

Map of Haiti
From Metraux 1972: 14.

Symbolism and Embodiment in Six Haitian Dances

This paper outlines some common characteristics of, and gestures embedded within, indigenous Haitian religion and six of the dances related to the religion. It will explore the relationship between the gestural action signs and their social and ritual contexts. Some of the constituent elements examined are: (1) the meanings of danced gestures conferred by the social relations of Haitian culture supported by historical evidence; (2) the significance of observable action signs in performance; (3) the material aspects of performance, such as ritual paraphernalia, clothing, weapons and musical instruments; (4) the musical accompaniment and related songs; and (5) the significance of the space/time organization of the dances, i.e. the physical, social, temporal and conceptual elements of the relevant semantic spaces (for opposite discussion, see Williams 1992).

Introduction

A Haitian proverb says, 'Behind the mountains are mountains, and that is a true picture of the island' (Courlander 1960: 7). The layering of mountain ranges that lends density and verticality to the geography of Haiti¹[see p.111] provides an apt metaphor for the complexity involved in attempts to analyze ceremonies and dances that enliven Haitian religious activities. To the uninitiated, these ritual celebrations are filled with puzzling contradictions, visible and invisible elements, and intricately varied influences that resulted from the confluence of three distinct cultures which produced a fourth. The customs of this continually-evolving ethnic mix are marked by a spirit of spontaneous improvisation overlaid upon traditional structures.

Barrett (1991: 55-60) suggests that codes of conduct and behavior must be learned by members of a society and passed from one generation to another through shared experience and symbolic acts. The decoding of cultural messages re-affirms social values and encourages unity among people who create their own social meaning. Many examples of the symbolic nature of Haitian culture are found in the ritual activities and dances of Vodou.²

Lévi-Strauss (1957: xvi) sees three functions served by Haitian dances within their system of reference: (1) they demonstrate complementary features in both sacred and secular aspects of Haitian culture; (2) they unite physiological and psychological manifestations within the individual performer; and (3) they validate conventional behavior through symbolic representations of established patterns.

In this paper, the discussion of how the human body is symbolically employed within the context of Vodou will be approached from a semasiological point of view³ in which the intention of the participant contributes to the formation of 'action signs' that convey significant messages to other participants and observers. Partially drawn from Saussurian linguistic concepts, the following relationship was defined: An action sign equals a *concept* (the signified); the 'code' plus an *action image* (the signifier) and a 'message' (lecture notes from a course 'Immigrant Dance Forms', Williams, N.Y.U, 1983). Furthermore, the rule structure internal to a formalized system of human movements is itself seen to form an essential definition of it.

However, what one sees is only one level of perception and interpretation. Invisible concepts and ideas inform the observed movements, therefore, knowledge of participants' beliefs is essential to an understanding of any culture's semantically laden actions (Williams 1991: 191, 259).

As a review of historical influences on the development of Haitian culture will show, one of the hallmarks of the Vodou belief system is a concept of complete integration among body, mind and spirit. Nothing within ideas about movement that emerge from notions based on Cartesian dualism prepares Euro-American readers for the fluid interplay (and lack of boundaries) between mind and body that characterizes the people who practice Vodou. Ideas about the integrity of the embodied person, fostered by the intermingling of religious principles carried to Haiti by differing groups of African slaves, do not allow for clear distinctions between humans and their Divinities or between 'sacred' and 'secular' domains.

Vodou is as much a way of life as it is a 'Sunday-only religion' attended to on one day per week. Within its purview fall such subjects as health (physical and psychological), personal relationships, the potential success of business ventures, artistic expression and entertainment, and more orthodox religious obligations and practices concerning Divinity. Views regarding the expressive properties of the body are thus consonant with the overarching wholistic thrust of Vodou philosophy.

Historical and Geographical Features

The island comprising Haiti and the Dominican Republic lies in the Caribbean Sea somewhat southeast of the Bahama Islands between Cuba and Puerto Rico. Port-au-Prince is Haiti's capital and only large city. Three cultures, Amerindian, African and European, entered into the formation of present-day Haiti. Slaves were imported there by the French from West Africa to work on vast indigo, sugar, coffee and cocoa plantations established between 1730 and 1790. By 1791, African slaves outnumbered French plantation owners by about 100 to 1 (Desmangles 1992: 20-21). Among the African slaves were represented the indigenous religions of Dahomean, Ashanti, Congolese, Ibo, Koromantyn and Yoruba peoples (Emery 1988: 49; see Figure 1, p. 115).

