use of healing procedures that recharge us and restore our Ashe. With soul loss, however, so much energy has been taken from us that we are permanently depleted and have little hope of recovery without forceful intervention by a healer.

In the case of an abused child, for example, the loss of Power will occur daily as a result of the physical and mental abuse that takes place. If that child is removed from the abusive family and taken to a place where she is loved and supported, the Power she has lost may return over time. Where the abuse is constant and there is no intervention, the soul will eventually be ground away to nothing.

In the psychological literature on child deprivation we read of many such cases. In the 1970s twin seven-year-old boys were discovered in a cellar in the former Czechoslovakia, where they had been imprisoned for more than five years by their father and stepmother. Neither of the

boys could walk or talk, both were suffering from rickets, and they were both extremely fearful. Despite their trauma, hospitalization and fostering with loving families enabled both boys to recover well, and they are now adults with children of their own. By removing them from the abusive situation and providing the love they needed for their souls to heal, the boys were eventually returned to Power.

Genie, on the other hand, was thirteen when she was found chained up in an attic and punished by her father if she made any sound at all. When discovered, she had the physical development of a six-year-old and was described as "unsocialized, primitive, and hardly human." She could make barely any sounds and could not walk. Genie was also hospitalized and fostered, but she went to a new family that subjected her to further abuse, and then to new foster parents who separated and divorced. Thus she was never able to experience a secure environment where she felt loved and able to restore her Power. Nor was she ever able to adjust to social life or develop language.

Such immoral acts are damaging to the soul, and if they continue will eventually lead to its withdrawal from the world entirely. Soul theft, in this sense, is no different from zombification.

The third way in which the *ti bon anje* may be damaged is similar to both of the previously described situations. The soul may simply leave the body in moments of great shock or pain, or at times of chronic illness or great fear. When the *ti bon anje* leaves the body for any of these reasons, like all energy it follows the path of least resistance, and so will take flight to that part of the otherworld that is easiest for it to reach: the spiritual middle world. It escapes the physical body and wanders into the spiritual landscape, where it finds solace with the *djabs* (spirits) of the natural world that parallels our own.

Soul parts are drawn to the energy of these natural features and especially to trees. It was in a tree overlooking his peristyle that Luc Gedeon first encountered the wandering spirit *Arapice La Croix*. Among the Congo tribes too, when the soul of a sick man leaves his body, the witch doctor will stalk it to a tree where it is hiding. A branch of the tree is then broken off and carried back to the village where the sick person lies. This branch is laid next to the patient, and the medicine man will then perform a ritual to transfer the soul back to its

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owner. A similar soul hunt is performed by the Batak people of Sumatra, who chase the soul through the natural world, chanting for it to return from where it is "lingering in the wood, or on the hills, or in the dale."<sup>4</sup>

Why are these souls so drawn to Nature and to trees? Because just as in the symbolism of the World Tree or the *porteau mitan*, trees link all three of the worlds. The lost soul longs for love and community, for return to the ancestral world or to *Gine*, and it is here at these gateways between the dimensions that it is likely to find what it most yearns for.

It is critically important for the *Houngan* to locate the missing soul as quickly as possible, as it remains vulnerable during all the time it spends in the presence of these gateways. The *loa* or the ancestors may take pity on the weeping soul and open the doorway between worlds to accept the soul back into their community. If that is the case, then the physical body may die. At the very least, a person without a soul will be zombified and unable to function as a normal human being.

At the same time, the soul lost in the middle world is also vulnerable to attack from less evolved spirits who have not served their time in the *Abysmal Waters* or have been called back by *Bokors* to become their malign servants.

The first action of the healer must therefore be to establish how and why the soul parts were lost. To recap, there are three reasons why a soul may be damaged in this way:

1. An immoral act or the breaking of a taboo by its owner
2. Zombification, a deliberate soul theft by another who steals our *Ashe* through abuse and unethical behavior, to such an extent that we are never able to recharge ourselves and our soul simply drains away or leaves the body in order to escape its pain
3. The immediate effects of shock or illness

Often the patient is able to talk and function in a seminormal way and may even have some sense of when and why the problem arose. If so the *Houngan* will direct his questions to the sufferer in order to establish which of these three circumstances has led to her current problems. If the client cannot speak for herself, however, the *Houngan* must ask the person's relatives, or journey to the *met tete* of his patient so the

spirit may advise him on the cause of the illness and the best means of its cure.

Once he has this information the Houngan will proceed in one of the following ways.

### **1. A Soul Lost Through Immoral Behavior by the Patient**

The first step is confession. If the Houngan can elicit a confession from his patient, the pain will be immediately eased and the lost soul will sense this. It may be enough for the soul to know that it will no longer be subjected to the distress caused by guilt and personal shame, and so it may return.

Other times, knowing the sins of his patient enables the Houngan to intervene on her behalf in order to make amends. It may be, for example, that the person is being punished by one of the loa because of her behavior toward another person who is the "child" of that loa. If this is the case the Houngan may ask the spirit for his or her forgiveness of his patient's transgressions and ask what may be done to atone for them.

If the loa is willing to accept atonement, a demand will be made of the patient that must be honored. Often this will be very practical in nature. The person may be told, for example, to return something she has stolen or to prepare a family feast in order to reconcile a feud. Once the penance is done the pain of the soul will be eased.

If the patient is being punished because he has broken one of the taboos of his own *met tete*, he must also make amends for this unacceptable behavior. Some crimes are harder to atone for than others. Breaking the oath of secrecy that all Houngans take when they initiate into Vodou is a crime often punishable by death. Mambo Racine tells how one of her initiates, Emile, seemed to know a little too much about what would happen in the *djevo* before he even stepped inside it. Upon questioning him, Racine discovered that a previous initiate, Pierre, had gotten drunk and told Emile all that he would encounter during his ceremonies. This exposed both the informant and Emile to danger.

Hearing what had happened, Racine rushed to Pierre's house to intervene on his behalf with the angry loa. She was too late, however. Pierre was already dead, having been struck by a car that very day.

Emile was luckier, as it was not he who had broken the taboo but had listened to the secrets. By going through his initiation and making his commitment to the loa he was able to atone for his lesser crime.

Confession and atonement in Vodou, as in many traditional spiritualities, is far from a token gesture. So important is it to discover what sins have been committed that should the patient be too ashamed to admit them, it is not unknown for the shaman to beat a confession out of him—a procedure no doubt learned from the Catholic Church (via the French slave owners on Haiti), which from the fourth century A.D. decreed that flagellation was the most effective form of penance, and by the fourteenth century regarded it as the only way to salvation for the soul.

We must make a distinction between Western confession and that practiced in Haiti and in other traditional cultures, however. In Western practice it is the sins of the flesh—sex—that are most condemned—a result, no doubt, of our repressive view of physicality that stems from the concept of original sin, wherein Eve chose the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge over that of the Tree of Eternal Life in the Garden of Eden. (And who could blame her—apart from the Christian God, who, by definition, was the original tempter? I am sure that most of us would rather live our lives consciously and with free will than live for eternity as mindless zombies.)

Much of what the Western world today considers sinful/sexual, however, has little to do with scripture. Instead the list of sexual sins, which guides our Christian confessors, was invented by the fathers of the Church in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. These Holy Fathers used religious arguments as a spur for their own celibacy, in order to repress their own sexual longings and, through their edicts, to establish political control of their followers. Even Saint Augustine (A.D. 354–430), who first linked sin with the pleasures of the flesh, knew where to draw the line in a way the fathers of the Church did not. “Give me chastity,” he is recorded as saying, “but not yet!”

Notwithstanding the sexual-political reasons for identifying sin predominantly with the flesh, the Catholic Church certainly recognized the Power of confession for restoring the soul. James, in the New Testament, recommends that if you are ill or dispirited you should first “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, and you

shall be healed." Augustine himself advised those suffering from disease to "admit the healing hand, make your confession."

In most traditional societies, which tend to have fewer hang-ups over the physical body and innate sexuality, confession is still recognized as an essential means of restoring the soul, though the reasons for confessing go far beyond the realms of sexual concourse. In Polynesia, for example, it is understood that as a result of betrayals or aggression within the family unit, family spirits may come back from the dead to settle these disputes by bringing illness and discord. They may be returned to their slumber only by burning basil to purify errant family members, and in addition the family must give a group confession of sins to the medicine man, who will also require their forgiveness, one by one, of all family members who have sinned against them. This model, reminiscent of that used in Haiti, recognizes that sin may cover a multitude of crimes and actions, not just those of a sexual nature, and that each one must be expunged in order for the soul to release its weight and find peace.

When the penitent finally confesses, depending on the severity of the crime, the punishment in traditional societies can sometimes be severe, reflecting the importance of soul cleansing and the repercussions of the transgression itself. In Haiti the loa may demand the sacrifice of a bull or the gift of a goat to the person who has been wronged. To the poor of Haiti this may be equivalent to half a year's wages. These steps are necessary if the person who has sinned (the *vedite*—"earthworm"—in Creole) is to escape the far greater pain of life without a soul.

Confession in the West can often seem meaningless and formulaic by contrast, and the atonement trivial and slight—a few Hail Marys or Our Fathers. But done properly and with genuine remorse, the principle itself is not to be underestimated as a means of soothing the soul.

It is also true that we may often carry shame for our past behavior, or for acts we believe we are guilty of, even if these acts are not actually our fault. We may carry the weight of a failed marriage, for example, even though both parties were equally to blame. People who have been abused by others more Powerful than they may also carry shame, assuming at an unconscious level that they must somehow have encouraged or caused the abuse.



Such guilt can come to drive our lives. Author John Perkins, in his book *The Spirit of the Shuar*, tells how the shame of his involvement with the World Bank and the United Nations, which led to the destruction of large tracts of Amazon rain forest, drove him for three decades to work for the protection of the Amazon and its people through an organization he set up called the Dream Change Coalition.<sup>5</sup> Through this John was able to atone for his perceived crime and to create something of value for the world.

