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The Quick and the Dead:

The Souls of Man in Vodou Thought

By [Richard Hodges](#)

The concept of the soul can be expressed as “that in a man which is capable of surviving physical death.” Much of the dialog of religion over the millennia has been concerned with the human soul: whether soul or souls exist, their nature, their stages of development, their fate, their relationship to God and to other metaphysical beings, and their relationship to the individual lives of people. In traditions derived from Africa the existence of various spirits including the souls of man is a matter of direct experience. The presence of spirits is encountered frequently through the experience of “possession” which is enacted in ceremonial. These ceremonials in their symbolism also outline a path of development by which souls either return to the general psychic circulation of the community, or in rare cases, become divinities, individualized spiritual presences that are permanent as long as they are “fed” by the community.

Though we might want to think of these ceremonials as dramas, it would be a mistake to think that the participants are only play-acting. To witness ritual possession, or to experience its onset, leaves the unavoidable impression that something very real and very profound is taking place in the psyche of the possessed. Perhaps the possession-drama is similar to what takes place in the best performances in Western theatre, when the actor as is said “becomes the role.” But true possession goes much further than this since the entire personality of the person possessed abandons its body, its “horse.” The very different personality of the spirit that replaces it as master of the horse then manifests spontaneously as an actor in the present moment.

In nineteenth-century France, the Nancy school of hypnotism discovered a way of producing states of abandonment of the body by the personality as profound as in traditional ritual possession. This only became a minor chapter in the history of Western medical psychology. There is a deep-seated prejudice in the West against loss of control. There is such a high evaluation of the individual and his personality that it is very difficult to conceive of the possibility for the ego to relax its grip and to accept to be displaced by something higher and finer. Such relaxation is one of the

fundamental states of the human psyche. The absence in the West of cultural institutions for the socialization and development of this state is one of the signs of the loss of genuine psycho-spiritual knowledge in modern times.

But this knowledge has not been lost in Africa, nor in the traditions of the New World that derive from Africa. In the New World, African religious ideas have rubbed shoulders with Judaeo-Christian ones for several centuries now, and the result is a mixture that throws a revealing light on our own spiritual inheritance and aspirations.

The Vodou Religion

In Vodou both man and cosmos are considered to be of two natures: half metaphysical, half material. The symbol of the cross (fig. 1) is often used to show how these realms reflect each other in the mirror which is the horizontal arm of the cross. “Sound the mirror!” is a formula repeated over and over in the liturgy of Vodou, a call to its devotees to ponder and plumb its deepest secrets.

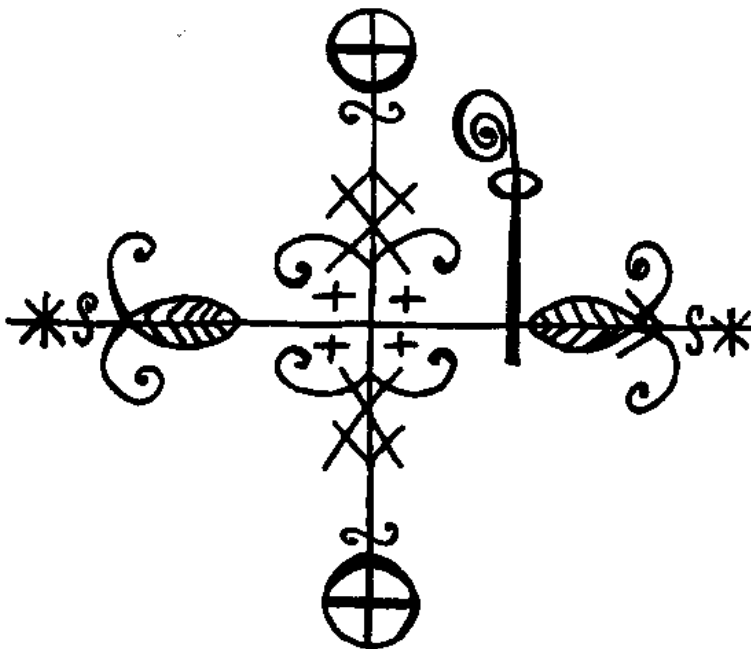


Fig. 1
Veve to Legba

The Vodou cross is used as an icon or vévé of the lwa Legba. A Vodou “lwa” is a Divine being, a representative of cosmic law (loi). A vévé is a ritual iconic drawing that is traced on the packed earth of the Vodou ceremonial ground; at the end of the ceremony it is erased by dancing over it. It is said to attract the attention of the lwa so

that they will be encouraged to “come down” and manifest by “mounting” or “possessing” the bodies of devotees.

