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# *Drapo Vodou*: Sacred Standards of Haitian Vodou

By ANNE M. PLATOFF\*

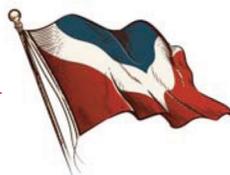
## Introduction

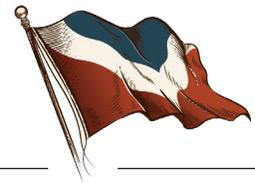
The field of vexillology is, by nature, a multidisciplinary one. It is difficult to understand the significance of an individual flag or group of flags without examining the context within which those objects were created and are used. This paper will present a case study of a multidisciplinary investigation of one type of flags. Haitian Vodou flags (*drapo Vodou*) are little known to vexillologists, but have been studied by scholars in the fields of art, anthropology, African-American studies, and other disciplines. An investigation of prior scholarship from these areas demonstrates that this category of flags is not only significantly different than the flags usually examined by vexillologists, but they also have much to teach us about the study of flags as a multidisciplinary exercise.

There are several books that are focused on Vodou flags. Patrick Arthur Polk, a prolific researcher on the topic, has produced a colorful and informative book titled *Haitian Vodou Flags* (1999). In his book, Polk summarizes information compiled in the preparation of his Ph.D. dissertation and during his work on exhibits related to the arts of Haiti. He explains the historical background of the flags, the role of the flags in ceremonies, the colors and symbolism, and he also includes colorful photos of a variety of *drapo Vodou*. Nancy Josephson, an artist and student of Vodou, authored the book *Spirits in Sequins: Vodou Flags of Haiti* (2007). This beautifully illustrated volume explains the colors and symbolism used in the flags, and documents the work of a variety of Vodou flag artists. In addition, two Ph.D. dissertations were also extremely valuable to this research. A dissertation by Anna Hartmann Wexler, *For the Flower of Ginen: The Artistry of Clotaire Bazile, A Haitian Vodou Flagmaker*, and Polk's 1999 dissertation, titled *Fabric and Power: Vodou Flags, Collective Symbolism, and Rites of Authority in Haiti*, offer two different perspectives on the topic. Wexler's work is an anthropological study of the flag-making process and the importance of flags within the Vodou faith. Polk, on the other hand, takes a

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## Editor's Note / Note de la rédaction

Flags participate, both physically and symbolically, in many emotionally charged human experiences. No doubt the rites most often associated with flags, at least in the popular conception, are patriotic in nature. While none deny the long intertwined history between flags and political identity, evident from the primeval battlefield to the contemporary array of national symbols at the United Nations in New York City, it can be easily forgotten that flags have not only arisen through a need to communicate sovereignty, allegiance, or aggression at a distance. They also act in more insular ceremonies, in experiences private and sacred.

Anne M. Platoff introduces one such powerful example of flag culture, largely unknown or at least undiscussed in the vexillological community, found in the sacred ceremonies of Haitian Vodou. Not only does Ms. Platoff provide a compelling historical and cultural sketch of these religious artifacts, of their design, function, signification, and religious power, she also presents a well-curated display of stunning visual examples, providing access to an aesthetic language of flag design and display that broadens our view of what flags can and should do.

Her excellent article reminds us that the study of flags is a study of people, of what we think, believe, and feel. By seeking to understand flags which would simply not be found in traditional vexillological literature, Platoff demonstrates vexillology at its best as an interdisciplinary endeavor. It is art and design, it is anthropology, it is religious ritual and performance. It touches every aspect of our desire to better understand ourselves and our fellows.

With great pleasure, the publication committee of NAVA presents Ms. Platoff's compelling paper which was originally presented at the NAVA Annual Meeting in New Orleans, in its entirety as a double issue of FRQ.

KENNETH J. HARTVIGSEN, Ph.D.

Editor, FRQ

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## Platoff: *Drapo Vodou*: Sacred Standards of Haitian Vodou

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more historical and sociological approach. He traces the roots of flag usage in Vodou through the national flag culture of Haiti and the Haitian colonial experience, and then back to Africa where he examines the African and European traditions that influenced the flags. These two scholars and others have also presented and published papers that provide more analysis of the topic. In addition, it was also necessary to draw upon general works about Vodou, the arts of Vodou, and the symbolism used by Vodou practitioners in order to compile an introduction to *drapo Vodou* for vexillologists.<sup>1</sup>

### What is (or isn't) Vodou?

One of the most important aspects of conducting and reporting on research is to try to view the topic from a position of neutrality. This is especially important when researching a topic such as Vodou. As a religion it is relatively unknown and quite misunderstood outside of Haiti (*Ayiti*). The popular stereotypes of voodoo dolls, zombies, and imagery from movies (such as the James Bond film, *Live and Let Die*) can make it difficult for an outsider to determine just what is, and what isn't, Vodou. In this case, spelling is the key to finding appropriate resources for research. The spelling "Vodou" is typically used by practitioners of the religion, by anthropologists, and by others who study the people and culture of Haiti. For the purposes of this study, it is Haitian Vodou that is most relevant to the field of vexillology because of the use of flags in religious services. It is also important to distinguish Haitian Vodou from the folk practices called "voodoo" and "hoodoo" in the United States. While there are some commonalities, these other traditions should not be considered to be representative of Vodou as it is practiced in Haiti.<sup>2</sup>

The Haitian Consulate in the United States has a page on their website which attempts to explain the religion of Vodou to non-Haitians. On this page, it states that "a Creolized form of Vodou is the primary culture and religion of the more than 8 million people of Haiti and the Haitian diaspora." The roots of this religion can be traced back to the Ibo and Kongo peoples of Central Africa, the Yoruba of Nigeria, and other cultures from Western Africa, but there are also elements inspired by the Taino Indians who were native to the Caribbean island of Hispaniola where Haiti is located (Hispaniola was known in colonial times as Saint-Domingue or Santo Domingo). African elements of Vodou were carried to the Americas by the hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans who were brought to the island during the colonial period. Anthropologists who study the culture and religion

of Haiti have been able to trace elements of Vodou back to their African roots through linguistic analysis and the study of cross-cultural similarities.<sup>3</sup>

Professor Claudine Michel is one of a number of scholars of Haitian origin who have worked to bring a better understanding of Vodou to the uninitiated. She summarizes the basic essence of the faith in this way:

Vodou is a comprehensive belief system and aesthetics which provide coherence within both the visible and invisible worlds. It implies connections with cosmic energies; it harmonizes the sacred and the profane, the material and the spiritual, and the world of the living with that of the ancestors and the *Lwa*. Vodou shares a common denominator and universal ethical principles with other world religions—a strong sense of justice and service, respect for elders, beneficence, forbearance, and humanism. The Vodou worldview constitutes the basis of the moral system which regulates behavior, social interactions and communal duties among Haitians. ...

Vodou is a very practical religion which is primarily about sustaining life in the community. Its influences range from individual spiritual healing to survival of the group and communal sustenance. Grounded in the family and the community, it functions as systems of traditional medicine, justice, art, music, education and cooperative economics. Vodou is not only a belief system and worldview, but also a mode of survival and existence. Thus, for Haitians and for other foreign nationals who are members of Vodou families, Vodou is present in all aspects of life and regulates our presence within the larger cosmos.

Keeping this basic description of how Haitians view Vodou in mind, it is also important to understand how this belief system relates to other world religions. Michel reminds her readers that this relationship was not always amiable, as there have been numerous periods during Haitian history when those who practiced Vodou were forced to hide their activities as a result of official persecution. It was not until 1987 that a new constitution officially guaranteed freedom of religion, and 2003 when a presidential decree recognized Vodou officially as one of the nation's religions.

As noted on the Consulate website, "A common saying is that Haiti is 80% Roman Catholic and 100% Vodou." There are many people in Haiti who would say that they are both a Catholic and a *Vodouisant* or *sèvitè* (one who serves the spirits). There are many elements of Catholicism that have been incorporated into the religion. For example, *Vodouisants* believe in one supreme God. This deity is considered to be the same God recognized by the Roman Catholic Church, but is often referred to as Bondye (likely derived from the

French language term *Bon Dieu*, meaning “Good Lord”). As Claudine Michel explains, “Vodou adepts perceive themselves as good Christians and see no conflict with practicing both Catholicism and serving the spirits; the same saints who ornament Catholic churches watch over Vodou altars. Catholicism becomes an extension of the quest for protection from the saints/spirits and the omnipotent God, Bondye.” The ancestral spirits that are served by Vodou practitioners are called *Lwa* (or *Loa*) and are considered to be subservient to Bondye, in a relationship that is analogous to that between Christian Saints and God. It is through the intercession of the *Lwa* that worshipers are able to communicate with Bondye. Most of these spirits have their roots in the indigenous religions of Africa, but there are others who are from the New World. In Haitian Vodou many of the *Lwa* have

become associated with specific Saints through a process which some scholars called “syncretism.” Many anthropologists have postulated that this was originally done so that the slaves could hide their religious practices from their Christian masters, but over time specific Saints and *Lwa* have come to be understood as just different representations of the same spirit in the eyes of Haitians. In addition, there are Catholic saints who have become known as *Lwa* in their own right without being syncretized to an ancestral spirit from Africa.<sup>5</sup>

Often the *Lwa* are described as “numbering in the thousands” or “uncountable”, but there are a relatively small number that are honored with flags in ceremonies. Very briefly, these *Lwa* (as identified in Polk’s Vodou flag book) are: Agwe, Ayizan, Azaka (Zaka), Bawon Samdi, Bosou, Danbala Wèdo, Ayida Wèdo, Ezili Dantò, Ezili Freda, Gran

Table 1. List of *Lwa* Commonly Associated With Flags, Their Roles, and Associated Colors, Symbols, and Saints

<i>Lwa</i> Name*	Nation / Family	Areas of Influence / Realm / Details	Colors**	Symbols***	Catholic Saints
Agwe	Rada	king of the ocean, sea captain; husband of Lasirèn	white, blue	boats, paddles, small metal fishes	St. Ulrich
Ayizan	Rada	patron of the priesthood, mother of the initiates; associated with initiation	white, silver	palm leaves	St. Claire, St. Rose, St. Martha
Azaka (Zaka)	Rada	protector of agriculture and harvests	blue, red	<i>Mabaya mabouya</i> (a species of skink), machete, pipe, blue <i>pakèt kongo</i>	St. Isidore, St. André
Bawon Samdi (The Baron)	Gède	<i>Lwa</i> of death; guardian of the cemetery; his realm is the earth. Bawon Samdi is the father of all the Gède.	black, purple, white	skull, black cross, farm implements	St. Andrew, St. Expedit
Bosou (Bossou)	Rada / Petwo	associated with lightning, fertility, and protection from harm	red, black, white	bull’s head, horns	St. Vincent de Paul
Danbala Wèdo	Rada	spirit of happiness & wealth; supreme snake spirit; also associated with wisdom and fertility; husband of Ayida Wèdo; with her, he represents birth and creation	white, [light green]	snakes and eggs; white <i>pakèt kongo</i>	St. Patrick, Moses
Ayida Wèdo	Rada	spirit of happiness & wealth; mistress of the skies; also associated with wisdom and fertility; her realm is water; wife of Danbala Wèdo; with him, she represents birth and creation	blue, white	rainbow; white <i>pakèt kongo</i>	Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception
Ezili Dantò	Petwo	spirit of motherhood, protection, & wisdom; her realm is the water; often depicted as a black Madonna with child and known for her maternal instincts	blue, red, black	pierced heart & knives, blue <i>pakèt kongo</i>	Black Madonna of Czestochowa (the Mater Salvatoris), Our Lady of Mount Carmel, St. Barbara Africana