Runaway slaves (maroons) formed communities in Haiti's remote mountain areas, where African-derived beliefs were honed to meet the harsh exigencies of New World slavery, culminating in revolts between 1791 and 1804 that led to the overthrow of the French dominated plantation system (Desmangles 1992: 29). It is possible (although not certain) that maroon communities may have been influenced by the descendants of Amerindians who fled the Spanish conquistadors at an earlier time and who may have survived in similar fashion to that of the slaves by hiding in the mountains (Deren 1953: 64).

Although the contributing West African religions were as diverse in their practices as the resulting urban and rural versions of Vodou, certain unifying features stand out. The religious rituals are expressions of belief carried out through drumming, singing and dancing, the aim of which is to facilitate communication with ancestral spirits.

The Divinities speak to the gathered faithful through the medium of spiritual possession, during which one or more members of a congregation may become the bodily vehicle of spiritual communication (Emery 1988: 49-50). The Divinities not only speak to their congregations, people also come to Vodou ceremonies to see them dance.

On their forced emigration, slaves were forbidden to bring with them any possessions, artifacts or musical instruments associated with their African religions. What they were allowed to keep (because no one could stop them) were certain products of their memories and imaginations, such as songs, drum rhythms, dances and stories transmitted by oral traditions -- in short, *non-material* phenomena, which formed the foundations for a largely extemporized Vodou religion (Courlander 1960: 5).

The isolation of remote communities within the mountainous terrain of the island, as well as the isolation of independent Haiti from its white-ruled neighbors, are generally held to be responsible for the retention of African customs within Vodou (Haskins 1990: 12).

Although conversion to Roman Catholicism was forced upon the slaves and Catholicism remained the official religion of Haiti after the slaves won their freedom in 1804, the Catholic church cast a relatively tolerant eye upon the widespread (albeit secret) practices of Vodou among the Haitian peasantry (Courlander 1960: 6). Although present-day Vodou has resulted from a collaboration among various religious traditions (Lévi-Strauss 1957: xvii), true syncretism may not be so strong a characteristic as it is often thought to be. Desmangles argues that Roman Catholicism and Vodou are two co-existing, parallel systems within Haitian society and that Catholic theological concepts have been re-interpreted in light of Vodou beliefs (1992: 47). The two are not mutually exclusive and at best have achieved a superficial connection (Dunham 1983: 5). From the perspective of Vodou participation, it is not a requirement that other religious affiliations be abandoned (Desmangles 1992: 47 and Brown 1991: 10-11).

Culture and Medicine

Vodou is both a religion and a medical system. Plants and herbs are used for curative purposes (Brown 1991: 160). Folk healing methods and spirit mythology influence health practices. Illness may be seen as a punishment, and a cure may require ceremonial propitiation of the spirits (Laguerre 1984: 117-18; Huxley 1966: 179). In the countryside, and to some extent in the city as well, familial relationships are tied to the land and spirit worlds, both of which are passed down through a bilateral kinship system.

An individual may inherit obligations to ancestral spirits from either his or her mother's or father's families. Service to the family Divinities becomes a collective responsibility, whereas land is bequeathed in individual plots (Lowenthal 1978: 394-5). Reciprocity is expected among family members and between families and their protective spirits, although strict accounts are not kept (Brown 1991: 36). Family members usually share food, tools and labor, but not money, which is often under the control of women in a household (Brown 1991: 27, 63).

Kiev describes how a form of folk psychotherapy is practiced within social and ritual contexts. A priest may act as therapist to an individual seeking assistance with psychopathological problems. The priest's privileged status in the community gives him (or her) opportunities to study human behavior and to collect information from the patient and his or her relatives in order to ascertain whether the problems arise from interpersonal or religious relationships. The priest/therapist is aware of the important part faith may play in recovery and will enlist the ritual participation of the entire community in the treatment. Rationalizations for unsuccessful treatments are found within the complex interactions between humans and spirit world (Kiev 1961a: 264 and 1962: 472).