In other cases people are less able to heal themselves of their transgressions, and these energies can develop into serious illnesses. One of Freud's early patients was a woman called Anna O, who suffered paralysis of her arm, with no physical reason for this ailment. Anna, a young woman, had wanted to go out and experience the world and enjoy her life, but had put her ambitions on hold while she cared for her sick father. Her unconscious resentments had built up until, exhausted and dispirited one night, she had sat by her father's bedside and in a vision saw a poisonous black snake slithering across the bed toward him, preparing itself for a deadly strike. Anna had tried to reach for the snake in order to protect her father, but because she unconsciously wanted him dead so she could have her own life back, she had found herself unable to move her arm. Her repressed resentment toward her father had created a physical paralysis in her body, which had been maintained by Anna's shame at her own feelings; she punished herself for her "evil thoughts."

Remarkably, as she told her therapist what had happened, the paralysis left her and her arm returned to normal. Such is the Power of confession.

Sometimes, though, the shame is not our own; it does not belong to us. We merely believe it does, or have been tricked by others into accepting the blame for their own actions. In this case we need to be able to let it go. Talking about it can often be the hardest part, but it is the most essential step in releasing this unwarranted self-blame.

This was the case with Chloe, a client of mine who carried the shame for "destroying" her mother's life. Her mother had Chloe young, at the age of seventeen, and her boyfriend had left her soon after that. Abandoned and with a baby, Chloe's mother had felt that her life was

over and had blamed her child for that. Chloe, of course, was too young to have any other interpretation of the events and had simply assumed that her mother was right—she had destroyed her mother's life—and had carried this guilt ever since.

The healing for Chloe came with a journey back in time to the weeks before her birth, when she was able to see quite clearly the dynamics that already existed between her parents. Through this she realized that her father was always going to leave her mother because the woman was too needy and he was too irresponsible for them to stay together as a couple. It was this combination—and not Chloe's birth—that had “ruined” her mother's life.

In fact, looking more closely, it was plain that Chloe's mother's life had not been ruined. She had raised Chloe with the support of her own parents, who had given her all that she needed as a young mother, until she met and married someone else. She had then lived quite happily with her new partner, Chloe, and the other children the couple subsequently had.

The “destroyed life” myth is a common one in families in which one or both parents feel they have not achieved all they could before settling down. But that is their own fault, their choice, and not their child's.

Once the healer understands what has truly happened—that the immoral behavior was not of his client's doing—she will know that what is really required is a healing to return the soul that has been lost through the behavior of others (see below).

When I teach confession in the workshops I run, it often takes participants by surprise that something so seemingly simple can be so profoundly healing. The technique turns out to be the most Powerful experience of the weekend for many people, who are finally freed from the weight of their guilt as they speak to a workshop partner who will not judge them and who maintains a loving and supportive demeanor no matter what is said.

The technique does seem simple, but it is actually extremely Powerful. Certainly, such release is good for the soul.

## 2. **Zombification: A Soul Lost Through Immoral Actions of Others**

The experiences of a soul lost through abuse are of pain and fear. The soul part has left because it could no longer bear the agony it had been subjected to. Like a child in the darkness hiding under the bed sheets from monsters, the soul finds a shield for itself in the otherworld. As with the child, however, hiding does not make the monsters go away, and so the physical abuse may continue on a day-to-day basis—but the soul is no longer present to experience the pain.

In these circumstances the Houngan will begin by re-empowering his client, in the way previously described (see last chapter), in order to strengthen her energy body and her spirit. If he does not do so, the soul he returns for her will simply leak away once more from an energy body so wounded that it is shredded and full of holes.

Having re-empowered her, the healer must then journey to the middle world to meet with the missing soul. The Houngan knows that the soul will not have wandered far from the physical community, and he also understands the affinity of human souls for trees and water, and this is where he will begin his search.

Calling on his own loa to assist him, the Houngan will allow his body to become entranced, ridden by the spirits, and will then journey out into the *lakou*, the village community where his client lives, and search for the missing soul. When he finds it he must deal with it kindly, for it will often be fearful, tearful, and confused. That is why it left in the first place. The Houngan must therefore be sensitive, gentle, understanding, and firm. Parental, in a word. Explaining what has happened to the missing soul, he will tell it that its owner is longing for its return and is now more Powerful and able to resist the attacks from others that caused the soul so much pain. He will then ask the soul to return with him.

Sometimes it is willing to do so, sometimes not. If it is, the Houngan will gather it in his arms and carry it back to his patient, where he will blow it back into her energy body, just as we did in our earlier Power retrieval.

If it will not return willingly the Houngan will ask what the soul needs in order to feel protected and cared for. He may then need to go back to his client and advise her of life changes she must make in order

for the soul to return. The client may have to enact these changes before the soul retrieval can continue, but sometimes a promise to make changes is enough to reassure the lost soul and it will return with the Houngan at this stage.

The patient may have been advised to leave her abusive husband, to appease her attacker (in situations where her own behavior has unwittingly provoked the attack), or to fight back and reclaim her Ashe. These life changes must be made or the soul will simply leave again. The patient may request the Houngan to help her create these changes, perhaps by sending an expedition mort against her aggressor so that his Ashe is weakened. It is a matter of personal conscience for the healer whether he is prepared to agree to this request. But certainly, the current circumstances of the client's life must change if long-term healing is to take place.

### **3. Seiziman: A Soul Lost Through Shock**

Sometimes we can be so scared or traumatized by an event that we literally jump out of our skins, as we say in the West. In Haiti this condition is known as *seiziman*. It is a state of such severe shock to the system that it causes physical and emotional pain. It is the agony experienced by a wife who is told that her husband is dead, the sense of hurt and disbelief we feel when we discover that our partners have been unfaithful or are leaving us for another, the stunned sensation that follows a physical accident such as a car crash.

In all of these circumstances the soul leaves the body in temporary shock. Often it does not leave us completely, but steps outside our skin until the physical body recovers from the shock and pain of the event. When we are able to gather our senses again we automatically begin to draw our spirit back into us. Sometimes, however, we need a little help with this before we can reenergize ourselves and then get on with our lives.

From the consultation with his client the Houngan will know if the soul loss is a temporary state of affairs where the soul is still attached to the human body and is simply taking its time to find a way back. He may also be able to see the disembodied soul, which appears like a luminous shadow of the physical self, attached to the body via a cord of energy.

Cases of *seiziman* are less extreme forms of soul loss and therefore

demand less extreme forms of healing intervention. Nevertheless, there is still some urgency for healing to take place, as the cord that holds the soul to the body can be broken or eroded over time and the spirit-self can then drift away and become lost completely. This rarely happens overnight. One of my clients had suffered soul loss in this way and was feeling drained, listless, and unable to work. In his case it had taken five years for the soul's attachment to the body to be completely broken. Nonetheless, all the time the soul remains outside the body, the less energy the client will have and the more danger there is of profound soul loss. The Houngan's job, then, is to help the soul ease itself back into the physical body.

This is accomplished, typically, by making the client's physical body the most attractive and comfortable place for the soul to be. In a word, healing takes place through pampering. The client may be massaged, treated to a healing bath with lots of sweet-smelling flowers and herbs, or a short ceremony may be performed for him, during which he will be reassured that he is loved and admired by the community, who want him back as one of their most important members.

Translated into Western healing methods, this may equate with giving the client a massage with sweet-smelling oils, allowing him to talk through his problems, giving him reiki or reflexology, and so on, all of it designed to relax him so that the soul feels comforted and welcomed home.

This is also akin to our practice of offering "tea and sympathy" to friends, or taking flowers and small food treats to people in hospital. In orthodox medicine, it equates to the sympathetic bedside manner of our physicians, or the safe space provided by a therapist who allows her patient to talk out his problems.

The Houngan will know that the soul is home by the return of color in his client's cheeks, by his lighter step, the sparkle in his eyes, and by what he says. If the Houngan is at all concerned that the soul has not returned, then he may undertake one of the more forceful healings described previously, and particularly may journey into the otherworld to escort the soul home with him. Normally, this is not necessary in cases of shock, where deliberate abuse is not the root cause.

### SUMMARY OF SOUL RETRIEVAL

Before attempting soul retrieval, the Houngan completes any necessary Power retrieval to create a safe, clean space that the delicate soul can return to. He will give the client time to allow this energy to settle back into his system before beginning the soul retrieval. Then, if soul retrieval is indicated, the Houngan uses his discussions with the client and his consultations with spirit to decide if the soul parts have been lost through:

1. **Guilt the client is carrying for actions he has committed and is ashamed of.** If so, the Houngan helps the client talk through these actions ("confess"), then journeys to his spirit advisors to find a way that the client can make amends for his behavior. When the Houngan presents this information to the client, he makes sure to do so in a nonjudgmental way so that he will not reinforce the guilt the client already feels. If the client is carrying guilt that does not rightfully belong to him because it actually stems from the actions of others, the Houngan helps the client to see the truth of the situation and then performs a soul retrieval for him, as indicated in number 2 below.
2. **Soul theft or zombification—the loss of soul through the immoral actions of others.** If this is the case, the Houngan journeys to his spirit allies and asks for their assistance in locating his client's missing soul parts, which are lost in the middle world. He begins his search at the moment and in the place that he senses, from what his client has told him, the damage was done—the town, street, or house the client lived in when the abuse first took place; the age he was at the time, and the year or month when the incident happened. This is the moment at which the soul was lost. If the Houngan does not find the soul part there, he looks around himself for trees and then for water, both common places for finding missing souls. When he finds the lost soul, he explains to it what has happened and encourages it to return with him. The Houngan blows this soul fragment into the energy body of his client, then rattles around the client's body to seal in the energy.