<b>Lwa Name*</b>	<b>Nation / Family</b>	<b>Areas of Influence / Realm / Details</b>	<b>Colors**</b>	<b>Symbols**</b>	<b>Catholic Saints</b>
Ezili Freda (Erzulie Freda)	Rada	spirit of love, sensuality, and beauty; the epitome of feminine beauty; her realm is water	pink & white, pale blue & white, (gold)	checkered heart, mirror, pink <i>pakèt kongo</i> ; [white lamp with a blue bulb]	Virgin Mary, Mater Dolorosa del Monte Calvario (Our Lady of Mount Calvary)
Gran Bwa (Grand Bois)	Petwo	spirit of healing & forests; associated with herbal remedies	green, brown	wood & roots	St. Sebastian
Lasirèn (Lasiren, La Sirene, Lasireen, La Sirenn)	Rada	queen of the ocean; patroness of music; "mermaid;" wife of Agwe	blue-green, [light blue]	mirrors, combs trumpets, shells	Nuestra Senora de la Caridad; Mary, Stella Maris (Star of the Sea); St. Martha
Legba (Papa Legba)	Rada / Petwo	spirit of rituals, guardian of the crossroads; keeper of the gates between the spiritual and physical worlds; sometimes shown as an old man in rags. Legba's alter ego who guards the crossroads at night is Kafou (Kalfou or Kalfu).	red & white	crosses, keys, walking stick, crutches	St. Peter, St Lazarus, & St. Anthony
Loko (Papa Loko)	Rada	patron of the priesthood; <i>Lwa</i> of healing; guardian of the <i>ounfò</i>	white & red (white, golden yellow, & light green)	red rooster	St. Joseph
Marasa (Marassa)	Rada	sacred twins (always shown together); protectors of children and fertility; associated with medicine; sometimes shown as the triplets Marasa Twa	pale blue & pink	palm leaves	St. Paul & St. Philippe; St. Cosmas & St. Damian; St. Claire & St. Nicholas
Ogou (Ogoun)	Rada / Petwo	<i>Lwa</i> of iron & blacksmithing, triumph, authority, pioneering, & power; often shown as a military general; the ultimate masculine spirit who is the master of iron and lord of battle. Ogou or Ogoun is also used to refer to an entire family of <i>Lwa</i> .	red	machete, sword driven into the earth, red scarf and/or flags, red <i>pakèt kongo</i>	St. James Major*** & St. Jerome
Simbi	Petwo	patron of the rains and river currents; master of all magicians; deliverer of powerful medicines; associated with the watery realms of the ancestors	white, green	snakes in a field of crosses, a well or spring	The Magi, Moses

\* The spellings of *Lwa* names can vary. There are differences between the way the names are spelled in French and the way they are spelled in Haitian Creole (*Kreyòl Ayisyen*).

\*\* Colors and symbols in brackets were only found in one source.

\*\*\* Other names for St. James Major are St. James the Greater, St. James the Great, St. Jacques, Sen Jak, or James, Son of Zebedee (one of the Apostles, and the brother of St. John the Apostle)

This table was compiled using multiple sources. When information in those sources has varied, that found in more than one source has been given preference.<sup>7</sup>

Bwa, Lasirèn, Legba, Loko, Marasa, Ogou, and Simbi. Each has their own realm of influence, symbols, favorite colors, and other preferences. Many of these elements are incorporated into flag designs so that those familiar with the *Lwa* can readily distinguish which *Lwa* is represented by a particular *drapo Vodou*.<sup>6</sup>

There are several different ways to classify and group the *Lwa*—by characteristics that they share in common or by their nation (or family). Three categories that are commonly used to classify the characteristics of the *Lwa* are the *fwet* (*Lwa* who are cool or soothing by nature), the *cho* (those with hot and abrasive personalities), and those *Lwa* who bridge these two extremes. The nations into which *Lwa* are grouped are called *nanchon*. These nations are usually associated with a particular culture of origin in Africa. Examples of nations include Rada, Nago, Djouba, Petwo (also written Petro), Kongo, Ibo, and Gède. The Rada are a group of cool, benevolent spirits, who are invoked for healing and spiritual protection. *Lwa* of the Nago *nanchon* are associated with power, and embody the qualities of leadership and power. The Djouba are the *Lwa* connected to farming and cultivation. A group of “hot” spirits is the Petwo, who are often malevolent and have harsh and abrasive personalities. This group is said to have originated in Haiti within the harsh conditions of slavery. The Kongo are a gracious group of *Lwa* who are known to enjoy song and dance. Another group of *Lwa*, the Ibo, are difficult to satisfy. They are known for their pride and arrogance. Finally, there are the Gède—spirits associated with eroticism and death. This last group of *Lwa* are also known as tricksters. For vexillological research, these groupings are most relevant because *Lwa* in the same categories will often share their preferences for certain colors or will be represented by some common symbols. Sometimes one flag will be made to honor more than one *Lwa* from the same group.<sup>8</sup>

Another very important aspect of Vodou that distinguishes it from many other religions is how it is organized. The doctrine of Vodou rituals is not centrally directed and, as a result, there is a great deal of variation in practice between different Vodou societies (called *sosyetes*). These societies are typically devoted to serving a specific group of *Lwa*. Before moving on to an explanation of how ceremonies are conducted and what role the flags play in the ceremonies, a few more terms need to be defined. The temple where a group of *Vodouisants* gather to worship is called an *ounfò* (*honfour*, *hounfour*, or *humfo*). Within the *ounfò* will be a main sanctuary area called the *peristil* (*perestil*, *peristyle*, or *perystil*). In this part of the temple there will be a central pole called the *poto mitan* (*poteau-mitan*), which is believed to be the conduit through which the *Lwa* arrive in the temple. This is the focal point of the efforts to summon the *Lwa* at the beginning of

the ceremony (*seremoni*). Rituals are led by either a male priest called an *oungan* (*houngan*) or by a female priest who is known as a *manbo* (*mambo*). Initiates to the faith—the members of the Vodou society—are called *ounsi* (*hunsi*).<sup>9</sup>

Vodou ceremonies are far too complex to completely explain within the context of this paper. In general the rituals focus on facilitating communication between the congregation and the spirit world. Through colorful and energetic ceremonies, *Vodouisants* attract the attention of the *Lwa*, summon them, and then entice them to cross through the gates between the spiritual and material worlds. When a *Lwa* is in attendance it will take possession of the priest. This is often described in terms of a divine horseman mounting a *chwal* (horse). Claudine Michel explains it this way:

During Vodou ceremonies, the *Lwa* possess or ‘mount’ the devotees, communicating with the living and answering questions. They deal with human and spiritual conflicts, antagonisms, oppositions, and disharmony which are the source of moral ills and societal imbalance. With imbalance, energy does not flow; things are tied or blocked, thus defying Vodou’s dynamic, fluid and ever-evolving *ethos*. The Vodou *Lwa* intervene in human affairs as they guide, chastise or praise, consistently assisting with healing, opening channels and facilitating the continuous flow of energy.

As with any religion, there are a number of ritual objects that are associated with the practice of Vodou. These include every-day objects required by specific *Lwa*, and also decorative objects that serve different purposes. For example, ornamented bottles (both filled and empty) are set on altars as offerings to the spirits. They are typically decorated with symbols and images, and ornamented with sequins or other colorful coverings. Dolls are sometimes used on altars, but not in the malevolent stereotypical fashion we see on TV and in movies—they are not stuck with pins to magically harm others. Instead, they are used to honor specific *Lwa* or to serve as messengers to the spirits. Another ornamental object found in Vodou temples are *pakèt kongo*. These are cloth packets which contain herbs and other materials. These packets are usually themed in the colors of specific *Lwa*, and are decorated in different fashions. They are used for healing and protection. One additional category of ceremonial item that holds the attention of both collectors and scholars are the *drapo Vodou*—the sacred standards of Haitian Vodou.<sup>10</sup>

## Vodou Flags in Ceremonies

For vexillologists, the most interesting aspect of Vodou ceremonies is the incorporation of flags as ceremonial objects. There are other religions in which flags are used—for example, in Tibetan Buddhism strings of flags inscribed with prayers are strung up so that the wind will distribute blessings into the

environment. In Haitian Vodou the flags are actually ritual objects which have been sanctified to transform them into sacred standards imbued with spiritual power. Called *drapo sèvis*, the flags play an important role in the ceremonies and function as invitations and signals to attract the *Lwa*. Most Vodou societies keep at least two flags devoted to the spirits they serve. When not in use, the flags are furled and leaned against an altar so that they can recharge their spiritual energy.<sup>11</sup>

In his 1959 study of Vodou, Alfred Métraux described how the flags are used in Vodou ceremonies. He also detailed how the movements of the *laplas* and *kò-drapo* maneuver around the *peristil*:

The flags are kept in the sanctuary, along with other objects used in worship. They are brought out at the beginning of a ceremony or when a 'great loa' [*Lwa*] possesses one of the faithful. Also, important visitors are entitled to the honour of walking beneath two crossed flags. When the moment comes to fetch these flags, the flag party, which consists of two *hunsi* [*ounsi*], goes into the sanctuary escorted by the *la-place* [*laplas*] waving his sword. They come out backwards and then literally charge into the *peristyle* [*peristil*] behind their guide who is now twirling his weapon. The choir of *hunsi* [*ounsi*] intones a hymn to Sogbo, protector of flags. The trio manoeuvres and from the four cardinal points salutes the *poteau-mitan* [*poto mitan*], the drums, the dignitaries of the society and finally any distinguished guests, each according to his rank. The *la-place* [*laplas*] and the standard-bearers prostrate themselves in turn before them. These show their respect by kissing the guard of the sabre, the staff of the flag, and make the *la-place* [*laplas*] and the standard-bearers pirouette. The return of the standards is accomplished in a remarkable rite: the two *hunsi* [*ounsi*], still preceded by the *la-place* [*laplas*] pointing his sabre before him, run around the *poteau-mitan* [*poto mitan*], often making quick changes of direction. This musical-ride goes on till the *la-place* [*laplas*] leads them off towards the sanctuary door through which, having first recoiled from it three times, they pass at the double.<sup>12</sup>

Patrick Polk also observed a ceremony and detailed how the flags are used in the ceremonies:

When called for during rituals, drapo are retrieved from one of the *ounfò*'s shrine rooms by the Vodou society's (*sosyete*) swordmaster (*laplas*) and two or three female initiates who serve as the flag-bearers (*kò-drapo*) for the *sosyete*. The members of the colour guard carefully unfurl the drapo and then charge back into the main chamber (*peristil*) of the *ounfò*, where they perform intricate manoeuvres with great pomp and circumstance. Sabre in hand, the *laplas* marches between the flags and directs the lively movements of the *kò-drapo*, thus creating one of the most dazzling spectacles in Vodou. Turning and wheeling with synchronized precision, they first salute the drums, the *poto mitan*, and the four corners of the *peristil*. They then salute all the dignitaries of *sosyete*, who salute

them in return. Once the flags have been introduced and leading members of the congregation properly recognized, the *laplas* and *kò-drapo* return the flags to the shrine from whence they came.<sup>13</sup>

Another account, from Susan Elizabeth Tselos, summarizes the role of the flags from the point at which they enter the *peristil* to the point in the ceremony where the *Lwa* has taken possession of the *oungan*. The entry of the flags occurs in mid-ceremony amid "a cacophony of singing, handclapping, and drumming..."

...As they come from the altar room, the two *hounsis* [*ounsi*] are wrapped in the breathtakingly beautiful drapo. They enter the ceremonial area with the drapo standards clutched in their right hands.