Legba rules the crossroads. On the cosmic plane he represents the intersection between the world axis and the plane of reflection. Standing at the boundary between the worlds, he is both the gatekeeper and the great road that allows passage between them. He is both the primal energy which reaches down to manifest among men, and the path by which men rise to encounter the higher. As the intermediary between the human and Divine realms, Legba is always saluted first in any ritual. On the earthly plane he is experienced as the play of divine forces, as the appearance of a higher level, as miracle, as passage, as conflict and its resolution, as paradox and humor. While he is in one sense first among the lwa, he is also considered to be only the servant of the lwa, their messenger. He is also perhaps the most human of the lwa; his aspect of contradiction is often experienced in human affairs.

The idea of reflection is further elaborated in the symbol of the demiurgic Divine Twins. It is they who contemplate each other in the mirror of Vodou. The Twins, originally hermaphroditic, subsequently take on a secondary division into male and female, divided in two by the vertical trunk of the cross. In Vodou the twins are always regarded not as two but as three (fig. 2), and sometimes as five, symbolizing the unity of opposites which appears as a third element when opposites cooperate creatively, and as the quintessence which is the completion of two complementary oppositions.

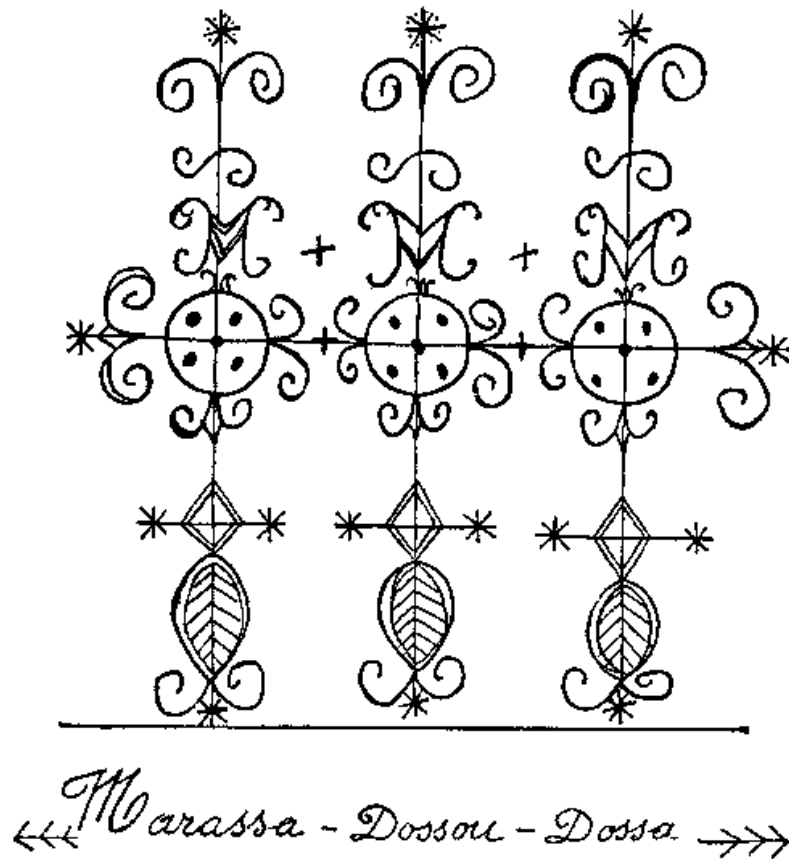


Fig. 2
Marassa as Trinity

From this sexualized, twice divided, divinity is born the human race. The Twins are thus the first humans, the first children as well as the first ancestors, the first dead. In Africa and its New World annexes, the sacred dead are of paramount importance; they represent the ancestral wisdom accumulated from past human experience, and also the channel through which the spiritual emanation of the original creation makes contact with each generation, and finally that which ought to concern every living human being above all else, his most fitting fate and end. In the rituals of passage that follow death, what is important in a person, the compartments of his soul, are disinhabited from the now useless physical body and helped to pass properly into the estate of the dead, where they can be of benefit to subsequent generations as well as participate in their own further transmigrations. Concerning the importance of a proper burial, there is this saying, uniquely African in flavor: "a man buries himself while he is alive;" in other words the quality of a person's burial, which is everyone's highest aim, is a mirror of the quality of his life.

It is interesting that the feast of the Twins is often observed on All Saints Day (in some places the observance is on Christmas day or some other holy day). For this feast two plates of food are prepared. One plate, which has mostly sweets, is distributed to the children, who are the only ones allowed to eat from it; the other plate is left in a cemetery as food for the dead. Thus, the children as progenitors of the next generation of adults, are introduced to the dead of previous generations, effectuating the transmission of cultural and spiritual continuity. Our own custom of Hallowe'en has a similar meaning.