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3. **Seiziman—intense acute shock or fear.** If this is the cause of soul loss, the soul part will not be far away. The best way to recover it is for the Houngan to comfort and relax his client so that the soul finds it desirable to reenter the client's body. The Houngan may sing gently to the client as he offers her a relaxing massage, for example. Like singing a lullaby to a child, this is a very simple, beautiful form of ceremony. The soul finds it comforting and will follow the song back home.

When the soul retrieval is complete, the Houngan makes offerings at the altar and closes the sacred space in the usual way.

Healing is one of the most beautiful parts of Vodou, and it is always inspiring to watch a client recover from a condition she did not think it possible to emerge from whole, and to make changes in her life that could only have come from the new sense of Power that she feels. It is a joy, as well, when these clients contact you, often weeks later, to tell you of their progress and the new enthusiasm they have for life. You must always remember, though, that the healer is merely a channel for the spirits, and it is actually the loa and the client who work together to create healing.

To use these techniques of healing effectively on others, we need to know how they feel and what exactly takes place for the client during a Power or soul retrieval or during extraction work. We cannot hope to heal someone else unless we know how the healing works from both sides, and unless we are whole ourselves. The exercises that follow will give you a sense of this wholeness by allowing you to practice healing techniques on yourself.



#### THE VODOU LESSONS: 6 MAKING YOURSELF WHOLE

It is not just clients who carry pain; we all do. Every one of us has been wounded at some point in our lives, whether this was emotional hurt, physical trauma, mental anguish, stress, or the yearning for spirit that

stems from our separation from the natural world and the community of like-minded souls.

To be effective healers we need to know such wounds, or we cannot identify and empathize with the experiences of our clients. At the same time we must have passed through this pain and found an answer to it that, at some level, works for us, so we are as balanced and whole as we can be. This also makes us able to lead others toward wholeness along the routes to recovery that we have taken.

As Eliade reminds us, the spiritual healer is "a sick man who has been cured, who has succeeded in curing himself." Once he has achieved this he is able to help others because he knows "the mechanism, or rather, the theory of illness."<sup>6</sup>

Such knowledge requires mindfulness. Even when she is suffering, the healer will be learning from her pain so she understands how it manifests, the course it takes through the body, the way it feels at each stage, and, finally, how it can be healed. Illness is a "theory" because, in a sense, it does not exist. It is our reaction to an event, our attachment to it, or our affinity for the energy it creates, that actually causes disease, not the event itself. A terminal illness is only terminal if we allow it to be so, if we agree that its spirit has more Ashe than we do. There are many examples of people who have defeated cancers, viruses, and debilitating diseases because they believed otherwise.

We also need personal familiarity with the Houngan's techniques of healing in order to use them effectively, so that we know how they feel and what impact they have on our clients. We then become adept at using those techniques and understand how to counsel the people who come to us, because we know what they may experience during and after their healing.

These exercises offer you the opportunity to gain familiarity with the healing techniques of Vodou and to use them positively for your own self-healing.

### **Confession**

Confession is good for the soul. It enables you to acknowledge the wrongs you have done to others, to express your remorse, and to remove this unhelpful energy from your body.



We have all done wrong at some point. I know there are many things I regret. Wrong in somebody else's terms is not important to me. Everyone has their own idea of how they like to be treated and what is right or wrong to them. If they have more Ashe than us they may try to force these views upon us and have us act toward them in one particular way: their way.

Such force is institutionalized in the legal system, but there are other subtler power plays going on around us too. It is not enough to be the best and fastest worker, for example, to do more than you are contracted for, to take work home with you; nowadays it is expected that you will also be present in the office well beyond the hours you are paid for. Workers call it "face time"; the additional hours they must sit at their desks so that their faces can be seen by the boss, whether or not they are actually working. One of my clients, a lawyer, told me about the "macho hours" of her profession, in which an eighty-hour work week, much of it unproductive face time, was expected by her bosses. This was the right attitude in their terms, even though these hours and the stress that came with them were making their employees tired and ill and less effective. Quantity, not quality, was the important thing.

Workplace and social conventions like these are someone else's idea of right and wrong (if they have thought about it at all). These do not interest me. I know when I have done wrong because I feel it deep in my soul and in my gut. These are the acts I regret.

Holding on to this shame and the energy it creates will lead to illness as we punish ourselves internally for the guilt we feel. Speaking about and externalizing our pain allows the energy body to realign itself naturally so we can be healthy again.

We do not always have a healer or even a friend we can confess to, but this is less important; we, as well as the loa, can be our own witnesses, and knowing the scale of our "crime," we also know the penance we must serve in order to be well.

This confession ritual is very easy to perform. All you need is string, approximately twelve to eighteen inches in length, and a fireproof container.

Open sacred space at your altar in the usual way and ask that the loa take away the pain of your guilt and suggest an appropriate means of making amends.

Take the string in your hands and begin to speak aloud your sins against others, or against yourself if you feel you have also let yourself down somehow. As you name each sin make a knot in the string, and before you draw it tight, focus on getting out of you all the negative energies associated with that event. Weep if you want to—this is between you and the loa (who already know what you have done); no one else can see you—so you can be as honest in words and emotions as you need to be. Offer the shame of your sins to the loa so they may transmute its energy and use it for their positive work on Earth. Then bind each of your sins into the string by pulling the knot tight.

Do this three times, even if there are more things you wish to confess; you can always repeat this ritual at another time. Then place the string in the container and set fire to it. Watch it as it burns and see the energy of your actions being returned to the universe, where it can do good for others.

Be aware of any thoughts or feelings that come to you about how you might make amends to the person you have hurt. If you possibly can, do what is asked of you to make things right, with this single proviso: *Do nothing that might cause further harm to another person or to yourself.*

### Retrieving the Soul Through Warriorship

Vodou is a shamanic tradition that has evolved from the warrior arts of Africa, and there are times when this warriorship, the use of Power, is necessary in order to repair the hurts of the past.

We have all experienced shock and pain as a result of the behavior of others toward us. In those moments part of our souls is lost as it takes flight from the body to escape further harm. We must retrieve these soul fragments in order to be whole and effective healers. We must do the work ourselves.

Think back to an event in your life when you know that damage was done to your soul. You may have experienced this as an empty pain in your solar plexus, as a feeling of disconnection and weakness, or a sensation of not being fully present some time after or during the event itself. This is the event we will heal.

Perhaps this took place many years ago; perhaps it was only yester-

day. Whenever it was, a younger you suffered. You are now older, wiser, more resourceful, and more Powerful. You are stronger than the soul part that left you and able to be your own warrior in facing the challenges that your younger self could not deal with.

Journey, in the usual way, into the middle world with the intention of finding that part of yourself that was lost through earlier trauma. Remember the Houngan's technique of looking first in the community. In your case this will be the location you were at or the place you were living when the incident happened. If you do not find the soul part immediately begin to make a spiral out from this place, looking for trees and for water as you search the whole environment.

The missing soul will normally have the appearance of a younger you, at the age you were when this energy was lost to you. If it looks even younger than you remember this is because the event you have in mind actually stems from an earlier incident when the energetic pattern was set up that eventually led to your hurt. If it looks older than you expected it is because the event itself was not the moment when the soul left; it was actually lost at a later time, when the full effects of this incident were felt by your energy body. Whatever the age of the soul part and however it appears to you, this is the part to work with and the energy you most need to recover at this time in your life.

Approach the lost soul and talk to it. Explain what has happened to it and tell it you love it and want it to return with you, but there are a number of trials you must face together first. If you can complete these tasks the pain of the past will be released as the energy surrounding the soul is diffused, and you will be able to return together.

The first of these challenges is an act of pure faith: crossing the invisible Earth. See before you a deep and wide ravine that you must both safely cross in order to continue your quest for wholeness. There is no bridge to help you, no visible way of crossing this great divide, and yet you know it must be done. When you are ready to do so, step out into the empty air, and trust—without an atom of doubt—that the loa will provide a way for you.

As you step out the miraculous seems to take place, and you find that there is an invisible bridge beneath you. Looking down, you see that this is a bridge of rock and earth that blends so perfectly with its

surroundings and the ground far beneath you that it is no wonder you missed it when you first looked. And yet it was there all along. All you needed to do was trust. You must cross this bridge together now if the soul is to be returned. You still have a choice of whether to accept this challenge or turn away. If you accept, you must help the soul to cross first, following behind as its guardian.

Your second challenge is to walk the cinder path of knowledge. Before you is a path of flame and hot coals, the only path to walk between walls of fire that burn all around you. The heat is searing and the flames singe your hair and face, but you know you will survive and pass through it safely as long as you both stay on the same narrow path. In order to keep to the path you must focus and not be distracted by the falling fire and tongues of flame. Lead the soul part safely through to the other side.

Your third challenge is to cross the dark waters. Before you is a vast lake, its waters black and ice-cold. As you step into the lake your blood is chilled and your body numb, yet you must remain determined that you both will cross. Your destination is a tiny island far in the distance. Your task now is to lead the soul safely through these treacherous waters to the island ahead of you.

Your fourth challenge awaits you on this island. As you land a great wind sweeps toward you, lifting all in its path. Your first instinct is to run, but something within you knows that the only way to survive is to stay calm and relaxed. If you resist the wind will crush you and tear you both apart; if you relax you will be able to bend with the wind and remain unharmed. Stay calm and allow the wind to lift and take both of you where it will.

Finally, you are set gently back to Earth. What faces you now is your fifth and final challenge. You are back in the situation that caused the original trauma. This is the event that your soul left to escape. As tired as you both are, you are still warriors and you have a code of honor to defend. Your enemy stands in front of you and must be defeated if you are to return victorious.

Soul parts may leave for many reasons—the physical pain of a beating, the emotional pain of divorce, an act of betrayal by a lover, the mental anguish caused by continual pressures, the spiritual pain of a

...of faith. Whatever  
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loss of faith. Whatever the reason in your case, the event must be dealt with.