The arrival of the drapo into the *peristyle* [*peristil*] (temple) is an essential mediation between the worlds of spirits and mortals. The brilliant, shimmering beauty of the drapo reinforces the symbols created in the *veve*, and their arrival indicates that an appearance by the desired *lwa* is imminent.

The trio proceeds to the four cardinal points at the edges of the *peristyle* [*peristil*]. The *La Place* [*laplas*] follows them, pitcher of water in one hand, candles in the other. Here they perform more ritual salutations which are concluded by kneeling and kissing the ground three times.

The trio charges back to the *poteau mitan* [*poto mitan*], and circles it in a mock battle of flag waving and sword flashing. The salutations are repeated, and they quickly move on to the drums, and then approach the guests. As they do so, they join the tips of the flag standards and present them to the dignitaries in a sign of respect. The dignitaries return the respect by kissing the guard of the machete and the staff of the drapo.

After this mutual recognition, the trio retreats and circles the *poteau mitan* [*poto mitan*] once again with numerous changes in direction. Finally, the two *hounsis* [*ounsi*] lower the drapo, roll them loosely around the standards and lean them against the *poteau mitan* [*poto mitan*] for the duration of the ceremony.

Within the frenzy of the drapo presentation, the *lwa* arrives and takes possession of the *oungan*'s body. By this time the *veve*, which was so carefully drawn on the ground of the *peristyle* [*peristil*] is obliterated by the feet of the dancing initiates. The spirit has arrived, the salutations have been a success.<sup>14</sup>

Karen McCarthy Brown, in her dissertation, notes that "Vodou flags are wonderful fanciful creations that combine the pomp and circumstance of the military with sequins... The presentation of the flags of the society is a ceremony reminiscent of a military parade that has added to it elements of standard Vodou ritual as well as elements of comic improvisation." Other published descriptions provide additional details such as how the flag-bearers hold the staves in one hand while wrapping the flags across their backs, perhaps in

a protective manner. A number of observers emphasize the ceremonial “charging” of the *laplas* and *kò-drapo* as if they were performing a rite of mock combat. The most important role of the *drapo Vodou* in the ceremony is that they serve as a signal to the *Lwa*, inviting them to take possession of the *oungan* and interact with the congregation.<sup>15</sup>

Polk explains that a typical Vodou society will possess at least two *drapo Vodou*, but sometimes there will be additional flags used in the temple. The banners are key ritual items for many Vodou ceremonies including the rites of initiation, invocation of the *Lwa*, and that of pilgrimage. In his conversations with various Vodou priests, Polk asked which *Lwa* should have flags. The most important, from the perspective of flag use, are Ogou and Danbala. Other *Lwa* which will typically have their own service flags are Ezili Freda, Gede, Loko, and Ayizan. In keeping with the philosophy of *balanse* (balancing spiritual forces), the flags used in a ceremony should represent *Lwa* of opposite characteristics—thus the “hot” *Lwa*, Ogou, is paired with the “cool” *Lwa*, Danbala. This concept of balance means that the most common flag ceremony is the *sèvis drapo de*—a ritual in which 2 flags are used. While the Ogou-Danbala pairing is probably the most common, sometimes Ogou’s banner is paired with that of other “cool” *Lwa* such as Ezili Freda or Agwe. It should be noted that Ogou enjoys a special status for Haitians which makes his *drapo* especially important in Haitian Vodou. As Polk explains, “Ogou is the *Lwa* most closely associated with the Haitian revolution and struggle for independence. Therefore, he is generally viewed as the spiritual leader of the nation and a principle symbol of freedom and the military power which assured it.”<sup>16</sup>

While the 2-flag ceremony is the most common, there are also times when congregations will use 3 flags in their rituals (known as *sèvis drapo twa*). When a third flag is used, it will often be that of a Gede *Lwa* such as Bawon Samdi. The Gede family are seen as mediating forces, so they help to achieve balance between the “hot” and “cold” *Lwa*. Another instance when a third flag might be used is for ceremonies dedicated to Ezili Freda (*sèvis Ezili*). In these ceremonies, her *drapo* will be presented with those of Ogou and Danbala. *Drapo Vodou* are often the most expensive ritual items used by a Vodou society. Perhaps for this reason it has become quite common to have one flag that not only represents Danbala, but also serves as the *drapo* for other like-minded *Lwa*. Polk cites combined banners for Danbala and Ezili Freda, and others that serve three *Lwa* (Danbala, Ezili Freda, and Agwe) as examples of this type of design. These combined flags will have a mix of symbolism so that a *drapo* for Ezili Freda might include not just her symbols, but also the snakes that everyone will recognize as representing Danbala. And, likewise, a flag for Danbala may also have the outline of a heart that would bring Ezili

Freda to mind. Before moving into a more detailed description of these design elements, it is first necessary to examine the role of flags, both in Haitian culture and in the religion of Vodou. This background will offer some interesting clues to the overall meaning of *drapo Vodou* in the symbolism of Vodou.<sup>17</sup>

## Flags in the Culture of Haiti and Vodou

As with many religious topics, there is an origin story that explains the source of the first flags. Since it is important to examine religious issues from the point of view of believers this story should not just be discounted as “myth” or “folklore,” but rather should be included in the overall discussion of the origins of *drapo Vodou*. In her work with Vodou flag maker Clotaire Bazile, Anna Wexler recorded the following story of how the *Lwa* came to use flags:

Everything I’m going to tell you, it’s a history. You must go to the beginning to get to the flags... Manbo Ayizan is the great queen of Vodou—she was the first to present Vodou. All the *Lwa* lived with her but they were not yet enlightened. They didn’t know who they were, what they were supposed to do. It was long, long ago. They all lived in Manbo Ayizan’s house because she was the most powerful, the mother of all the *oungan* who was responsible for watching over everyone in the initiation chamber and knew all the rules for serving the spirits. She initiated people, she treated people, she had what was needed to crush leaves, to take care of people. Then Papa Loko who is responsible for the *ason* began to revolt. Papa Danbala, he also left Manbo Ayizan’s house and stayed in a palm tree where he turned into a snake. Agwe Tawoyo turned into a fish, he commands the sea. Ezili Freda was in the same group. She came to live in the sea, she is a woman who loves jewelry, perfume. Kouzen himself when he lived in Manbo Ayizan’s house he used to clean tables; Zaka he used to work in the fields. He left, too, he tends his own crops now, he works the fields. Each *Lwa* who revolted became responsible for something, symbolized something. They filed out of Manbo Ayizan’s house one by one. Then Papa Sobo said, “Good, I am going to make a flag. He took a piece of wood, he put a little cloth on it, he said, “Good, there is going to be a flag for signaling all the *Lwa*.” Now he’s the one responsible for the flag, the master of the flag. He made one white flag, one red flag... peace, victory... There was a young man who also lived with Manbo Ayizan. Sobo left with the young man and then told him, “You are the *laplas* of the house now.” He left with the young person, the *laplas*, and then Papa Sobo took the flag, each took their place. He left with Bade too, his younger brother, they all left together with the flag. The flag came to be called Sobo and Badè.<sup>18</sup>

Anthropologists often collect stories like this, as they represent how people explain things within their own cultural context. Flag origin stories, of course, are not unique to Haiti.

Other countries have stories that tie their national flag to a supernatural occurrence, a famous battle, or a particular flag maker. In Haiti there is a dramatic story about how revolutionary leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines removed the white stripe from a French flag to form the red and blue Haitian bicolor. This story has Vodou roots as it is often said that the event happened under a *repozwa* (a tree which houses a spirit) near an *ounfò*. In addition, there are two interpretations of the red and blue colors in the Haitian flag. One version indicates that blue represents the Black population of Haiti, while red stands for the Mulattos. The other explains the colors within

a Vodou context. According to this explanation, the colors are “based on the African derived color code for the two *Lwa* of Haitian Vodou that were seen as essential to the successful waging of the war against the Napoleonic armies of France. The blue would stand for the deity *Ezili Dantò*, the all-suffering mother of the Haitian pantheon; the red for the Dahomean and Yoruban deity of war and metallurgy, *Ogou Feray*.” It has also been suggested that Dessalines was possessed by Ogou when he created the national flag. All of these aspects help to explain the bonds between the Haitian people, their national religion, and their flag.<sup>19</sup>



Figure 1. Painting portraying the creation of the Haitian flag during the revolution. To the left of the tree, Jean-Jacques Dessalines uses his sword to remove the white stripe from a French tricolor. Notice that he wears a red uniform coat—the color preferred by Ogou. At right, Catherine Flon sews the remaining stripes together to create the new Haitian bicolor. (Artist: Madsen Mompremier, Source: Fowler Museum at UCLA, Photograph by Don Cole, FMCH X95.22.5)

Both Polk and Wexler have delved into not just the spiritual origin of Vodou flags, but also into the historical circumstances that have influenced the role that flags now play in Haitian life and in the practice of Vodou in that country. These circumstances are related to the history of the European colonization of Africa, the perception of European power by various African cultures, and the enslavement of Africans and subsequent transplantation and mixing of their cultures in the New World. A bit of this story will be relayed here, but for more detail the reader is encouraged to refer to the work that has already been done in this area.<sup>20</sup>

There are a number of vexillological threads that all converged to form the unique flag culture of Haiti and Haitian Vodou. Most scholars have focused on the influence of European colonizers who eventually gained control of many regions in Africa. These Europeans brought with them military flags and rituals, many of which seem to have influenced *drapo Vodou*. For example, the generally square proportions, flag dimensions, and fringed edges of traditional *drapo sèvis* are very similar to regimental banners that would have been used by French troops in their colonies. Polk has also pointed out that French military banners were traditionally blessed before they were presented to the regiments, and that they were stored in churches when not in use—practices that seem to have been transferred directly to the protocol associated with Vodou flags. When tracing the cultural transfer of flags from a military context to their adoption as important ritual objects, it is necessary to consider the symbolic meaning of flags at the point when the transfer occurred. These standards and the ceremonies associated with them were used as physical reminders to the colonized people of the might of the colonial authorities. In essence they became talismans of power in the eyes of some indigenous Africans.<sup>21</sup>

Some African peoples incorporated flags and flag usage into their own cultures to reassert their own sense of power and control. Such flag usage has been documented among the Fon people of Danhomé (now Benin), the Fante people of Ghana, the Ibibio of southeast Nigeria, and others. These cultures did not just adopt European flags. Instead, they created their own unique Africanized interpretations of flags and banners. Patrick Polk notes that, “By the 1600s a wide range of flags were in use throughout the coastal regions and figured prominently in the military rituals of major African states. Ceremonial flag traditions flourished during the colonial occupation of Africa and many have continued into the postcolonial era. The flags serve as a fundamental means of expressing relationships of power and authority and, as such, are integral components within the recognition and maintenance of political, social, and spiritual leadership.” Other

scholars have been quick to point out that the introduction of flags to these various regions of Africa may possibly predate the era of European colonization. Islamic peoples are known to have been active in trade with these regions of Africa as early as 900 C.E., and they possibly could have brought their banners with them. European and Islamic flag usage became Africanized and their traditions intermingled with the variety of cultural beliefs and practices of the peoples of Africa. Once enslaved and forcibly mixed with each other, the Africans blended their traditions together to form the unique culture of Haiti. Just as the *Lwa* and Saints became syncretized, it can also be said that flags and flag culture were as well. And, just as the peoples of Africa asserted their own power through the use of flags, the people of Haiti developed their own traditions regarding flags.<sup>22</sup>