Vodou recognizes three spiritual components which together with the physical body make up a man. In the terminology of this tradition, they are called the ti-bonanj (petit bon ange) "little angel," gwo-bonanj (gros bon ange) "big angel" and mét-tét (maitre tet) "master of the head." The ti-bonanj represents the individual consciousness of a man, his ego, his personal experience. It is the seat of moral action of the individual. After death of the physical body it stays on earth for a period of time and then ascends to a heavenly audience where its deeds are judged. Because it then has no further relationship to the living, the ti-bonanj is of slight concern to the practices of Vodou. The mét-tét and the gwo-bonanj on the other hand represent what a man has been entrusted with from the realm of communal, ancestral, spirits. It is what he possesses in fief and finally must give back to that realm. It is with these that Vodou is concerned at every passage of a person's life.

A devotee's mét-tét is one of the lwa. From among all the different lwa, the one which is the principal inhabitant of a person is discovered by a process of divination. In most cases the lwa who is determined to be the mét-tét appears to reflect a person's essential character. It is then fixed "in his head" in a series of initiations beginning ideally shortly after birth, but it can take place at any time. The whole life of the person is from then on consecrated principally to the service of this lwa; and the lwa reciprocates by functioning as a kind of guardian angel who aids the person throughout his life.

An important part of the drama of the singing and dancing which constitute the ordinary liturgy of Vodou is when a lwa "mounts" a devotee. For a person who has been initiated, it will usually (but not always) be his mét-tét that mounts him. The person vacates his body temporarily so that the lwa can use it to communicate his specific kind of socio-spiritual energy to the congregation, who receive it as a needed influence. The whole ritual is also understood as feeding the lwa--the lwa only can exist if they are fed, by the ritual services and dances enacted for them, and particularly by the invitation to mount the body-horses of their devotees. If a person serves well, he enriches the standing relationship between his community and the lwa who is the master of his head. The main function of the ordinary funeral rite is to

reclaim the mét-tét from the person who has carried it and return its enhanced vitality to the community.

The gwo-bonanj is a particle of Bondye (bon dieu, “High God”). It is entrusted to a man as his life force, his invisible core; it is his vital spirit, his blood, his breath, his disposition, his intelligence. Its movements, its rises and falls are the invisible driving force behind the visible manifestation expressed by the man’s body and his ti-bonanj. Finally, it is what a man’s life amounts to, what he as an individual represents in eternity. For those who are his direct descendants, it represents their ancestry, and through them undergoes a kind of reincarnation. The funerary rites coupled with the naming, baptism, and initiation rituals that mark the important passages in a person’s life function to facilitate this process. If a person has lived well, his memory is cared for by people for several generations. His gwo-bonanj, elevated to the status of a minor saint, may be worshiped and even prayed to for specific benefits. Under certain conditions, it can even “mount” or possess people as the lwa do.