Your job is to act as guardian and protector of the lost soul, but it is the soul itself that must deal with this situation. With you as an ally it must go back to this original scene, and using your combined strengths, do battle with and defeat the perpetrator of this disempowering event. Offer as much support and assistance as you need to from the empowered perspective of someone older, wiser, and more resourceful, who has already lived through this event and survived to become more Powerful as a consequence.

If your enemy is still too strong for you, call upon the loa to intervene on your behalf. They are also your resources now, and cannot be defeated by a human enemy, no matter how strong. You really cannot lose.

When the battle is over, return with the soul the way you came, and as you stand safely once again before the deep ravine of the invisible Earth, embrace each other. You have been through a mythical challenge and an adventure together and are now inseparably one once again.

Return to ordinary reality when you are ready, knowing that you now have this Ashe back.<sup>7</sup>

This technique is interesting from both a spiritual and a psychological perspective. Notice that all of the elements—Earth, Fire, Water, and Wind—play a role in your journey. As you pass through each of these you accept the healing gifts they have to offer. You are grounded by the Earth, purified by Fire, washed clean by the Water, and lifted by the Wind. You are strengthened by these forces with every step you take along the path to your final challenge.

At the same time you invoke the Ashe and blessings of the loa, as particular loa are associated with these elements: Earth with Baron, the loa who symbolizes death to the old and regeneration of a new life; Fire with Ogoun, the warrior, whose Power you are reborn into; Water with Erzulie, who brings you the Ashe of Love; Air with Sobó, the spirit of the heavens, where you are finally accepted.

Psychologically, you are reintegrating the lost soul at every step of the way, for you actually work together to bring the soul home. You are also able to use the inner resources of the older you, who can look at

the hurtful events of the past with a sense of detachment and objectivity, so that you can see it for what it really was, rather than the terrifying, monumental catastrophe it appeared to be to your younger self.

In helping your younger self to face its challenges and to heal, you also learn compassion, understanding, and love for yourself, as you were then and as you are now, which many people who have been hurt or abused find so very difficult. In agreeing to face these challenges with you, the soul part itself is also stating its intention to return with you and remain a part of you and forever become part of your shared energy system.

For these reasons this is a very Powerful method of soul healing. My workshop participants, some of whom have years of experience as healers, often find that it is the most Powerful healing they have undertaken. Be gentle on yourself for the next few days after this healing, and allow yourself two or three weeks before attempting any of the other exercises in this book.

### **Forgiveness and Humility**

When you emerge from the djevo as a newborn there are still two essential trials you must perform.

The first of these is to go, dressed in your priestly garb, into the Marketplace and literally and symbolically beg for money. This is an exercise in humility so that the priest does not get above his station and remembers at all times that he is here to serve the people.

There is a lesson in this for all healers. Many people new to spirituality and healing can become enamored with their own sense of Power. They assume it is they who do the healing and they who therefore have a hot line to god. This is not the proper department for a priest or a healer. Compassion, empathy, and an earnest desire to help one's clients are required. In Vodou the Houngan always takes the lowest chair in any room to remind him of his humbleness and his closeness to the earth.

Such humility does not mean you have to work for nothing and give everything away, of course. There must always be an exchange of some kind between healer and client if the healing is to work, for your client must also invest in his own recovery. This is empowering for him. If the

healer does all the work, she is not engaging her client in the healing process; in fact, she may be further disempowering the client by removing the need for him to help himself. The healer thereby defines the client as a helpless victim and herself as the rescuer, but it is really the client's own inner resources that need to be mobilized and energized.

Whatever fee you set for your work is up to you. The exercise in begging, however, taught me that asking for donations is preferable to setting a monetary value on the work. After all, how can you say that some people are more or less deserving of your healing solely as a result of their finances?

The second trial you must face is, for many, the hardest of all, and is also an exercise in humility.

Because you have been reborn into the world with a clean slate, you must put away the past entirely and ensure that the slate is truly wiped clean. For this reason you are required to make a list of all the people who have hurt you in the past and write a letter of forgiveness to each one.

It can be very demanding and a great act of will to forgive all those who you know have done wrong to you and caused problems and pain in your life. Approach the exercise humbly, however, and take comfort in the fact that this is not just about healing them; it is also about healing you and freeing yourself from their hold.

Whenever we attach ourselves to events from the past, some of our energy remains there and we find it hard to move forward. Houngans perceive the energy body as comprised of veins of light (*ven-yo*), strands of luminous energy that wrap around us like thread. When we become attached to people or things we do so literally, with our luminous fibers entangling themselves with other people's so that we become energetically entwined. In moments of great hurt these fibers are ripped from our bodies and are absorbed by the people who have caused us pain. We are left with holes in our soul, and we are then vulnerable to spiritual attacks and to illness.

The way to recover these energy fibers can be as simple as forgiving someone for their actions. In this way we cease to be attached to the event that binds us to them (and them to us) and we no longer waste our energy remembering things that have happened to us years ago. We

stop dwelling on the past and start living in the now.

As difficult as this may be for you, sit down now and make a list of all the people in your life who have wronged you in some way. Then write a letter to each one, recounting what was done, how that made you feel, and the impact it has had on your life since then.

As you think about it, you may find that some of these effects were quite positive. Perhaps you were able to learn new survival skills, to see yourself in a different light, to uncover resources you did not know you had, or to better understand others as a consequence of this event. If so, thank the person for the lessons you have also been able to learn. At the end of your letter simply write, *And I forgive you.*

What you choose to do with this letter is up to you. If you wish you may post it to the person. If not, burn it, just as you did in the confessional exercise. What is important is that you get the event out of your system so the energy you have invested in it is returned to you and you are freed from the past to face the future, renewed.



Here is a Haitian story:



*Bouki was ploughing his field one day, tilling the barren soil with his ancient mules and wooden hoe, when his blade hit metal. It was gold, hidden by the Spanish during their occupancy of the land.*

*Bouki would be rich! But instead of rushing to a bank he began running to the house of his friend Ti Malice, to share his wealth with him. Ti Malice will be so pleased, thought Bouki. I know that he likes money because he already has so much of it.*

*But Ti Malice had already heard the news, carried by the wind, of Bouki's fortune, and hid in the forest to intercept his friend. As Bouki passed by, Ti Malice stepped from behind a tree, disguised as a spirit of Nature. "Bouki," he said, "leave your sack of gold here, hanging from the branches of this tree, and I will protect it for you. Then walk on for another two miles and you will come*

...well. In it there are two  
...able to give your friend  
...Bouki wanted to help Ti  
...When he came to the  
...and when he return  
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"Oh no, what of my fr  
...money." Bouki wept.  
But Ti Malice was alrea

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to a well. In it there are two bags of gold. You will be twice as rich and able to give your friend Ti Malice even more of your money!"

Bouki wanted to help Ti Malice and so did as the Nature spirit asked. When he came to the well, though, he saw that there was no gold, and when he returned to the tree, found that his sack had been stolen.

"Oh no, what of my friend, Ti Malice? Now I cannot give him any money." Bouki wept.

But Ti Malice was already rich with Bouki's money. . . .



There are many Haitian stories about Bouki and Ti Malice, all of which concern the same themes of generosity, betrayal, love, and hurt. But they are never quite as simple and obvious as they seem; in fact, many of them have an almost Zen-like quality that invites us to look closer and question what is going on here.

If I tell you, for example, that in this story Ti Malice's behavior was actually an act of goodness and generosity toward Bouki, this may well surprise you. But there are at least three ways in which Ti Malice expressed his love for Bouki by taking his gold.

This is the importance of forgiveness. Because at first sight we often do not know or appreciate the real motives of those who have hurt us, and so we end up creating and living a myth from which our true pain often stems. The real truth, meanwhile, is that you often do not know the full picture or the true motivations involved. If you look again at the text above, can you discover for yourself three ways in which Ti Malice performed an act of kindness for his friend?

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*Say not, I have found the truth, but rather,  
I have found a truth  
Say not, I have found the path of the soul  
Say rather, I have met the soul walking  
upon my path  
For the soul walks upon all paths  
The soul walks not upon a line, neither  
does it grow like a reed  
The soul unfolds itself, like a lotus of  
countless petals*

—KAHLIL GIBRAN

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# DREAMING

## THE NEW WORLD

Changing Your Faith,  
Healing Your World

*Nago pa piti*

*Nou pe pale Nago mal Nago . . .*



Nago [the people of Africa and their  
vision] is not small [weak]

Yet still you speak badly of Nago . . .

—VODOU SONG THAT STATES THE

IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING FAITH IN ONESELF



*It is the last night of the initiations. We have been in this djevo for the best part of a week. Thirteen of us. Five priests-to-be, the armed men who guard us with machetes day and night, as much to stop us leaving as to prevent others entering, and the Houngans and Mambos who have been teaching us.*

*Yesterday, late in the evening, we had a visit from Ogoun, who possessed one of the Houngans. He was extremely agitated.*

Racine seemed to think it was because he was excited that our initiations were nearing their end and five new priests would be made, but he didn't seem that happy to me.

The first thing he did was reach for his machete and start swinging it wildly round the room. Thirteen of us crammed into a space no larger than a garden shed, and a wild man swinging a machete at head height. Then at that precise moment, every candle in the djevo blew out, though there was no breeze that night. I think we all hugged the ground at the same time. I lay there for what felt like hours as chaos reigned for an eternity of three or four minutes, listening to the voices in the dark, the screams of Ogoun, and the sound of the machete hitting wood and stone, while Racine tried to relight the candles.

Then the other loa turned up—Erzulie, Dambala, Baron, La Sirene, others I can't even remember, there were so many—all of them chattering and laughing in the half-light. This must be what Bedlam sounded like, I thought. They stayed for hours. Maybe Racine was right and they were just excited about their new priests. Nobody got much sleep.