### Flag Making and Design

Vodou flags (especially *drapo sèvis*) are traditionally hand-made under the direction of a Vodou priest. Anna Wexler has worked to document the flag-making process. For her Ph.D. dissertation, she worked with an *oungan* named Clotaire Bazile, who is known for both his work with service flags and flags for the art market. Wexler interviewed Bazile and assisted him in the creation of a flag. A typical *drapo Vodou* used in services measures about 40 x 40 inches (91.4 x 91.4 cm). Of course, there are variations from flag maker to flag maker. To begin making a flag a piece of fine cloth, such as satin, is stretched across and secured to a wooden frame along with a stiffer backing fabric. The *oungan* then outlines the design for the flag onto the fabric. Bazile explains that “When I draw a flag, it’s the spirits who direct me. They tell me to do it.” He also described how the *Lwa* direct the design process. “It is the *Lwa* who guide me to change the work; for example, a *Lwa* says, ‘You shouldn’t use that design today – don’t use the squares divided into eight triangles (for the border)—just do it that way—divide them into two triangles, cut it like that, choose two colors’—it’s another type of design.”<sup>23</sup>

This type of *Lwa*-directed creation results in one of the most unique aspects of Vodou flags, from the point of view of a vexillologist—each *drapo Vodou* is a one-of-a-kind creation and has its own unique design. There is no one prescribed way to make a flag for a particular *Lwa*. However, to be an effective symbol there has to be some sort of standardization. Elements of symbolism are the key to understanding which *Lwa* is connected to which *drapo*. Designs can incorporate such diverse elements as a *vèvè* (a ritual drawing), the image of a saint or *Lwa*, and/or one or more of the *Lwa*’s symbols. For example, a *drapo* for Ogou may simply depict his *vèvè*—a sword framed by two banners. Often flags for Ogou/Sen Jak

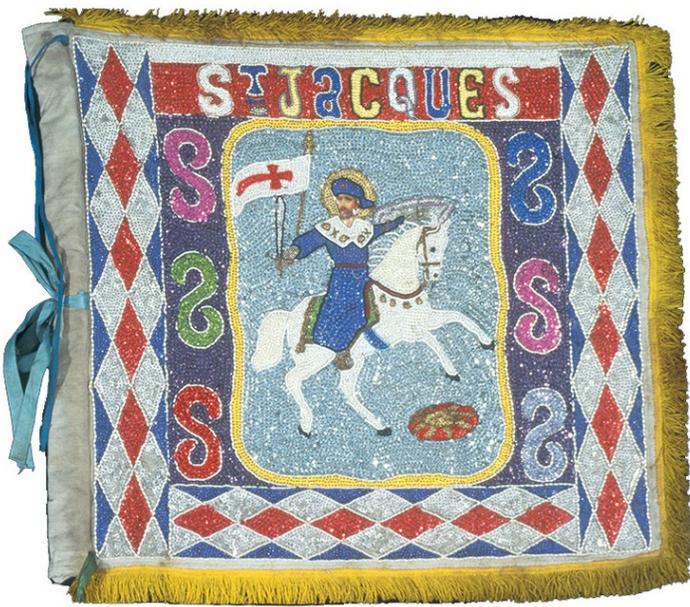


Figure 2. *Drapo sèvis* for Odou in his form as Sen Jak. The image on this flag was inspired by one of the chromolithographs of the Catholic saint that are popular with Vodou practitioners. Note the hoist ties and fringe that are typical of flags created for temple use. (Artist: Silva Joseph, Source: Fowler Museum at UCLA, Photograph by Don Cole, FMCH X94.50.1B).



Figure 3. Art flag with the full *vèvè* of Ogou. Note the treatment around the edge of the flag that is typical of those made for the art market. (Photo by the author, Flag courtesy of Claudine Michel).

have an image of St. James Major (patron saint of Spain) as the central emblem. According to tradition, this saint miraculously appeared to fight with the Christian army at the Battle of Clavijo—a legendary battle related to the expulsion of the Muslims from Spain. On Vodou flags he is frequently shown in this role as a “Moor-slayer”. Sometimes the imagery is achieved by incorporating an actual chromolithograph (a colorful paper image) of the Saint into the flag. In other cases, the flag emblem is an embroidered outline traced from a chromolithograph. The images are then embellished with sequins and/or beads to complete the decoration of the flag. And then there are the basic symbols of Ogou which also might be used on the flags—a machete, a sword driven into the earth, a red scarf, and flags. Finally, there is a color palette associated with each *Lwa* and group of *Lwa*. In the case of Ogou and his family of *Lwa* the color of choice is red, so that this will be the dominant color on his flags. In addition, it is not uncommon for the name of the *Lwa* to be incorporated into the design, written either in Haitian Creole (*Kreyòl Ayisyen*) or in French.<sup>24</sup>

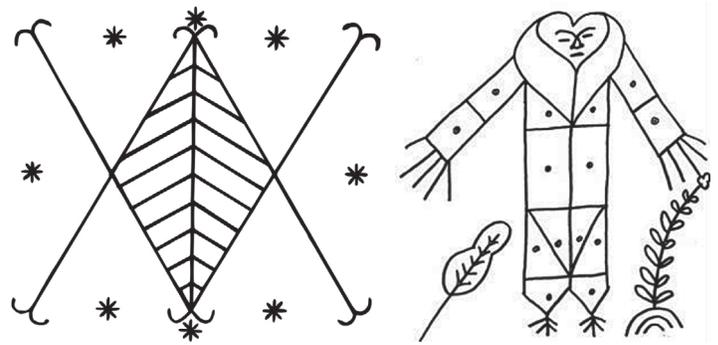
As previously mentioned, *vèvè* are a common design element on *drapo Vodou*. The *vèvè* that are created at the beginning of a Vodou ceremony are outlines “traced” onto the *ounfò* floor by the *oungan*. These drawings are produced using corn meal, flour, or other powdered materials. In the process the priest deftly manipulates the material through his fingers to create straight lines, curves, and details as required by ritual. The purpose of the *vèvè* is to serve as an initial invitation to the *Lwa* and each is meant for a specific one. Karen McCarthy Brown, in her dissertation, describes the importance of the *vèvè* in the ceremony: “the execution of one of these drawings in the ritual context is a direct summons to a particular god [*Lwa*] to ascend from the watery world of *Gînnè*, the home of the gods beneath the earth and possess one of his worshippers so that they all can talk with him, tell him their problems, procure his advice and blessing.” However, since the drawings are made of powder they are only temporary beacons. As the ceremony progresses the images on the floor are obliterated by the dancing feet of the congregation. Museum curator Delores Yonker notes that “designs on the flags lift these ground drawings into the air and energize them with moving, reflective surfaces and dynamic zig-zag and pinwheel borders.”<sup>25</sup>

Some drawings of a *vèvè* for a particular *Lwa* will be very elaborate, while others will seem to be just the basic elements. How a design is traced is passed down from one *oungan* to another priest that he is training. The design is dictated by the *Lwa*, rather than being open to the artistic whims of the priest. This is very similar to the way that icons as said to be painted in Orthodox Christianity—they are divinely directed rather than being open to artistic interpretation. As a result

of the decentralization of Vodou and how the knowledge is shared, it is possible to find *vèvè* for the same *Lwa* that look slightly different. However, there will be basic elements for each *Lwa* that should be included in their symbols. *Agwe* will always have a boat, the *vèvè* for *Bawon Samdi* will always have a cross from a cemetery, and a sword with banners will always represent *Ogou*. Imagery in *vèvè* combine symbolic elements from Africa and Europe, as well as some derived from Native American traditions and Free Masonry. According to Karen McCarthy Brown, a Vodou priest will typically know how to make 25-35 different *vèvè*. When drawn onto the floor of the *peristil* the completed designs will be nearly 3-foot square in size. While each *oungan* has their own style of creating *vèvè*, Brown suggests that there are certain constants—the center axis (if there is one in the *vèvè*) is drawn first, moving from the *poto mitan* outward towards the priest's feet. The last elements added are the *puè*, which Brown describes as “figurative elements that have an iconographic relationship to the particular [*Lwa*] in whose [*vèvè*] they appear.” As he works his way around the *poto mitan* the *oungan* will create a *vèvè* for several different *Lwa* involved in the ceremony.<sup>26</sup>

Understanding all the symbolism of a *vèvè* requires knowledge of the *Lwa* for whom it is a beacon. In her dissertation, Brown describes how *Ayizan* “uses the power that comes from below (the power of purity) against the knowledge that comes from above (the knowledge of how to harness and use the powers of the gods for destructive purposes).” She then explains that this dualism is visible in *Ayizan's vèvè*—“The V that is open to the forces below thrusts up to the top of the drawing; that which is open to the forces above is grounded firmly at the bottom.” In contrast to the somewhat abstract design of the *vèvè* for *Ayizan*, others draw upon more concrete imagery. For example, the *vèvè* for *Gran Bwa* portrays the *Lwa* himself, along with materials from his realm of influence. Brown notes that “the *vèvè* tells us that *Gran Bois* (*Bwa*) has to do with forests and leaves and that he is masculine, and so forth.” These are just two examples of the rich use of symbolism in the ritual drawings of Vodou that are sometimes found on the flags. Common *vèvè*-based imagery found on *drapo Vodou* include *Agwe's* boat, *Bawon Samdi's* cross, *Ezili Freda's* checkered heart pierced with a dagger, the flags and sword of *Ogou*, the crossroads for *Kafou*, and the palm tree and snakes that represent *Danbala* and *Ayida Wèdo*.<sup>27</sup>

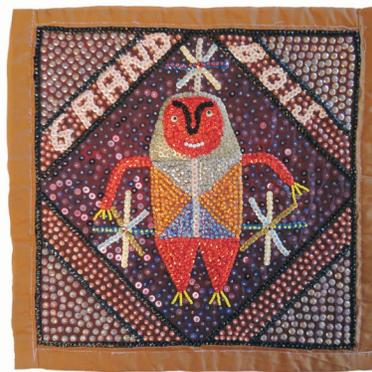
In addition to the *vèvè*, another common element on Vodou flags are images of the *Lwa*. On some flags the image will be a popular depiction of the *Lwa*. For example, flags for *Bawon Samdi* often show this *Lwa* wearing a hat and standing near a cemetery cross. *Drapo* for *Lasirèn* depict her in her popular form as a mermaid. Most flags for *Bosou* show him in the form of a bull. Flags for *Gran Bwa* typically show



Figures 4-5. *Vèvè* for *Ayizan* (left) and *Gran Bwa*. (*Ayizan* image from *Wikipedia*).

the *Lwa* as the half-man half-tree figure from his *vèvè*. It is also quite common to find flags for the *Marasa* that feature the sacred twins or three children. In the aforementioned cases the image is usually just drawn onto the flag and decorated with beads or sequins. Another type of *drapo Vodou* with images of the *Lwa* are those where the image depicted on the flag is of the Saint with whom the *Lwa* is syncretized. Often these flags incorporate an image from a chromolithograph—a multicolor printed picture of a Catholic saint. The chromolithographs which are sometimes used on flags became readily available in Haiti starting in the mid-19th century. They are now quite common in the practice of Vodou and are found on alters and elsewhere in the *ounfò*, including on *drapo Vodou*. Some flag makers incorporate the image of the *Lwa*/Saint by tracing the image from the chromolithograph onto the flag and then outlining it with sequins and beads. Often, though, an actual chromolithograph is incorporated into the flag itself. The face is usually covered over with a protective clear plastic film and then the rest of the image is embellished with sequins. Flags with chromolithograph-inspired images are most common for *Ogou* in his form as *St. James Major*, *Danbala* in his form as *St. Patrick* or *Moses*, and *Ezili Freda* in her form as the *Madonna*.<sup>28</sup>

Early flag makers relied on the use of brightly colored fabrics such as satins, brocades, taffetas, and velvet to bring color to their flags. On these early flags beads and sequins were applied mainly to the outlines of the *vèvè* and other symbols. In addition, sequins were sometimes applied sparingly to the field to make the flag reflective and more eye-catching. As one Vodou practitioner explained, “The spirits like shiny surfaces.” This style of sequin distribution across the field is known as *simen grenn* (scattered seeds). It is more typical of how *drapo sèvis* were made in the past and is often referred to as “old style” or “traditional” by flag makers who still use it. Eventually when sequins became more readily available in Haiti they were used more and more on the flags. In most workshops (called *atilye*) the *oungan* draws out the basic design of the flag and then the



Figures 8-10. Above: Flags with *Lwa* images for Gran Bwa (top left), Lasirèn (top right), and Bosou (bottom). The flag for Bosou was damaged in the 2010 earthquake. (Photos by the author, flags courtesy of Claudine Michel)



Figures 6-7. Above: *Vèvè*-inspired flags for Gran Bwa (top) and Ezili Freda (bottom). (Photos by the author, flags courtesy of Claudine Michel).