But there is perhaps another possible fate for the soul. In Vodou, the gwo-bonanj also has the possibility ultimately to become an eternal, a lwa. This path is open in general only to the gwo-bonanj of an extraordinary individual, usually one who has served as a houngan or mambo, a priest or priestess of Vodou, and who in that capacity has worked in such a way as to transform his soul to a higher level of existence. This result would be recognized at such a person’s funeral, which would be a much more complex rite than for an ordinary person; for ordinary people, there are actually sometimes rites performed to forestall the possibility that their gwo-bonanj might become a lwa.

Among the lwa of Vodou, there is one who has a special function in the transformations of the soul. This is Ezili, who is identified in Vodou with Mary of the Christian tradition. Of all the lwa, she is the most popular and most served throughout Haiti, and is regarded as the patroness of the Vodou religion itself. She is conceived as bearer of the principle of feminine eros and fertility, of desire, emotion, and creativity in general, as the eternally fecund womb of all that has vitality, mother both of the human race and of that of the lwa. She is the lunar, female counterpart to the solar, male Legba. Through her capacity to give birth, she transforms the raw energy of Legba’s will to exist into that which can live and grow.

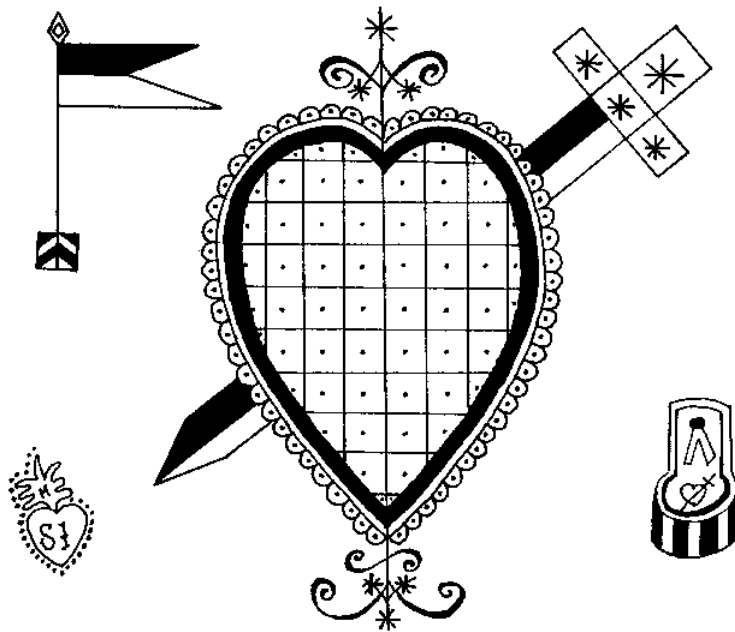


Fig. 3
Veve to Ezili

In Vodou, no contradiction is perceived between Ezili's erotic fecundity and her virginity, which is interpreted to mean transcendence of ordinary life. It is perhaps in this transcendence that she most resembles Mary. Ezili is envisioned as possessor of all things rich and beautiful, to a degree beyond human comprehension. There is in Ezili's worship a demand for that which transcends the ordinary, in her largesse, in the extravagant offerings of beautiful and valuable things which she expects as sacrifices from her devotees, and in the reorientation she demands toward a plane of feeling infinitely more exalted than the concerns of ordinary life. Many of her devotees undertake a "marriage" to Ezili; this condition obligates them to expend much of their personal resources toward providing her needs, and a whole day each week to her service during which they must refrain from other sources of personal satisfaction especially sexual. In return they receive the finest that religion has to offer, Ezili's transcendent bliss.

Perhaps it is appropriate to see Ezili not as any particular feeling but as the potency to feel, the organ as it were of the human psyche which is capable of feeling. Some such idea seems to be indicated in the gridded heart of her vévé (fig. 3) which may represent the field in the psyche upon which feelings play. Such an infinitely sensitive organ of perception then is that which on the one hand can elevate a person's consciousness to the divine plane, or on the other, if adulterated with impure feelings, can reduce it to the subhuman level.