Today was better—until now. Tonight is the brule zen ceremony, the final test for initiates, where we will be taken out in front of the entire community and have to prove our mastery over fire. Many shamanic traditions equate Power over fire with the Power of the spirit. I imagine it has something to do with passion and the ability to control the ecstatic. In Vodou they take it literally.

Three metal pots of boiling oil are lined up out there, all of them aflame. At the bottom of each one is a small wafer of corn. All we have to do is take out the corn and show the people we have done so. Simple enough if we don't get fried. I can see the flames through the one small window in the djevo. The window is twelve feet off the ground.

I decided some time ago that I didn't want my consciousness anywhere near my body when my hand goes into that pot of oil, and I have been dancing and singing myself into trance for the last hour. They call it shape-shifting; transformation into a different life form. In my case, one braver, stronger, and more resilient to

*pain than I am. Ricardo tells me later that I look nothing like me and am growling and snarling as I dance. Fine—nothing like me is exactly what I want.*

*It is time now. The drums kick in and there are screams from the people. Yabofe enters, grabs me by the arms, and blindfolds me again. Then he leads me out. Like a slave, I think, being taken out to face some punishment, with only a deep faith in his protective spirits to keep him safe from pain.*

*I feel the night air on my face and the heat from the flames. The sound of the people. The smell of incense and palms. Yabofe takes my hand and plunges it into the oil. I feel the heat, but it does not burn. There is no pain.*

—HAITIAN JOURNALS, JANUARY 2000



The brule zen is one of the most important ceremonies in Vodou, not just for the initiate, but for the entire community. It is proof for them of the reality of the loa and the Power of the priest, and it reaffirms that the spirits are watching over them all. If the loa can keep the initiate safe from the pain of boiling oil and twelve-foot flames, the people know they will also be protected during the smaller trials of daily life. This is a great healing for them. It means they are not alone in the universe, but at the heart of a moral code that ties them to the Infinite and the Love of God for His or Her children.

In taking part in the brule zen ceremony the initiate gives herself totally in a single act of faith and Power, the trust in a healing and compassionate universe. The initiate does not need to understand the spirits intellectually or to define them in any way; she simply has to believe that they will protect her. Whether the spirits are real or whether she imagines their existence and the Power really comes from within does not concern her at all.

By putting her hand into the fire, the initiate is simply acknowledging what is; that there is a world beyond ours and a new way of being in which there is Power, if we choose it. In this way it is also an act of healing on a personal and communal scale.

Healing is about far more than helping the patient in front of you. In its widest, most idealistic sense, it is about preventing illness by healing the causes of disease so that people never have to suffer in the first place.

Long ago in Chinese medicine, healers were paid by their patients for every day they did *not* fall ill. The healer's job was to keep them well, instead of treating their ailments. If the people became ill the healer would treat them free of charge, no matter how long it took or how much it cost him. Only when they recovered would they start to pay him again.

This is the ideal of healing in Vodou. Without treating the cause of disease, you may well help a client to cast out the spirit of her illness, find her traumatized soul, and pump her full of Ashe, but you will then send her straight back home to the aggressive neighbor who is using magic against her to steal her lands, or the in-law who wants her dead. She will have no protection against further attacks. The real challenge is to change the mind of the aggressor so that the attack never happens. It never needs to.

The absolute root cause of all such attacks, and all illness, is our lack of connection to the spiritual world. When people have no sense of the Absolute, no belief in the moral standards the spirits have set for their children, there can be no honor in the world. We cannot subscribe to a moral code if we do not believe one exists; we cannot act spiritually if we do not believe in the spirits. And without these conditions there can never be true community based on mutual respect, in which people feel loved and wanted and cared for.

This is the situation we find ourselves in today in the Western world. Our cities can be the loneliest places, for here we live our lives isolated from true communion with others. Many of us live in these places only so we can hold down jobs, finding no real pleasure in the landscape or the people around us. And yet our work—the reason for this lifestyle—is often unsatisfying and, if we stopped to analyze it, ultimately meaningless. It is about selling home improvements to people who do not want to live in these homes, or selling the latest model of car capable of speeds of over 170 miles an hour to people who cannot drive faster than five miles an hour through our congested city streets. Where is the purpose, the payoff, the reward?

At the same time, our family structures have broken down and we no longer know an extended network of support from relatives and friends. Even among married couples, the smallest family unit, around half will eventually divorce.

On a bigger level our politicians use their power—the power we have given them, as our public servants—not to create positive change by bringing the world together, but to engender more fear and separation by whipping us all into a fervor of nationalism so they can wage war on other countries whom they accuse of terrorism, using exactly the same weapons and tactics of terror that they accuse these others of.

“We live in a steadily collapsing world,” Mambo Racine has written. “Unlike the natural human social structure, where a person knows perhaps 15 to 20 people with whom they pass their lives, humans are now grasping for relationships that endure . . . Above all, we are faced with the uneasy certitude that the physical world itself is collapsing, losing its ability to sustain our lives. Holes in the ozone, changes in the Gulf Stream, global warming, the mass destruction of the rainforests; all are catastrophic changes in the biosphere which supports our existence.”<sup>1</sup>

If we do not know community and our place within it, then we have no real respect for life—that of others or our own. And because we can see no alternative we carry on following the Western dream, where we take from others for the immediate gratification it brings us, the illusory sense of security that material things give in an insecure world.

“The U.S. standard of living is a bourgeois baby blanket for executives who scream in their sleep . . . Our fight is with those who would kill us through dumb work, insane wars, dull money morality,” as some of our revolutionary outsiders postulated as long ago as the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Things have changed very little in the last half century, including the reasons for the continuing battle we must face to unweave the Western Dream (or is it really a nightmare?) and the problems it brings us.

The notion that there is no alternative to this bourgeois worldview is itself an illusion. Who created the Western Dream, after all? Western dreamers—us! And we can change it as well, to one in which community and healing, compassion and love, are the guiding principles,

instead of the desire for new cars, executive lifestyles, and designer breakdowns.

Vodou, the religion of “uncivilized savages,” as the tabloid press tells us, at least has the sophistication to understand that healing the community (which, in the West, might even mean *finding* our community first) is vitally important if we are to halt the destruction of our world.

Vodou, the religion of the “dark arts” and “black magic,” at least has the light and goodness to try to heal the world, starting where it can by helping its own community to understand itself, to adhere to a moral code, and to remain healthy at an individual and collective level.

The many ceremonies of Vodou, including the *brule zen*, are always more than they seem. At a deep level they reaffirm the existence of a spiritual universe. We come to know that we are surrounded by living gods who care for us and demonstrate the preciousness and beauty of the world we share with them. If the gods care enough about humankind to protect and support our fragile existence, is it really asking too much that we do the same for ourselves?

The Houngan knows that the world is a dream and that we swim in a sea of energy. Our bodies and every solid thing around us are, after all, mostly energy. And because of this, the Houngan knows that we can change our dream tomorrow—or even right now—if we wish.

It doesn't much matter what you put faith in. It is the *act* of faith—the Power of your belief—that creates a world for you to live in. Energy responds to intention—even sub-atomic particles react according to the light in which they are seen, as our quantum scientists now tell us—and will take any form we wish.

What would it really take to end global warming? To decommission our nuclear weapons? To clean up our polluted rivers and forests? To redistribute the wealth of the world so that 90 percent of its riches are no longer in the hands of an elite 10 percent while the rest of the planet starves?

Only our *intention* to change things. It takes action by all of us, at an individual level, so that we all do what we can to dream a better world.

How long do we have in order to do so? It may not be very long.



According to many traditional cultures, such as the Maya and the Hopi, we are living in the End Times, and both predict the completion of a cycle of human history on December 21, 2012. This has been interpreted by some people as positive, signifying a change in consciousness as we enter a new era of beauty. Others are not quite so optimistic.

After consulting with the shamans of Colombia, Terence McKenna was inspired to investigate the I-Ching, the Chinese Book of Changes, an ancient divinatory tool for exploring the future. Applying a rigorous mathematical procedure to the sequences of numbers the I-Ching contains and then loading this into a specially developed computer program to analyze its predictions, McKenna found that a "timewave" emerged that correlated to every significant event in the four-and-a-half-billion-year history of the Earth.<sup>3</sup>

The timewave accurately predicts dramatic world events such as the extinction of the dinosaurs sixty-five million years ago, but also allows any part of our history to be investigated, in segments as small as ninety minutes.

The timewave correlates time and history precisely with the ebb and flow of what McKenna calls "novelty." A novel event, in human terms, is something new in history that changes our current way of thinking and behavior. It is, in effect, a new dream of the Earth, created by those who stand outside the majority mind-set. It need not be a wholly positive event, but it is always something that significantly changes the world so that life continues to adapt and evolve.

Such novelty is registered on the timewave as a peak, whereas a decline in novelty leads to a drop in the wave toward a historical trough where nothing significant has happened. In this way, the whole course of history can be charted, as well as projected into the future.

One of the most chilling aspects of the timewave is that it stops completely on December 21, 2012, corresponding exactly with the end of the current era in the Mayan calendar.

Some have argued that this suggests a suprahistorical event during which a completely new world order will arise so that our view of reality and our way of life will be radically transformed. A simpler explanation, however, is that the world just stops.

It is therefore with some urgency that I ask you to consider how

you might make a difference to the world by introducing novelty of your own, by acting outside the norm, and by doing what you can to change our thinking now, with actions that are healing and empowering for yourself and, through your new dream of the world, for others.