Figure 11. Right: Flag for Ezili Freda incorporating a chromolithograph of the Mater Dolorosa. Only the head and one hand of the original image can be seen on the flag. The remainder has been covered with sequins and beads. (Artist: Yves Telemak, Source: Fowler Museum at UCLA, Photograph by Denis Nervig, FMCH X94.6.8)

work of filling in the details by sewing on the sequins one-by-one is completed by carefully-trained assistants. Bazile is very particular about how the sequins are placed—they must overlap each other, all going in the same direction. Other flag makers apply their decorations differently. Tina Girouard documented the traditional 5-step technique for securing



Figures 12-13. Two art flags made in the “old style” with scattered sequins. Above: flag for Ezili Dantò. Below: flag for Kafou. (Photos by the author, flags courtesy of Claudine Michel)

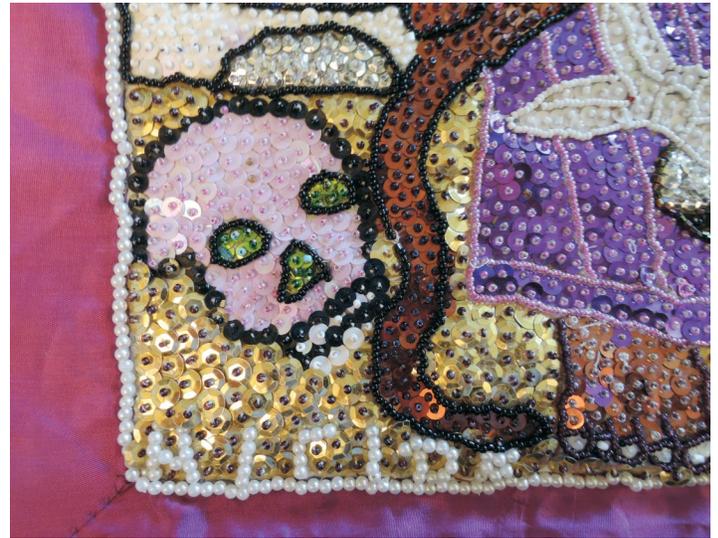


Figure 14. Detail from an art flag for Bawon Samdi showing application of sequins with bead anchors using the five-step process. Note the artist’s signature “written” with white beads in the lower left corner of the flag. For the full flag, see Figure 16. (Photo by the author, flag courtesy of Claudine Michel)



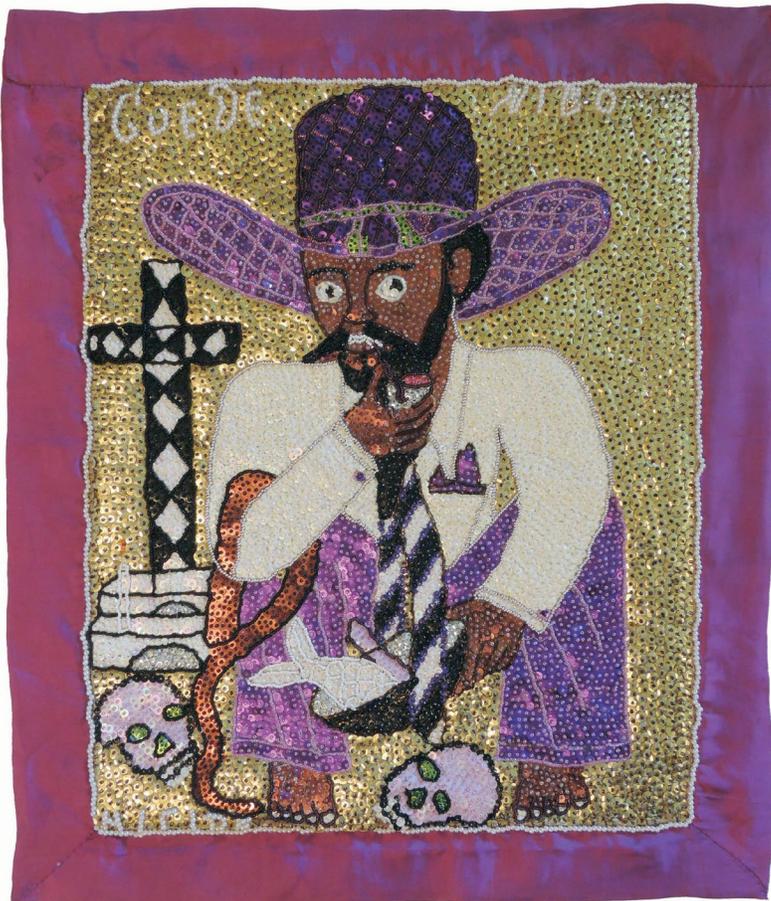
Figure 15. Detail from an art flag for Lasirèn showing a different style of sequin application. Note the use of beads to outline different color regions and to fill in some areas of the design. For the full flag, see Figure 19. (Photo by the author, flag courtesy of Claudine Michel)

sequins to the flags: “Needles guide the thread up through the cloth, through the sequin, through the glass bead which will hold it in place, then back down through the sequin to the cloth. A typical work requires from 18–20,000 sequins (usually 8 mm) to be sewn, a feat accomplished in about ten days.” On *drapo* made for the art market, the flag makers typically fill in the entire surface of the flag with sequins.<sup>29</sup>

Another design element found on *drapo Vodou* is the use of geometric shapes in contrasting colors. Sometimes the entire field of the flag will be done in a checker-board pattern or will have a design of alternating triangles behind the main emblem. On other *drapo* the geometric designs are found around the borders of the flag. It is difficult to accurately determine when different design elements were first incorporated into Vodou flags because the earliest flags that have survived the tropical climate of Haiti and the occasion “anti-Vodou” campaigns carried out by the government only date back to the 1930s. Some scholars suggest that the geometric patterns found in the flags are reminiscent of the *lozengy* (diamond) and *fusilly* (elongated diamond) designs associated with European military banners. Of course, there are also African cultures that produced their own geometrically-patterned cloth so these elements could have African, as well as European, roots. Susan Tselos suggests that the types of patterns associated with *drapo Vodou* today only became popular around the time of the 1960s when sequins became more readily available to the flag makers. Nowadays, the

patterns are quite common and even expected by those who collect the flags as *objets d'art*. After all the sequins and beads have been applied, a colorful backing fabric is added to the reverse side of the flag, as well as a border. Most *drapo sèvis* are also fringed, a practice that was very likely adopted from the flag traditions of military regiments. Flags created for the art market are typically unfringed and rely on the sequins for their flash and color.<sup>30</sup>

The colors used in Vodou flags vary greatly. Dominant colors on a flag will usually draw upon the favorite colors of the *Lwa* for whom the flag was designed, as well as the colors of that *Lwa's* family or group. For example, since Danbala prefers the color white and Ayida Wedo prefers blue and white, a flag for these *Lwa* would use these as the principal colors. Likewise, a flag for Papa Legba would use red and white, the colors favored by that *Lwa*. Nancheon colors include white for the Rada, red for the Petro, and black and purple for the Ghede. Other colors will be liberally used by the flag maker, so that any given Vodou flag can be quite colorful.<sup>31</sup>



Figures 16-17. Two art flags for the Ghede which demonstrate the use of the *nanchon* colors—purple and black. (Photos by the author, flags courtesy of Claudine Michel)

## Sacralization of the Flags

In her research Anna Wexler asked one flag maker about the process through which *drapo Vodou* are sanctified and therefore transformed from colorful flags into sacred objects. She reports that “According to flag maker Edgar Jean-Louis, unbaptized flags ‘*pa gen nanm*’ (don’t have soul, energy), unlike consecrated *drapo* which can acquire ‘*plis nanm*’ (more soul), ‘*fòs*’ (force) and ‘*kouraj*’ (courage) by participating in ceremonies.” Wexler notes that Jean-Louis interchangeably described the process of sanctification as both “baptism” and “*kanzo*”—a term used for the second level of Vodou initiation. Perhaps this is because, like initiates, the flags must be prepared for their roles in formal Vodou ceremonies.

In the version of this ceremony he described, a mixture of oil and *fèy* (leaves) are prepared in a pot. As a mixture burns and the flames leap up, the flag is passed through them. On the final day of the three day ritual, lasting from Friday until Sunday, a dance is held to celebrate and formally present the flag to the *Lwa* for whom it is intended.<sup>32</sup>

Wexler also reports another version of this transformative process described to her by flag makers Monique and Pollone Colin.

In their version, the flag is sequestered in the *djevo* (initiation chamber) for up to eight days and made to *kouche* or lie down, like human candidates, on the sign of the *Lwa* to whom it is dedicated. There it rests on a special bed surrounded by a white curtain until ‘*ou leve li*’ (you get it up) and then ‘*ou resevwa drapo a*’ (you receive the flag) with a meal consisting of chicken killed for the occasion, rice, plantains, yams, spaghetti, and kola which is placed beside the flag for the *Lwa* within it to consume. After the meal, the flag is put to bed again and brought out of the *djevo* the following day ready to assume its public ritual functions.<sup>33</sup>

To those who do not practice Vodou these accounts might sound very strange. Again, it is important to pause and adopt a neutral point of view. World cultures and religions abound with examples of ceremonies through which inanimate objects are blessed or sanctified to give them new meaning. Objects used in the rituals of many religions are blessed to transform them into sacred objects. For example, in Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, and other Christian faiths the rite of transubstantiation is believed to transform bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. Medallions can be blessed as a means to protect the wearer or provide spiritual support. Physical locations are also consecrated so that a place of worship or a cemetery is transformed into “holy ground.” All of these practices reinforce that these elements in Vodou are more rooted in mainstream religious

practice than they initially appear to be. Again, much of the misunderstanding of Vodou as a religion is probably the result of the decades of negative stereotyping of the faith by non-believers.<sup>34</sup>

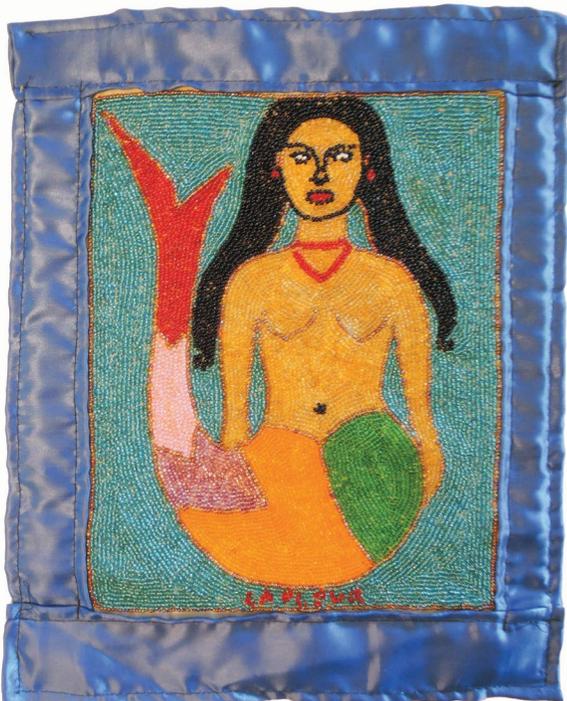
There are also examples of this sort of ritual transformation from secular life. For example, in the rituals associated with launching ships, they are christened by breaking a bottle of champagne over the bow and speaking the name of the ship aloud. This process ritualistically “baptizes” the vessel and prepares it for the transition from its “birthplace” in the shipyard to its new marine environment. Vexillologists should also be familiar with numerous types of flag rituals that are practiced in various cultures. For example, it is not uncommon for soldiers to carry small versions of their national flags as totems or good-luck charms. In Japanese culture it has been a wide-spread practice, especially during World War II, for friends and families to present soldiers with *hinomaru yosegaki*—signed “good luck” flags—before their deployment. These flags frequently carried stamped impressions from temple seals, adding a spiritual element to the cloth. Military rituals around the world also demonstrate the many ways in which flags are revered, honored, and used to salute higher authority. Flags are awarded combat ribbons, they are saluted, they are captured, they are kissed, they are dipped in deference to monarchs, they are retired through elaborate ceremonies, they are preserved as national relics, etc. Once the flag rituals of Vodou are considered within the broader context of these practices they do not seem so strange. It is not difficult to understand how Vodou practitioners can believe that the flags, once baptized and transformed into ritual objects, can have acquired spiritual power of their own.