But humans, being what they are, are never really able to love Ezili purely enough or to live up to her demands. For this reason, at the end of her mountings, Ezili usually weeps beyond consolation, betrayed by those who would obey her but cannot. Her pierced heart is the same as that of Maria Dolorosa (fig. 4) who weeps for the failure of mankind to understand and treasure the force from above.



Fig. 4
Maria Dolorosa

Richard Temple (Temple 1990, and letter to Material for Thought, #14, Nov. 1995) has proposed a symbolic interpretation of the three main crossroads of the life of Mary as described in the Gospels and as frequently depicted in icons of the Eastern Orthodox church. These events are Mary's childhood and early religious training; the annunciation and birth; and the dormition and assumption. Temple proposes that they represent the sequential birth in Mary of the three "higher bodies" (astral; mental; and causal, following the terminology of Ouspensky). This also shows the stages in which the higher bodies must be developed in the course of a life of spiritual aspiration and work. This is entirely consonant with the image of Ezili in Vodou.

Vodou highlights two ideas which are inherent in this archetype. First, Ezili is conceived as a primordial cosmic principle whose nature is that of emotion. Her manifestation is the essential core of human nature, with all its latent possibilities of higher development in the direction of refinement of the emotional life. It is this possibility that distinguishes the human from the animal realm. Second, the nature of religion itself is seen as that of sacrifice: the sacrifice of that which is most precious in ordinary life in the hope of that which is infinitely more valuable in another life.

The Nature of the Soul, and its Possible Development

Customs of invocation and reverence for a variety of levels of spirits, ranging from the souls of recently departed ancestors to very high metaphysical beings, are found in most indigenous cultures, and are even found as folk practice among the faithful of nominally monotheistic religions including Catholicism. Vodou places great emphasis on the principle that all its rites and beliefs, especially those concerning the spirits of the dead, address the spiritual and social fabric of the community. In other words, the spirits who are addressed do not inhabit some inaccessibly transcendent world, but the real world in which people live and interact. This is generally true in African religions. Two examples can be offered of the way this principle is reflected in the practices and beliefs of Vodou. First there is the absence of rites connected with the fate of the ti-bonanj, and second the poverty of rites specifically for the service of Bondye, who though higher than the lwa is so much higher that he is of little moment in this world.

There is an important suggestion in all of this about what the soul really is: it seems to subsist not just in something inside a person, but also in the network of forces and relationships of a spiritual as well as a material nature which a person establishes with other people during his life. Some of these relationships are such that they are not destroyed when the body dies, and may continue to act for a long time. However, not having the person himself (i.e. his body and his ti-bonanj) to continually reinforce them, in most cases they gradually die out and enter into the general circulation of the community.

When the feeling function is purified, made more able to accept the universal, selfless quality of feeling to which man is called by religion, there arise better and deeper relationships with others. As other people are affected beneficially by these relationships, they spontaneously send good wishes to the person who is the source of these benefits and in that way begin to feed his remembrance among people. A point can be reached, these teachings seem to be telling us, where this aspect of a man's inner and outer structure becomes permanent, able to exist and to act independent of his physical vehicle.

Note

Vodou (the current official spelling) is the popular religion of Haiti. It is derived from the religions of West and Central Africa, brought to the New World during the “African Diaspora.” The word “Vodou” comes from the word for divinity in certain languages of West Africa. Its root meaning is “hidden.”

These traditions have put down deep roots in most of the New World and have given rise to a bewildering variety of forms in which African ideas are mixed in varying degrees both with indigenous pre-Columbian traditions and with religious ideas from Europe and the mediterranean area, especially Catholicism, spiritism, and Freemasonry. Ideas and symbols from our own tradition are often seen in unfamiliar perspective in these mixings.

Several of these New World African traditions have been studied by Western observers. Perhaps the most sensitive such reports are several concerning Haiti. There, almost the entire population, though nominally Catholic, actually hold more profound devotion for the divinities and rituals of Vodou.

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See also this [Source List](#) on Africa-related music and culture.