McKenna is not alone in some of his views. The Dalai Lama has also written, "The hour has come for us to demonstrate at the highest level our most extraordinary thought about *Who We Really Are* . . . If we want the beauty of the world that we have co-created to be experienced by our children and our children's children, we will have to become spiritual activists right here, right now, and cause that to happen. We must choose to be a cause in the matter."<sup>4</sup>

We must all become spiritual activists if we want a world that survives and can evolve toward perfection for our children and for future generations.

## THE SCIENCE OF SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM

Politicians will tell you it is impossible for things to change, for reasons of world diplomacy, the need to protect ourselves against foreign attack, the demands of the political and economic system. But all it really takes is an act of will.

After all, we created the world we now live in and the systems that regulate it. We created the very reasons we give for the impossibility of changing things! Is it really beyond our abilities to create something new, better, more novel—if we believe in it strongly enough?

The Western Dream, of course, is based on faith in science and, after all its ridiculing and demonization of tribal spirituality (especially Vodou), it is unlikely that the modern world will turn its back on science now in order to accept the views of "savages" and those like McKenna who associate with them.

Fine. It doesn't have to. Because even modern science now supports the idea of an energetic universe, and is starting to agree with these "primitive" spiritual beliefs.

Dr. John Hagelin is a world-renowned quantum physicist and winner of the Kilby Award, which recognizes him as "a scientist in the tradition of Einstein, Jeans, Bohr and Eddington." In a paper titled

Quantum Politics: Science  
 "Recent scientific breakthroughs  
 order in a single, unified  
 phenomena in the universe  
 living systems. It is just  
 the structure of his or her  
 within his or her mind  
 the universe."<sup>5</sup>  
 Beneath the scientific  
 the world that the Hour  
 —the same energy.  
 "We carry in our cells  
 the living universe.  
 We all have the Power  
 energy, this field, to change  
 and to create a world  
 not just the "enlightened  
 ability; it is all of us. A  
 higher states of consciousness  
 difficult, new research  
 of human consciousness  
 of balanced neuro-  
 by healing ourselves we  
 able to tune in to this  
 dream. Hagelin continues  
 for transforming consciousness  
 stress, violence and conflict  
 vision for permanent world  
 the unified field brings healing  
 remaining problems of civilization  
 "We are on the threshold  
 of affluence and  
 experience, of the universe  
 in this remarkable  
 and

"Quantum Politics: Science, Consciousness and the Future of Government," he writes:

"Recent scientific breakthroughs locate the source of nature's perfect order in a single, universal, 'unified field' at the basis of all forms and phenomena in the universe. This universal structure . . . is reflected in all living systems. It is precisely mirrored in the human physiology and in the structure of human consciousness. Every human being . . . carries within his or her mind and body the total organizing intelligence of the universe."<sup>5</sup>

Beneath the scientific terminology, what this amounts to is a vision of the world that the Houngan would recognize, wherein everything is energy—the same energy. It is this energy that creates the "unified field." We carry in our cells and between our atoms the consciousness of the living universe.

We all have the Power to apply this "organizing intelligence," this energy, this field, to change reality for ourselves and for the entire planet, and to create a world as healthy and as balanced as we wish. It is not just the "enlightened" few and great spiritual masters who have this ability; *it is all of us*. As Dr. Hagelin writes: "While the attainment of higher states of consciousness has historically been considered rare and difficult, new research reveals that 'enlightenment,' the full development of human consciousness, is our birth right—a spontaneous by-product of balanced neuro-physiological functioning."<sup>6</sup>

By healing ourselves we achieve balance in our lives, and are thereby more able to tune in to this energy and to work with it to change the social dream. Hagelin continues, "These field effects . . . provide a powerful tool for transforming collective consciousness, alleviating acute societal stress, violence and conflict, and thereby providing a practical foundation for permanent world peace . . . The practical application of . . . the unified field brings holistically positive effects, and can alleviate long-standing problems of crime, terrorism and war . . .

"We are on the threshold of a global transformation to . . . a new world order of affluence and peace based on the knowledge, and widespread experience, of the unity of life."<sup>7</sup>

What is this remarkable "unified field" that promises a future of such magnificence and wonder? It is simply the awareness and experience of

Oneness, the unity of life, bound together by the same energy shared by us all—the people, the spirits, the animal and plant worlds, the stars in the sky, and the Earth beneath us. A breakthrough for the scientific community this may be, but it comes as absolutely no surprise to the Houngans and shamans who have known of this Oneness for more than forty thousand years and have always lived by the code that all life is sacred and connected.

It should come as no surprise to you either, if you have worked through the exercises in this book, that there is more to life than the solid objects and hard facts of the old scientific rationalism that our leaders still cling to in order to govern our planet.

Did you experience anything in your communion with the loa and the ancestors? Has your life changed in any noticeable way since you started this spiritual regimen? If so, by definition your experience is real—even if you cannot measure or quantify it or break it down into the bits and pieces of the laboratory. And if you can experience these things, then so can we all. And once people come together to make a difference, there is no quantification possible of the Power we have to change things. Our Power is too vast for that.

The great anthropologist Margaret Mead summarized her years of fieldwork all over the world in one very simple observation: "Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever does."

This is the Power that you have—that we all have—if you want it and if you are prepared to accept the responsibility for the Ashe that is yours.

## **BE GOOD TO YOURSELF . . . BE GOD TO YOURSELF**

What it amounts to is this: There is no essential truth to the world, in the sense of a known order, immutable rules, and a final authority to be appealed to. There is only energy to be shaped, named, and defined as you wish. And only you can do this for yourself. We each have our own truth, and it is just as real and valuable as the next person's, whoever that person may be.

There are many people in the world who will try to take your

power from you—politicians, tax men, boyfr  
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 as a whole, and a  
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 What we leave behin  
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 lives that counts, but  
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Power from you—politicians, educators, religious leaders, gurus, lawyers, tax men, boyfriends and girlfriends, parents. That is *their* truth, *their* way of being in the world. You don't have to make it yours. We all live in our own worlds and occupy our own truths.

But we don't have to do it alone. What we can share as collective human beings is a moral code, a new agreement about how we will see the world and the sort of energy we will mobilize—love, hate, good, or evil—in order to shape it. Our task as evolving beings is to ensure that we use this energy to create an honorable way of life for us, the environment, the planet as a whole, and all living things that we share our space with.

For in the end, we will all return to Gine or become ancestors ourselves. What we leave behind is a sense of ourselves, the work of our souls, and the memories that others will draw upon. It is not the length of our lives that counts, but the quality of our contributions. This is what will inspire our children to greater things and provide the energy they use to shape and reshape the world.

I hope I leave for my children the memory of some fun times together, a few adventures, and the knowledge that I loved them. From this they will draw their own strengths and form their visions of the world. When I am dead, I can materially offer them no more than this, so this energy I leave behind is the only real inheritance they have. Perhaps their memories will inspire them to create a world of fun, adventure, and love in their own terms. This is all I can ask or hope for.

To the wider community I leave the contribution of my teachings and the people I have healed. If I have taught people well in my workshops, then there are now more people in the world who are good healers and can help to create a balanced, disease-free world. If I have healed people well, then there are now more people who are freer and more empowered to make a contribution of their own, if that is their choice.

Each of us must have a vision of something that is meaningful to us, that gives us purpose in life, that allows our souls to flourish, and enables us to contribute to the world community we belong to. Without this our lives have been meaningless.

It will not serve you on your deathbed that you were the biggest mogul in Hollywood, the richest trader on Wall Street, or the world's most feared dictator. You cannot offer death a part in your next movie,

gold from your briefcase, or a rank in your army in exchange for your life. In the end you will still be dead.

What you will be remembered for is the energy that you, personally, outside of your role and supposed status, have put into the world, and the contribution you have made to the welfare (or otherwise) of others. It is these things that will be assessed when you reach the Abysmal Waters and your life is weighed in the balance, and these things the community will revere or despise you for.

### THE BIGGEST SECRET

The biggest secret of Vodou, then, is that ordinary people, not deities, control the cosmos. It is we and our actions that will these divinities into being. It is we who give them identities and the Power we draw from through ceremony and ritual. It is we who express ourselves through them as part of our conscious evolution toward Love. It is we who are the gods.

"The Haitian conceives of goodness or morality as a function of man's consciousness, experiences, information, understanding and discipline; and he conceives of ritual as a means by which men induce the essentially amoral forces of the universe towards moral ends.

"In the final analysis, human consciousness, with all its attendant powers and potentials, holds the highest position in Vodoun metaphysics. It is this which the Haitian understands by *esprit* and which he separates from the matter of the body, rescues from the abyss, leaves as ancestral legacy to his descendants, and upon which, eventually, he confers the status of divinity."<sup>8</sup>

There can be no doubt that the loa are real, that they have their own identities and personalities, beyond human invention. But what, in the final analysis, is the nature of this reality? What are the loa?

They are the interplay between humankind and the soul of the cosmos; the energy of the universe, conducted and channelled by the Power of human imagination and its creative genius, in order to birth the world through magic. We create the gods, just as they create us in their image. If we have the Ashe to manifest and partner such beings, then how Powerful must we truly be?

There is a Haitian  
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become more than w  
better world, the mo  
and the more real the  
"Divinity is here,  
it may be mad  
society, is given a fifth  
ness of space and tim  
the Earthly Paradise—  
when in a shattered l  
The loa want only  
to you, but your ow  
power time. Love is th  
more health and h  
our fear of reaching  
the good in the world.  
We must become spiri  
must decide to change  
real and become a bette  
of us, individually.  
his human beings who  
of the spirits and our  
the difference, and we  
them.  
now time now for you  
the unknowable. Our live  
we will never figure it out.  
as all gestures are, ultin  
is, after all, "missing," i  
that we do is meaningless  
that it is we and we alone  
and power to build the w  
perfectly mean  
for the

There is a Haitian proverb, "Great gods cannot ride little horses." The more we encourage our consciousness to evolve, to improve, to become more than we are, and the more that we focus on dreaming a better world, the more Powerfully we are able to channel this energy and the more real the loa become.