As has been previously discussed, there are many aspects of the topic of *drapo Vodou* which are of interest to vexillologists. First, the history of flag usage in Europe, Africa, and Haiti has influenced the usage of flags in Haitian Vodou. Second, the designs of the banners present a special challenge to those who study flags. They are quite different than the other groups of flags with which we are familiar—there are no design specifications or standards which govern the creation of these flags. Each *drapo* is a unique work of art. This aspect of Vodou flags forces us to delve more into the underlying colors and symbolism for the *Lwa* in order to “read” the message sent by each flag. Finally, there is the sacred nature of the flags. Again, unlike most flags that we study *drapo Vodou* are considered to be more than just flags—they are sacred items which are believed to be imbued with spiritual power. Each of these aspects makes Vodou flags an area worthy of study by vexillologists.

## Flags as Art

The story of *drapo Vodou* does not end with their ceremonial use, however. There is one final twist that makes this category of flags even more interesting. At some point they became recognized not just as ritual objects, but also as works of art. This transformation, like the syncretism of symbols that changed flags into sacred standards, was rooted in the

experience of cross-cultural interaction. Interest in Vodou flags as art objects is a relatively new phenomenon which began in the 1950s and 1960s. At this time collectors of “primitive art” began to take an interest in the ceremonial objects used in Vodou ceremonies. On their trips to Haiti they would visit Vodou priests and arrange to acquire objects, even asking if they could buy the *drapo* used in the temples. Eventually, the



Figures 18-21. Four art flags for Lasirèn showing a variety of designs. She is a popular subject on *drapo* made for the art market. (Photos by the author, flags courtesy of Claudine Michel).

makers of *drapo Vodou* found that by making smaller and more artistic flags specifically for sale to art collectors, they could develop a source of income to fund their Vodou societies. Many Haitian flag makers have now added the title “artist” to their status as *oungan*. In addition, the flags have gained more status as art objects as museums have collected them and developed exhibits focusing on Haitian art in general, the arts of Vodou, and *drapo Vodou* specifically.<sup>36</sup>

Stylistically, art flags can be quite different from those produced for temple use. Makers of art flags usually omit the fringe, opting for a treatment around the edge of the flag that is more typical of the binding on a blanket. Since these flags are meant to be displayed as art and not secured to a staff, they also omit the ties at the hoist of the flag. While ceremonial flags are typically made in standard sizes, the size of art

In the early days when Vodou flags were made for the art market, they were still made by an *oungan* and his assistants using traditional designs which echoed the look of *drapo sèvis*. As the demand for *drapo Vodou* increased and *oungan* also gained the title of “artist,” they began to exercise more creativity when making flags. This stylistic experimentation increased as Haitian painters and other artists, who were not practicing Vodou priests, began to produce flags. Today, one can find a variety of flag designs for sale as art. Most flags still represent and “are made for” a particular *Lwa*, but the overall designs



Figure 22. Art flag with decorated with the Haitian coat of arms.  
(Photo by the author, flag courtesy of Claudine Michel)

flags varies dramatically depending upon the flag maker and the customer for whom the flag is intended. Larger flags are more expensive, so they can take longer to sell. Smaller flags are easier to make, but bring in lower prices. For this reason, a flag maker might produce flags that range in size from 12 x 12 inches to 40 x 80 inches. It is also not unusual for flag artists to sign their work by incorporating either with their initials or their name into the design (usually at the bottom of the flag). In addition, art flags are not baptized so that they do not have the same sacred status as service flags.<sup>37</sup>



Figures 23-24. Two art flags with non-Vodou themes. Top: a Catholic angel, Bottom: Flag bearing the slogan “Aba la Miser,” which translates as “Down with Misery”. (Photos by the author, Flags courtesy of Claudine Michel)

emphasize aesthetics and market demand. In other cases flag artists have strayed from the look of service flags completely so that their *drapo Vodou* are more like fabric posters or paintings. Themes on these flags can range from political slogans and images to more artistic portrayals of life in Haiti. Regardless of the designs, these flags share a common lineage based upon the traditional use of flags in Vodou ceremonies, the importance of flags in Haitian life, and the many influences that converged and evolved into the tradition of *drapo Vodou*. Sales of Vodou flags to art collectors, museums, and tourists also serve as a valuable source of income for Vodou societies to fund their congregations. Their importance is not just as folk art, but also as a way to keep this tradition alive and ensure that it will be passed down from generation to generation. In this way the people of Haiti have developed their own unique style of flags which is both highly symbolic and very colorful.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

This discussion is just a brief introduction to Vodou flags intended to expose vexillologists to this rich and diverse category of flags. While written as a review article to highlight work that has already been conducted by anthropologists, folklorists, and art historians, it is also meant to challenge vexillologists to expand their studies of flags. On first glance a *drapo Vodou* produced for the art market may be seen as more of a fabric assemblage than a flag. But on closer examination of the cultural contexts from within this tradition arose, it becomes obvious that the people who make them intend them to be seen as flags. Once the vexillologist understands this context it becomes possible to see how they fit into the broader scope of world flag culture.

There are many areas in which vexillologists can expand upon and contribute to the body of knowledge about *drapo Vodou*. With our understanding and appreciation of the meanings behind colors and symbols, we can conduct detailed symbolic analyses of this body of flags. We could do this by comparing and contrasting a variety of flags for one specific *Lwa*, or by doing this for all the *Lwa* in a particular nation. What types of commonalities do we find and what do they tell us about this category of flags?

In addition, there are other African American religious traditions such as Santería where flags are used in ceremonial contexts. Perhaps a cross-cultural examination of flag use in both Vodou and Santería could produce more information about the similarities and differences between these religions. The possibilities for research are numerous and can result in new information about the roles of flags in human societies that will be not just of interest to vexillologists, but also to scholars of anthropology, political science, history, art history, religious studies, and other fields.



Figure 25. Art flag for Ezili Freda. (Photo by the author, flag in the collection of the author)

## Appendix: Glossary of Terms

**Ason:** A ceremonial rattle used in Vodou ceremonies. Also spelled *asson*.

**Atilye:** A workshop or studio where Vodou flags are made. Also used to describe those who assist the flag maker. Also spelled *atelye*.

**Ayisyen:** Haitian.

**Ayiti:** Haiti.

**Balanse:** To balance or create equilibrium among spiritual forces. This concept is often demonstrated by pairing the flags of “hot spirits” with those of “cool” spirits.

**Bondye:** God; Refers to the Supreme Being in Vodou, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Likely derived from the French *Bon Dieu*, meaning “Good Lord.”

**Cho:** Hot; Used to describe *Lwa* whose personalities are hot and abrasive.

**Chromolithograph:** A brightly-colored printed image of a Catholic saint. These are sometimes incorporated into a flag or used as models for portrayals of the *Lwa* on drapo.

**Chwal:** A horse; used to refer to servitor who serves as a host for the possession of a *Lwa*. For this reason, the *Lwa* are sometimes called “Divine Horsemen.”

**Djèvo:** A sanctuary or treatment room within an *ounfò* dedicated to a specific *Lwa* or group of *Lwa*. Also used as an initiation chamber. This is where *drapo Vodou* are kept when they are not being used for ceremonies.

**Drapo:** Flag. Also written *drapò*.

**Drapo sèvis:** A flag that is actually used in Vodou ceremonies (not applied to flags made for the art market only). Service flags typically have fringe around the edges and ties at the hoist.

**Drapo Vodou:** Vodou flag. Refers to both flags used in Vodou services and to flags made for the art market. Often shortened to “*drapo*.”

**Fwet:** Cool; Used to describe *Lwa* who are cool or soothing by nature.

**Gîné:** Refers to Africa or the underwater home where the *Lwa* and the dead reside. Often used synonymously with *Ginen*.

**Ginen:** West Africa. Often used synonymously with *Gîné*.

**Kafou:** An intersection or crossroads. Also spelled *kalfou*.

**Kanzo:** The second level of Vodou initiation. Also used to describe the baptism or sanctification of flags.

**Kò-drapo:** The flag corps or color guard that carries a Vodou society's flags during ceremonies. This group includes the *laplas* (swordmaster) and the *pôt drapo* (flagbearers).

**Kreyòl:** Creole; The language of Haiti, derived from French.

**Laplas:** The swordmaster who leads the *kò-drapo* during the presentation of Vodou flags. Also spelled *La Place*. The *laplas* is usually male.

**Lwa:** A spirit or deity of Vodou. Used in both the singular and plural. Also spelled *Loa*.

**Manbo:** A Vodou priest (female). Also spelled *mambo*.

**Nanchon:** Nation or group of *Lwa*. Examples of *nanchons* include Rada, Nago, Djouba, Petwo (also written Petro), Kongo, Ibo, and Gède.

**Ounfò:** A Vodou temple. Also spelled *honfour*, *hounfour*, *humfo*, or *houmfò*.

**Oungan:** A Vodou priest (male). Also written *houngan* or *gangan*.

**Ounsi:** A Vodou initiate, a member of a Vodou congregation. Also spelled *hunsi*.

**Pakèt:** A packet or bundle. Also spelled *paké*.

**Pakèt kongo:** A spiritually-activated bundle.

**Peristil:** The main chamber in a Vodou temple where ceremonies are held. Also spelled *perestil*, *peristyle*, or *perystil*.

**Petwo:** The pantheon of “hot” Vodou spirits who are noted for their harsh and abrasive personalities and often malevolent behavior. Also spelled *petro*.

**Pôt drapo:** A term that specifically refers to the flagbearers in the *kò-drapo*. Members of the *pôt drapo* are typically female.

**Poto mitan:** The sacred center pole of the *perestil* (main ceremonial chamber). Most ceremonies occur near this pole and it is believed to be the conduit through which the *Lwa* ascend into the temple. Also spelled *poteau mitan* or *poteau-mitan*.

**Pwê:** A charm or power object. Also refers to figurative elements that have an iconographic relationship to the particular *Lwa* in whose *vèvè* they appear.

**Pwen:** Star shapes in a *vèvè* and on a flag that are used as power points.

**Rada:** The pantheon of “cool” Vodou spirits who are generally associated with healing and spiritual protection. The Rada are considered to be good-natured and dependable. These spirits are said to originate in *Ginen* (West Africa).