"Divinity is here, now, and . . . by proper service and contemplation, it may be made apparent even to the intelligence of man. Man, thereby, is given a fifth dimension, which is eternity—beyond the accidents of space and time; and man made aware of this dimension is in the Earthly Paradise—even where the tourist may see only a squalid heathen in a shattered hut."<sup>9</sup>

The loa want only love and all good things for us. I cannot prove this to you, but your own journeys to the spirit world may reveal it to you over time. Love is the most Powerful healer there is, and we can all create more health and happiness on Earth if we are prepared to overcome our fear of reaching out to another and making it our intention to do good in the world.

We must become spiritual activists, as the Dalai Lama has written. We must decide to change the dream of the world if we want our world to heal and become a better place. The decision begins with us, every one of us, individually.

It is human beings who make the dream, and it is we, with the guidance of the spirits and our own inspiration, who build the world. We make the difference, and we must be the solution to our own human problems.

It is now time now for you to take your own act of Power. We cannot know the unknowable. Our lives do not make sense. The rational is not our ally. We will never figure it out. What is required is action, a gesture, that will be, as all gestures are, ultimately meaningless. Ninety percent of the universe is, after all, "missing," invisible, unprovable by scientific analysis. Most of what we do is meaningless in this sense. We must embrace this and accept that it is we and we alone who can give it meaning through an act of faith and Power to build the world around us. Then the world may be made again—*perfectly meaningless*—and therefore perfect.

I hope, for the sake of our children and our children's children, that your act of Power will be to build the best world that you know.

— 000 —

THE VODOU LESSONS: 7  
**CREATING THE WAY AHEAD**

"We don't believe in spirits who come to possess us. We believe in ourselves. I'm a spirit, she's a spirit, you're a spirit. It works according to how you live and how you communicate."<sup>10</sup>

In these simple and beautiful words, drummer Sanba Zawo sums up the essence of Vodou and of "right living." We are all spiritual beings; we all have Power. And it takes just an act of faith and belief in ourselves to focus that Power and use it for the good. Then we can start to live more honorably and create a better world.

These exercises are about beginning that process by taking two acts of Power for yourself.

### The Nom Vayan: Choosing a New Future

Every person who becomes a Houngan or Mambo is given a new sacred name by his or her initiatory parents and is baptized with this name on the day they leave the djevo.

This sacred name, known as the *nom vayan* in Creyole, from the French *nom vaillant*, meaning "brave" or "valiant name," is an affirmation for the future, a statement that a new birth has taken place, and that the Houngan or Mambo has reinvented himself or herself with a new identity and purpose, one that will be focused on the creation of sacred intent and personal Power in the person's new life.

Since you have also undertaken an initiation of sorts through the exercises in this book and by experiencing something of the spiritual other-world, my proposal to you is that you adopt the practice of choosing a *nom vayan* for yourself. This then becomes your commitment to yourself to live spiritually and honorably in the world and to draw strength and Ashe from the spirits who work with you, so you may create further acts of personal Power to charge your new vision of the world.

Choosing a *nom vayan* is simple enough, but there are some guidelines you should refer to so that you select the most appropriate and Powerful name for your purposes. Mambo Racine offers this advice:

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 In Haiti, the  
 Mambos—"Tro  
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 Haitian cultural conte  
 for, proverbial feeling  
 for example, I had a  
 the image of light shin  
 living in the Darkness"  
 the Houngan Lamp  
 to me



Firstly, people do not incorporate “normal” everyday names into their *nom vayan*—there is no “Houngan George” or “Mambo Angela”; a *nom vayan* does not include proper names.

In Haiti, there are certain common names for Houngans and Mambos—“Trop Pou Te” (“Too Much for the Earth”) is one—but people often reject this because it makes other Houngans and Mambos want to test their mettle and their claims of Power. “Jou M Lonje” (“The Day They Take My Measure”) is another. This is based on a Haitian proverb which asserts that it is only on the day that one dies that one’s true “measure” (one’s height, for the coffin, but also one’s true worth) is known. “Ya Tande” (“They Will Hear”), “Ya Sezi” (“They Will Be Astounded”), and other similar names are also quite common. These names are like proverbs, they have a point to make, they are . . . well, pungent, so to speak.

Haitian initiates also seek names that promote an image of them as strong or even dangerous. In my house I have *hounsi* “Pike Set Fwa” (“Stab Seven Times,” a reference to this initiate’s *loa met tet*, *Erzulie*, who is associated with knives and hearts), and a *hounsi* “Baka Nkisi” (“Monster of the Nkisi”). International initiates sometimes come with a different view, however—more sweetness-and-light than watch-out-I’m-bad. So there will be a person who wants to call herself “Mambo Radiant Sunflower of Gine,” or “Mambo Black Queen of the Mystical Universe,” and if they really want to, I suppose they can, and I will translate it into *Kreyol* for them, but I try to work with each candidate to find names which reflect what they are trying to say, and which are appropriate to the Haitian cultural context so that they have that “point,” that pungent, proverbial feeling.

For example, I had a Houngan who wanted his name to reflect the image of light shining in the darkness. But “Houngan Light Shining in the Darkness” sounds mawkish to Haitians, and even a little bit Christianised. We thought about it, and now this Houngan is “Bon Houngan Lamp de Nwit” (“Night Lamp”). A *lamp de nwit* is a fixture in most rural Haitian houses; it’s a little oil lamp and it consoles whole families when darkness comes.

Most of my initiates also receive the surname "Daginen," which is abbreviated from "de Ginen" ("of Gine"). I choose this name because I want to emphasize that each and every one of my initiates, Haitian or international, white or black or mulatto, gay, straight, male, female, whatever, is a child of Gine. I don't know of any other houses where initiates are given the surname Daginen, and I don't know of many houses where initiates are given any surname at all; it's uncommon, though not unheard of.

There are some names which are to be avoided, though—"Cherche Lavi" ("Seeking Life"), "Marche Cherche" ("Walk and Seek"); others like this. It keeps the person seeking but never finding! You want a name that is positive and Powerful, not one that is going to limit you or hold you back in life.

When you become an initiate, you have a chance to rename yourself, so choose a name that reflects your spiritual values, a deeply meaningful name which is also witty and positive and colorful.<sup>11</sup>

It is important, then, to choose a name that accurately reflects your sacred purpose and your intentions for the future, that has poignancy and Power behind it, and that avoids any negative associations or connotations (such as the "seeking but never finding" example given above).

In Vodou once the sacred name is given it cannot be removed except by undertaking a new initiation, so it is crucial to choose the right name. You should also approach your naming ceremony with a level of seriousness and sacred intent.

Begin by reflecting on your life to date. Repeat some of the exercises in this book, such as the ancestor journey, if you find it helpful. What would you like to change about your life? Which things no longer serve you that you would like to be rid of?

Start to play with words that Powerfully state, in a positive way, the opposite of the negative patterns you see in your history. If you have often played the role of victim in your life, for example, use words that summon up a sense of strength, courage, fortitude, and victory in order to directly counter the associations of the past. Allow these words and thoughts to go around in your mind for nine days and nights so you do not rush into anything.

When you have en  
consider the options  
before making your  
journey—this time no  
to the spirits of Natu  
Begin this journey  
ing relaxed and easy,  
the sacred names you  
and guide your inten  
pose for this journey:

To journey back  
born to this world  
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with me from the

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When you have employed your rational mind fully to explore and consider the options available to you, it is time to consult with the loa before making your final decision. This can be done in the form of a journey—this time not to the loa or the ancestors themselves or, indeed, to the spirits of Nature, but to your own primal soul.

Begin this journey just as you are about to sleep, when you are feeling relaxed and easy, ready to make some final choices. Hold in mind the sacred names you have considered for yourself in order to express and guide your intentions for the future, and then formulate your purpose for this journey:

To journey back to my soul—the sacred being I was before I was born to this world from spirit—to understand my soul-purpose in coming here, and to receive my first name, the one that I carried with me from the spirit world when I came to this Earth.

And then let your intention go and simply sleep. In the morning be sure that you write down the images and recollections that come to you from your dreams, paying special attention to the *nom vayan* that is uppermost in your mind.

When you are certain that you have once again touched the sacred name that is truly your own and perfectly expresses your soul-purpose, open sacred space at your altar and communicate your decision to the loa and the ancestors so they will know you by your new name when you journey to them next. This is the new you, the Powerful you with a new dream of a more positive and blessed future.

It is not necessary to broadcast your choice of sacred name to others; in fact, in Vodou the *nom vayan* is normally kept secret so that others cannot use it against you in any way. What is more important is that *you* (and the spirits who work with you) know your sacred name and that it helps you to succeed in your quest for Power and happiness.

### Becoming a Spiritual Activist

There is nothing to do in this final lesson, only to reflect.

These are the words of two loa, the healer Gran Bwa and the cosmic mother Erzulie, both of whom appeared to initiates in the *djevo* on the

night of the brule zen in Jacmel in January 2000. Think about what these loa have to say and the meaning of these words for you.

Gran Bwa: "Children, open your hearts! Let me tell you how it was for the people of Gine, for all those people back then. Their lives were good! The fruit of the trees was plentiful. The sea was full of fish. The children were never sick. The people lived to be two hundred years old! Those days may still return to this Earth. Children, I beg you, open your hearts! Love one another. And those days may still return."

Erzulie: "Dry your eyes, little ones. Life was never meant for suffering. You deserve more. You deserve the beautiful things, the special things, the things that reflect the beauty of your soul. No one can give you these things. But they are still yours. There is nothing on Earth as precious as you. All you need do is believe in yourselves, as I believe in you."



What can you do, right now, to make this vision real?