**Reine drapo:** A “flag queen” who is in charge of displaying the flags in the opening of a Vodou ceremony. Also spelled *Renn Drapo*.

**Repozwa:** A repository. Also used to describe the tree under which the Haitian flag was created, because it was believed to house a spirit. Also spelled *reposwa*.

**Sen:** A Saint or divinity; within the context of Haitian Vodou the Saints are frequently syncretized with a specific *Lwa*.

**Seremoni:** Ceremony in Vodou. Also called *sèvis*.

**Sèvi Lwa:** Serving the Spirits; Another name for Vodou.

**Sèvis:** A Vodou ceremony or service. Also called a *seremoni*.

**Sèvis drapo de:** A ceremony in which two flags are used.

**Sèvis drapo twa:** A ceremony in which three flags are used.

**Sèvitè:** A practitioner of Vodou; literally, one who serves the *Lwa*. Also spelled *serviteur*. Synonym of *Vodouisant*.

**Simen grenn:** “Scattered seeds,” refers to the more traditional technique of scattering sequins or beads across the field of a *drapo Vodou*, rather than covering the entire surface with sequins as is now typically done on art flags.

**Sosyete:** Society, used to describe the congregation of a Vodou temple.

**Syncretism:** The process through which *Lwa* became associated with specific Catholic Saints.

**Vèvè:** Ritual designs that invoke spirits; these designs are often used as central motifs on Vodou flags. Also written *vèvé* or *veve*.

**Vodou:** The traditional religion of Haiti. Variant spellings are Vodun, Vodoun, Vaudou, Voudoun, Vodou. The spelling Voodoo carries with it many negative connotations.

**Vodouisant:** A practitioner of Vodou. Also spelled *vodouizan*. Synonym of *sèvitè*.

Note: Spellings of these terms and the use of accent marks vary from source to source. These differences are the result of some authors using the French spellings and others using variant spellings in Haitian Creole and English. For the purpose of consistency the author has chosen the spellings that seemed most common in recent sources and has used them throughout this paper. Where spellings or italicization in quotations do not match that used in this paper, that used in the original quote has been used. In some cases the author's preferred spellings have been added into the quotes using brackets in order to ease readability for those unfamiliar with Vodou terminology.

Excerpted from the glossaries in *Haitian Vodou Flags* (by Patrick Arthur Polk), *Spirits in Sequins: Vodou Flags of Haiti* (by Nancy Josephson), *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (edited by Donald J. Cosentino): 430-433, and *The Vèvè of Haitian Vodou: A Structural Analysis of Visual Imagery* (by Karen McCarthy Brown): 419-420. Special thanks to Claudine Michel, who provided personal input to this glossary.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Patrick Arthur Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags* (Jackson, Miss.: University of Mississippi Press, 1997); Nancy Josephson, *Spirits in Sequins: Vodou Flags of Haiti* (Atglen, Penn.: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 2007); Patrick Arthur Polk, *Fabric and Power: Vodou Flags, "Collective Symbolism, and Rites of Authority in Haiti,"* PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1999; Anna Hartmann Wexler, "For the Flower of Ginen: The Artistry of Clotaire Bazile, A Haitian Vodou Flagmaker," PhD diss., Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1998. These are the monograph-length works that were essential for this research. Articles and papers will be cited in the sections where they are relevant.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 15-23; Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel, "Introduction," in *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth, and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), xvii-xxvii; Richard Brent Turner, "The Haiti-New Orleans Vodou Connection: Zora Neale Hurston as Initiate-Observer," in *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture: Invisible Powers*, ed. Claudine Michel and Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 117-134; Henrietta B. Cosentino, "Sacred Arts of What?: A Note on Orthography," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald J. Cosentino, (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), xiii-xiv.

Some basic research into the religion of Vodou was an essential first step for this paper. Finding unbiased information can sometimes be difficult. One way to get started is to do some basic reading on the topic. The *Wikipedia* article on Vodou and a web page from the Haitian Consulate were used as a starting point. Next, I consulted more scholarly sources about the topic. Identifying those sources was a bit tricky, because they needed to be sources that were considered valid by scholars in the field of Haitian studies. Using the bibliographies of works I had found on Vodou flags, I was able to work back to their basic sources of information on Vodou.

Alternative spellings of Vodou include Vodun, Vodoun, Vaudou, Voudoun, Vodou, as well as the spelling commonly used in the United States—voodoo. These many spellings come from a variety of linguistic roots including different African languages, French, Haitian Creole, and southern American English. As Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel noted in their introduction to a collection of essays on the religion by leading Haitian scholars, "thus far, in French or English, there is no correct way to spell the name of Haiti's national religion." Different spellings and pronunciations of the term are the result of the variety of world views which influenced its belief system. While the Haitian Language Academy seems to have settled on Vodou, many Haitians simply refer to their religion as *sèvi Lwa* (Serving the Spirits).

For an excellent discussion of the evolution of American prejudices regarding Vodou, see Laënnec Hurbon, "American Fantasy and Haitian Vodou," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*: 181-197. This volume also contains a useful glossary of *Lwa* names and Vodou terminology (see pages 430-433).

Finally, I must confess that I chose to give this paper at the NAVA meeting in New Orleans precisely because of the tourist appeal of Voodoo in that city. There are real practitioners of Haitian Vodou in New Orleans, but there is also a hodgepodge of "Voodoo" culture in the city as well. For a quick run-down on the nature of New Orleans Voodoo and its tourist trappings, see the discussion in Ina J. Fandrich's article, "Yorùbá Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo." She discusses the nature of the Historic New Orleans Museum, the tourist trade in Voodoo, and then compares and contrasts Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo. Ina J. Fandrich, "Yorùbá Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo," *Journal of Black Studies* 37 no. 5 (May 2007): 775-791.

<sup>3</sup> Consulate General of Haiti in Chicago, "Haitian Vodou," <http://www.haitianconsulate.org/vodou.html>, accessed 27 June 2014; Métraux, 25-57; Bon Mambo Vye Zo Komande LaMenfo (Patricia Scheu), *Serving the Spirits: The Religion of Vodou* (n.p.: n.p., 2011), 61-99.

<sup>4</sup> Claudine Michel, "Vodou: Visible & Invisible Worlds," in *The Descent of the Lwa: Journey Through Haitian Mythology: The Works of Hèrsza Barjon* (Santa Barbara, CA: UCSB Center for Black Studies, 2004), 39; "Vodou is Fully Recognised as a Religion in Haiti," 5 April 2003, <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/43a/522.html>, accessed 7 September 2014; "Haiti Makes Voodoo Official," *BBC News*, 30 April 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/2985627.stm>, accessed 7 September 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Consulate General of Haiti in Chicago; Leslie G. Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Claudine Michel, "Of Worlds Seen and Unseen: The Educational Character of Haitian Vodou," in *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth, & Reality*, 32-45; LaMenfo (Scheu), *Serving the Spirits*, 61-214.

<sup>6</sup> Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags*, 9-15.

<sup>7</sup> Ernestine A. Ray, Claudine Michel, and Chryss Yost, *Ancestral Rays: Journey Through Haitian History & Culture* (Santa Barbara, CA: UCSB Center for Black Studies, 2005), 34-37; Alex Farquharson and Leah Gordon, ed., *Kafou: Haiti, Art and Vodou* (Nottingham: Nottingham Contemporary, 2012), 50-53; Gordon, *The Book of Vodou*, 50-89. Kyrh M. Daniels, "Appendix: Table of Haitian Lwa," in *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth and Reality*, [139-141]; LaMenfo (Scheu), *Serving the Spirits*, 101-214, 284-286; Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags*, 12-15; Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*, 108-169; Kenaz Filan (Hougan Coquille du Mer), *The Haitian Vodou Handbook: Protocols for Riding with the Lwa* (Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 2007), 72-188; Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: Book Collectors Society, 1952), 86-150.

<sup>8</sup> Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags*, 10-11, 39; "Lwa," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lwa>; accessed 6 July 2014; "Lwas and nancheons," in "Haitian vodou drumming," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haitian\\_vodou\\_drumming#Lwas\\_and\\_nancheons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haitian_vodou_drumming#Lwas_and_nancheons), accessed 6 July 2014; LaMenfo (Scheu), *Serving the Spirits*, 61-214.

<sup>9</sup> Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 61-81.

<sup>10</sup> Michel, "Vodou: Visible & Invisible Worlds;" Leah Gordon, *The Book of Vodou: Charms and Rituals to Empower Your Life* (London: Barron's, 2000), 34-45.

<sup>11</sup> Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags*, 15-18; Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 160-161; Leah Gordon, *The Book of Vodou*, 42-45; Sal Scalora, "A Salute to the Spirits," *Americas* 45 no. 2 (1993): 26-33; Anna Wexler, "Yon Moso Twal Nan Bwa (A Piece of Cloth on Wood): The Drapo Vodou in Myths of Origin," *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 10 no. 2 (Fall 2004): 16-32 (also published as Chapter 5 in *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture: Invisible Powers*, 65-77); Delores M. Yonker, "Emblems of the Spirits: the Vodou Flags of Haiti, Perspective [California State University, Northridge] (Fall 1986), 5-8.

<sup>12</sup> Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 160-161.

<sup>13</sup> Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags*, 15-18.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Elizabeth Tselos, "Haitian Drapo Vodou: Imagery, Ritual and Perception," in *Sacred and Ceremonial Textiles: Proceedings of the Fifth Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America, Inc., Chicago, Illinois, 1996*: 58-67 (quoted from p. 63-64).

<sup>15</sup> Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags*, 15-18; Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 160-161; Gordon, *The Book of Vodou: Charms and Rituals to Empower Your Life*, 42-45; Scalora, "A Salute to the Spirits:" 26-33; Wexler, "Yon Moso Twal Nan Bwa (A Piece of Cloth on Wood): The Drapo Vodou in Myths of Origin," 16-32; Yonker, "Emblems of the Spirits: the Vodou Flags of Haiti," 5-8; Karen McCarthy Brown, "The Vèvè of Haitian Vodou: A Structural Analysis of Visual Imagery," PhD Diss., Temple University, August 1975, 58-62; Deren, 154, 177-178, 205-207, 251.

There are several videos that show the use of *drapo Vodou* during ceremonies. See “Presenting the Vodou Flags—Danbala and Ogou,” University of Florida, George A. Smathers Libraries, <http://cms.uflib.ufl.edu/vodou/Video/VideoPlayer/TabId/665/VideoId/446/9-Presenting-The-Vodou-Flags-Danbala-And-Ogou.aspx>, accessed 15 July 2014; “The Presentation of the Drapo Vodou (Lwa’s Flags),” *Vimeo*, <http://vimeo.com/61208007>, accessed 15 July 2014; and “Vaudou Haïtien: Salutations La-place et parade des drapeaux,” *YouTube*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8e9j0BCraeQ>, accessed 15 July 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags*, 15-18; Tselos, 62-64.

<sup>17</sup> Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags*, 15-18.

<sup>18</sup> Wexler, “Yon Moso Twal Nan Bwa (A Piece of Cloth on Wood): The Drapo Vodou in Myths of Origin.”

Papa Sobo is of special interest to vexillologists, as he is considered to be the master of the flags. Sobo is associated with thunder and is related to the sky deity of the Fon people. Delores Yonker notes that the thunderous drumming that occurs in the *peristil* when the flags appear is an allusion to the thunder of Sobo. She notes that “Sobo in Haiti has assumed a military identity and is known for his valor in battle. As soon as the doors to the shrines are flung open he is invoked in song:

Papa Sobo who is in the *houmfo*,  
He asks for the flags!