*Here come the choices:  
It's consume or be consumed.  
Jump if you feel crazy  
And jump if you're a fool.*

—TIM BOOTH OF THE BAND JAMES

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WORKS  
BOOKS

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...as soul retrieval  
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...also a representative f  
...information created to pro  
...ness wisdom and ways  
...Dream Change Co

# THE MARKETPLACE: WORKSHOPS, TAPES, AND BOOKS BY ROSS HEAVEN

Ross runs workshops in Vodou, shamanism, and spirit-based healing (such as soul retrieval and spirit extraction). Together with Mambo Racine and Medsen Fey Loulou Prince, he also facilitates spiritual journeys to Haiti, where participants receive experience of and instruction in the Vodou arts, including initiations into Vodou and attendance at Fet Gede, the Festival of the Ancestors.

Ross has also produced *Infinite Journeys*, a tape of trance drumming suitable for shamanic journeying and spiritual communion as described in this book. For details on workshops, to purchase tapes, or for more information on Ross's work and activities, visit the author's Web site, [www.BeautifulMutants.com](http://www.BeautifulMutants.com).

Excerpts from Ross's previous books, *The Journey to You* (Bantam, 2001) and *Spirit in the City* (Bantam, 2002), are also available on the Web site, and both books may be purchased from bookstores.

Ross is also a representative for the Dream Change Coalition, a non-profit organization created to protect the Amazon rain forests and preserve indigenous wisdom and ways of life. For more information on the work of the Dream Change Coalition, visit [www.DreamChange.org](http://www.DreamChange.org).

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# GLOSSARY

Explanations are provided below of some of the key terms used in Vodou and in this book. Where pronunciations are not immediately obvious, they are given in parentheses after each word. In the pronunciation guides, syllables that begin with capital letters indicate where the most emphasis should be placed when speaking.

**Agwe** (a-Go-Way): God of the ocean waves, represented by the image of a ship.

**Ashe** (a-Shay): Spiritual Power, which has nothing to do with role or social status and everything to do with strength, fortitude, and the support of the spirits.

**Asogwe** (a-Sog-Way): The highest level of Vodou priesthood, roughly equivalent to that of a Catholic bishop.

**asson** (as-Son): The rattle of the Houngan and Mambo, which is used for calling the spirits.

**Ayida Wedo** (i-yay-Dar way-Doe): The rainbow serpent, who represents wealth, luck, and happiness. (See also Dambala.)

**Ayizan** (ay-ee-Zan): Spirit of the fields, the harvest, and fertility.

**Baron** (bar-Ron): The father of the dead, who also represents the sensuality of life and is petitioned in the making and breaking of magical spells.

**bat guerre** (bat Geyre): The “battle for the spirits”; a ceremony that is part of the ritual of initiation.

**bila** (bee-Lar): A large pillow filled with magical herbs that is used as part of the bat guerre ceremony.

**Bokor** (bock-Ore): A magician, sometimes a Houngan or Mambo, who is prepared to “work with both hands” (use his or her magic for healing or to attack and hurt others by sending an expedition mort against them, for example).

**Bondye** (bon-Dee): From the French *bon dieu* (“good god”); the ultimate Power in Vodou; also known as Gran Met, or “Great Master.”

**brule zen** (brool-Ay Zin): The final ceremony for initiates in which they prove their mastery over fire by plunging their hands into boiling oil.

**Candomble** (can-Dom-Blay): Brazilian Vodou.

**Dambala** (dam-bar-La): The serpent-god, husband of Ayida Wedo, who represents the principle of goodness. (See also Ayida Wedo.)

**danse-loa**: The dance of the spirits; a form of possession or trance state, wherein the spirits "dance in one's head."

**djab** (Jab): A spirit of Nature often found in trees, rocks, rivers, and other natural features.

**djevo** (jay-Vo): The inner temple of the Vodou church, which only priests and initiates may enter so that the secret teachings may be passed to them.

**eggun** (egg-Gun): In Santería, an ancestral spirit.

**Erzulie** (ur-Zoo-Lee): The cosmic mother, similar to Isis or the Virgin Mary, who represents the principles of love, beauty, grace, and luxury.

**expedition mort**: A spirit sent against a living enemy in order to do that person harm (see also lougharou).

**gede** (gay-Dee): An ancestral spirit; the dead.

**geis** (gesh): In Celtic belief, a curse or sacred challenge. (See also wanga.)

**Gine** (gin-Ay): A mythical land or state of grace associated with primal Africa, before the slave trade; similar to heaven or Eden.

**govi** (go-Vee): A clay pot in which the souls of the dead may be housed.

**Gran Bwa**: The spirit of Nature.

**gros bon anje** (grow bon Ange): The "big good angel"; one part of the human soul. (See also ti bon anje and met tete.)

**Houngan** (oon-Gun): The shaman-healer and priest of Vodou (known as a Santero in Santería and Palero in Palo).

**Hounsi Bossale** (oon-see Bow-sall): A person chosen by the spirits to become a healer or priest, who must now learn the secrets and rituals of Vodou.

**Hounsi Kanzo** (oon-see Can-zow): A person chosen by the spirits who has begun the journey to priesthood by spending ritual time in the djevo.

**kanzo** (can-Zow): To spend ritual time in the djevo, where the rational mind is allowed to sleep while the spiritual self is in communion with the loa.

**kay myste** (kay Mist): The "house of the mysteries"; a sacred ritual space for communion with the ancestors.

- lakou** (la-Koo): The compound of the Houngan; a small village for the faithful of that church.
- Laplas** (la-Plas): The master of ceremonies who is assistant to the Houngan or Mambo.
- larve tete** (lar-Vay Tet): The ritual washing of the head or bathing to remove negative energies and restore Ashe.
- La Sirene** (la See-Ren): The mermaid spirit of the deep oceans, representing the unconscious and the mysteries of the deep.
- Legba**: Spirit of the gateways between the worlds who opens the way for the other loa to commune with the Vodou faithful.
- loa** (low-Ar): Also known as *lwa*, these are the spirits or saints who are both individual entities and parts of the god-energy of Bondye.
- Loko**: Spirit of the forests who gives the asson to the newly made Houngan.
- lougrou** (loo-Gar-Roo): A shape-shifting spirit sent by a Bokor to harm a living enemy; similar to the European concept of a werewolf or vampire, which attacks its victims and drains their life force.
- Mambo** (mam-Bow): Priestess of Vodou (also see Houngan).
- manje-loa** (mon-Jay low-Ar): The ritual feeding of the loa in order to give them the energy to protect and serve the person who calls upon them for favors.
- Marketplace**: In the Vodou cosmology, the middle world that is occupied by human beings and subject to human concerns and actions, which may be good or bad.
- Medsen Fey** (med-Sun fay): Leaf doctor and herbalist who is medicine man for his community and may also be a Houngan or Mambo.
- met tete** (met Tet): The "master of the head"; the one loa with whom the follower has a special affinity; the met tete forms a part of the human soul (see also gros bon anje and ti bon anje).
- nom vayan** (Nom vay-On): The "valiant name"; a sacred name given to the priest or priestess after initiation.
- Obeah** (o-bee-Yar): Jamaican Vodou.
- Ogoun** (o-Goow-un): Loa who represents Power and warriorship.
- peristyle**: The Vodou church.
- porteau mitan** (port-O Mee-Tan): The pole that is always found at the center of the Vodou peristyle; equivalent to the World Tree, this is the doorway used by the loa in order to enter the human world.

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 veyer (vee-Ver): A mystic  
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**pot tete** (pot Tet): A small container that holds part of the initiate's soul.

**Santería** (san-tar-ree-ya): Cuban Vodou.

**seiziman** (sez-EE-mon): Severe shock or trauma that can cause the soul to temporarily leave the body.

**societe** (society): A congregation or church of the Vodou faithful.

**Sur Pwen** (sir Pwenn): The second grade of the Vodou priesthood (after Hounsi Kanzo), which puts the initiate "on the point" (in connection with and under the protection of the loa).

**ti bon anje** (Tee bon Ange): The "little good angel." That part of the human soul that represents man in the Marketplace, the human world (see also gros bon anje and met tete).

**ven-yo** (ven-Yow): "Veins of light"; in Western terms, the meridians of the body, along which energy travels and the chakras are located.

**vever** (vee-Ver): A mystical design made in corn or flour or, in Santería, with gunpowder that is set alight; each vever is representative of a specific loa.

**Vodou** (voo-Dow): Haitian Vodou.

**Vodouissant** (voo-Dow-EE-sont): Member of the Vodou faithful.

**Voodoo** (Voo-Doo): Refers specifically to New Orleans Vodou, but has now passed into common usage to mean every branch of the religion.

**wanga** (one-Gar): A spell, curse, or sacred challenge to be overcome. (See also geis.)

**zanset-yo** (zan-Set-Yo): The ancestors; spirits of the dead.

**zombi** (zom-Bee): Derived from the Congo word *nzambi* (meaning "spirit of a dead person"), the word *zombi* refers to a person whose soul has been lost through magical attack, severe fright, or trauma; one who is living but not truly alive. Wade Davis, a Harvard ethnobotanist, showed in his books *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (Dambala and Ayida Wedo) and *Passage Into Darkness* that physical zombification is achieved by administering a powerful poison, the *poudre zombi* (or "zombi powder"), a blend of toxic plants, animal, and fish remains. Two of the main active ingredients are derived from the porcupine fish and the puffer fish, and contain a powerful neurotoxin known as tetrodotoxin, which produces symptoms of headache, racing pulse, and diarrhea, followed by respiratory distress and then a deep coma that resembles death. The victim can be raised from this state using another powerful combination of drugs known as "zombi cucumber," although the "soul loss" of mental, emotional, and spiritual trauma will almost certainly last forever. To protect their loved ones from any threat of zombification, it is common in some parts of Haiti for the deceased to be stabbed in the heart or have his or her head removed to ensure that the soul departs and can never be used by a Bokor.

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