Delores Yonker, *Sequinned Surfaces: Vodoun Flags from Haiti* (Northridge, CA: Art Galleries of California State University, Northridge, 1991), [7].

<sup>19</sup> Wexler, “Yon Moso Twal Nan Bwa; “The Haitian Flag,” in *Ancestral Rays: Journey Through Haitian History & Culture*: 7; Polk, “Sacred Banners and the Divine Cavalry Charge,” 337-338. For more on the history of the Haitian flag, see Odette Roy Fombrun, *History of the Haitian Flag of Independence*, translated by Christopher Phillips (Danvers, Mass.: Flag Heritage Foundation, 2013). In particular, the role of Vodou symbolism is discussed on pages 21-22 of this work. Another discussion of the Haitian flag can be found in Philippe R. Girard, “Birth of a Nation: The Creation of the Haitian Flag and Haiti’s French Revolutionary Heritage,” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 15 no. 1/2 (Spring/Fall 2009): 135-150. Patricia Mohammed incorporates *drapo Vodou* and the origins of the Haitian flag into a broader discussion of flag culture. See Patricia Mohammed, “Taking Possession: Symbols of Empire and Nationhood,” *Small Axe* 11 (March 2002): 31-58.

<sup>20</sup> See further: Wexler, “Yon Moso Twal Nan Bwa;” Patrick Polk, “Sacred Banners and the Divine Cavalry Charge,” in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, 324-356.

<sup>21</sup> Wexler, “Yon Moso Twal Nan Bwa;” Polk, “Sacred Banners and the Divine Cavalry Charge.”

Polk’s essay discusses the similarities in dimensions between *drapo Vodou* and the flags used by the French during the colonial period, noting that “the dimensions of French colonial standards, ranging from 50-65 cm in height and 50-67 cm in width, most likely provided the model for the measurements of *drapo Vodou*. In 1804, when Napoleon issued new flags, the dimensions for standards were set at 60 x 60 cm. After 1814, standards were reduced to 55 x 55 cm.” He also points out that “drapo Vodou bear a closer stylistic affinity to regimental colors, particularly those employed by Royalist and Napoleonic-era troops.” In addition, he points out that the background and border motifs seen on many traditional *drapo* are similar to those used on the regimental standards during the Napoleonic era. Another point of comparison is the staves used with ceremonial flags. Polk notes that the pointed finials clearly resemble the metal pikes used on military flag staves, and that the S-shaped crosspieces that are typically found between the finials and the flags “recall similar devices used for centuries on military flag-staves, pikes, swords, and bayonets.” In contrast, Delores Yonker points out that the S-shaped crossbar could have distinctly African origins. She notes that others have interpreted the S-shape as resembling a ritual pose found on



Figures 26-27. Flag for Lasirèn. Bottom is a detail of one of the fish in above flag. (Photo by the author, flag courtesy of Claudine Michel)

figurines called the “Congo pose”—“left hand at rest or on the hip, right hand gesturing,” Dolores M. Yonker, “Invitations to the Spirits: the Vodun Flags of Haiti,” *A Report from the San Francisco Crafts and Folk Art Museum* (San Francisco: The Museum, 1985); Polk, “Sacred Banners and the Divine Cavalry Charge,” 337-338.

<sup>22</sup> Wexler, “Yon Moso Twal Nan Bwa;” Polk, “Sacred Banners and the Divine Cavalry Charge;” Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags*, 7-9, 41-42; Francine Farr, *Flying Colors: Military Flags of Africa and African America* (Boston: The Museum of Afro American History, The African American Meeting House, 1991);

LeGrace Genson, "Some Breton and Muslim Antecedents of Vodou Drapo," in *Sacred and Ceremonial Textiles: Proceedings of the Fifth Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America, Inc.*, Chicago, Illinois, 1996 (Minneapolis, Minn.: 1997), 68-75.

<sup>23</sup> Anna Wexler, "For the Flower of Ginen: The Artistry of Clotaire Bazile, A Haitian Vodou Flagmaker," in *Sacred and Ceremonial Textiles*, 76-85; Anna Wexler, "I Am Going to See Where My Oungan Is: The Artistry of a Haitian Vodou Flagmaker," in *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean*, ed. Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 59-78; Anna Wexler, "An Interview With Clotaire Bazile," *Callaloo* 20 no. 2 (Spring 1997): 383-398; Anna Wexler, "The Flags of Clotaire Bazile," *Callaloo* 20 no.2 (Spring 1997): 373-377, 379-382.

<sup>24</sup> Donald J. Cosentino, "It's ALL for YOU, SEN JAK!" in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, 243-263; and *Interleaf K Ogou*, on pages 264-265; Tselos, "Haitian Drapo Vodou: Imagery, Ritual and Perception," 58-67; Polk, "Sacred Banners and the Divine Cavalry Charge," 345-347; "James, son of Zebedee," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James,\\_son\\_of\\_Zebedee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James,_son_of_Zebedee), accessed 4 July 2014; "Battle of Clavijo," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Clavijo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Clavijo), accessed 4 July 2014; For examples of a variety of flag designs for each *Lwa*, see Josephson, 20-58. To see images of a variety of different flags for Ogou (and some other *Lwa*), see "Interleaf P: A Gallery of Vodou Flags," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald J. Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 348-355.

<sup>25</sup> Delores Yonker, *Sequinned Surfaces: Vodoun Flags from Haiti*, [10]; Tselos, "Haitian Drapo Vodou: Imagery, Ritual and Perception," 58-67; Karen McCarthy Brown, x.

<sup>26</sup> Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags*, 18-19; Leah Gordon, *The Book of Vodou*, 31-33; Donald J. Cosentino, "Imagine Heaven," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, 25-55; Karen McCarthy Brown, 48-49, 240-260; "A Brief Word about VEVE," *Houngan Matt's Vodou Blog*, <http://blog.vodouboston.com/2011/10/a-brief-word-about-veve/>, accessed 3 August 2014. For a discussion of Masonic symbolism in Vodou, see Donald J. Cosentino, "Imagine Heaven," 44-47 and Karen McCarthy Brown: 241-244.

<sup>27</sup> Karen McCarthy Brown, 171-176; 232-235; Polk, "Sacred Banners and the Divine Cavalry Charge," 345-347; Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags*, 12-15, 18-20, 45, 50-52, 57, 60-62, 64, 71-72. Nancy Josephson's book illustrates a variety of vèvè with their corresponding Vodou flags. See Josephson, 20-58.

<sup>28</sup> Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags*, 12-15, 18-21, 44, 46-49, 54-55, 58, 61, 63, 65-72; Josephson, 15-58 (see also, various examples in Josephson in the section devoted to specific flag artists); Salvatore Scalora (curator), *Saluting the Spirits: Vodou Flags of Haiti* (Storrs, Conn.: The William Benton Museum of Art, University of Connecticut, Storrs, 1998); Cosentino, "It's ALL for YOU, SEN JAK!," 253; Tselos, "Haitian Drapo Vodou: Imagery, Ritual and Perception," 8-67. For an excellent presentation of chromolithographs and their use in Vodou flags, see Josephson, 20-58.

<sup>29</sup> Girouard, "The Sequin Arts of Vodou," 357-377; Yonker, "Emblems of the Spirits: the Vodou Flags of Haiti," 6; Wexler, "I Am Going to See Where My Oungan Is: The Artistry of a Haitian Vodou Flagmaker," in *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean*, 59-78; Wexler, "An Interview With Clotaire Bazile," *Callaloo*, 383-398; Wexler, "The Flags of Clotaire Bazile," *Callaloo*: 373-377, 379-382; Tina Girouard, "The Sequin Arts of Vodou," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, 357-377; Tselos, "Haitian Drapo Vodou: Imagery, Ritual and Perception," 58-67; Wexler, "For the Flower of Ginen: The Artistry of Clotaire Bazile, A Haitian Vodou Flagmaker," 82-83.

<sup>30</sup> Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags*, 21-24; LeGrace Benson, "How Houngans Use the Light from Distant Stars," in *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture: Invisible Powers*, 164-167; Tselos, "Haitian Drapo Vodou: Imagery, Ritual and Perception," 58-67; Marilyn Houlberg, "Sirens and Snakes: Water Spirits in the Arts of Haitian Vodou," *African Arts* 29 no. 2 (Spring 1996): 30-35, 101.

<sup>31</sup> Polk, "Sacred Banners and the Divine Cavalry Charge," 326-329; Farquharson and Gordon, 50-53.

<sup>32</sup> Wexler, "Yon Moso Twal Nan Bwa," 25.

<sup>33</sup> Wexler, "Yon Moso Twal Nan Bwa," 25-26.

<sup>34</sup> "Transubstantiation," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transubstantiation>, accessed 12 July 2014; "Sanctification," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanctification>, accessed 17 August 2014.

<sup>35</sup> "Ceremonial Ship Launching," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ceremonial\\_ship\\_launching](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ceremonial_ship_launching), accessed 12 July 2014; "Good Luck Flag," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good\\_Luck\\_Flag](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Luck_Flag), accessed 12 July 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Dolores M. Yonker, "Invitations to the Spirits: the Vodun Flags of Haiti," Scalora, *Saluting the Spirits: Vodou Flags of Haiti*; Candice Russell, *Masterpieces of Haitian Art: Seven Decades of Unique Visual Heritage* (Atglen, Penn.: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 2013), 176-201; Tselos, 64-66. Nancy Josephson's book offers an excellent survey of prominent and up-and-coming Vodou flag artists and their works. See Josephson, 64-174. Another excellent photo essay on Vodou flag makers and their work can be found in Candice Russell's book (See Chapter 2, 176-201). For a discussion of prominent sequin artists, including those who produce *drapo Vodou*, see Girouard, "The Sequin Arts of Vodou," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, 357-377.

<sup>37</sup> Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags*, 18-25; Tselos, 64-66.

<sup>38</sup> Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags*, 18-38; Josephson, p. 63-174; Tselos, 64-66.



Figure 28. Flag for Ezili Freda. (Photo by the author, flag courtesy of Claudine Michel)

## Call for Articles for *Flag Research Quarterly*

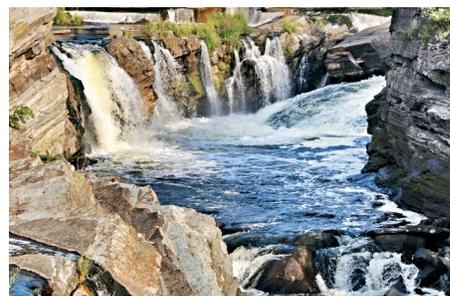
The *Flag Research Quarterly* Editorial Board seeks submissions for publication. *FRQ* was founded to provide a new voice in vexillology, to stand for flag studies as an interdisciplinary endeavor committed to furthering the understanding of the human experience through an engaged relationship with the flags and banners we design, construct, collect, fly, and perhaps even revile.

*FRQ* is looking for dynamic, well-written, and thought-provoking essays, commentaries, and reviews that illuminate new ground for exploration. Facilitating current debate and inviting future discussion, *FRQ* is evidence of the *big-tent* personality of flag studies, and invites submissions on any flag-related topic from the material sciences of textiles to cultural analysis of flag usage and design. Ultimately, *FRQ* is not intended to publish content of any one particular style or argument; we are not looking for final answers but compelling questions.

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Having full faith in the scholarship of the vexillological community at large and in particular in the membership of NAVA, we look forward to publishing your research for many years to come. You are our authors. We thank you for your hard work and invite you to work with us in creating vexillology's bright future.

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Hog's Back Falls,  
where the Rideau  
River and Rideau  
Canal part. (Onasill Bill  
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Canadian Museum of  
History (formerly the  
Canadian Museum  
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