Qualities of theatricality and vivid emotional expression can be seen in Haitian ritual and in the society generally. An example of a typical gestural pattern seen in Haitian social interactions was related by Desmangles.⁴ The shoulders are seen as an expressive feature, especially of women, both in dances and in everyday social situations, but particularly in personal exchanges of negative emotions between women and men. A woman will turn in a certain way that puts her body at an indirect angle to the man she addresses, indicating that she wishes to put him aside and creating a temporary barrier by giving him the back of her shoulder. She may also lift her skirt to show part of a thigh and to accent the corresponding hip as confirmation that she makes this gesture *specifically* as a woman speaking to a man. At other times, the woman's shoulders are drawn backward and the chest lifted slightly forward as an affirmation of womanly pride. There are other gestural intersections of formalized with non-formal systems of bodily communication in this culture.

Courlander outlines how secular songs are used as a means of exerting social sanctions. Songs may spontaneously be composed to influence public opinion, to ridicule particular individuals, to register complaints against unjust authority or to spread gossip. No matter how personal the subject matter, once a song has been performed publicly, it becomes community property (Courlander 1960: 137-8). Songs are used in Vodou rituals to speak directly to (or speak about) individual Divinities honored by the ceremony.

Vodou: A System of Belief

Humankind is believed to receive its life force from *Bondye*, the creator of the universe.⁵ Pantheons of lesser Divinities, or ancestral spirits, called *lwa*, intervene in the mundane problems of devotees and act as mediators between humans and *Bondye* (Brown 1991: 6). The *lwa* are sometimes seen as loosely analogous to Catholic saints, but they appear to have greater capabilities for direct intercession in everyday affairs than do the saints.

Substances that make up an individual's physical body are considered to be part of the earth (considered to be sacred), which reclaims its elemental contributions through recurring cycles of life and death. Each individual is seen as belonging to an extended family that consists of currently living relations and the departed spirits of ancestors (Desmangles 1992: 64). Deified ancestral spirits may teach moral principles to their devotees through acts of spiritual possession within ritual ceremonies (Deren 1953: 16). The psyche (or soul) is believed to consist of two conceptual entities.

1. The *gwo-bon-anj* (big good angel) is the life force that generates conscious action in a person's body. *Gwo-bon-anj* is the source of breath and heartbeat and is associated with intelligence, understanding, overall disposition, acts of judgment, and indeed, all purposeful human action. It is located in the head and may travel away from the living body during sleep or spiritual possession.
2. The *ti-bon-anj* (little good angel) motivates conscience, morality and behavior and is the visible manifestation of the *gwo-bon-anj*. Located in the eye or heart, *ti-bon-anj* has the protective function of a guardian spirit, remaining continually with the living body. *Ti-bon-anj* bestows the power to dream and to remember dreams. These two constituents of the soul (or psyche) represent an interactive process, inseparable in the motivation of human action (Desmangles 1992: 67-8; Kiev 1961a: 260).

At the moment of death, *ti-bon-anj* is separated from its transitory bodily home. *Gwo-bon-anj* becomes the ongoing spiritual form of the deceased person and is returned through ritual processes to its mythological home in Ginen (sometimes thought of as returning to Africa) to join the ancestral spirits, whence it may eventually return to the world of the living as a *lwa*. Characteristics of a particular spirit may be incorporated into a symbolic archetype, over time, which may ultimately manifest itself in the teachings of a *lwa* (Desmangles 1992: 67-8; Deren 1953: 25-29).

Desmangles also points out that democratic principles characterize the access of Vodou worshippers to communication with the *lwa*. While priests and their assistants exercise a certain amount of authority over the progress of a Vodou ceremony, any congregant may achieve direct engagement with the spirit world through the medium of spiritual possession, an altered state of consciousness during which a person's *gwo-bon-anj* is temporarily replaced by the *lwa-in-residence*. Thus, receiving the teachings of the *lwa* through the

possession states of fellow devotees or becoming the means of transmission of the *lwa's* messages are primary aims in the religious activities of Vodouisants (Desmangles 1992: 3).

Ceremonial Forms of Vodou

Because there is no central governing body to formulate or standardize Vodou ceremonial customs, practices vary from one geographical region to another, both inside and outside of Haiti.⁶ Isolation of communities and difficulties of travel caused by Haiti's mountainous terrain have perpetuated the lack of similarity in the home communities, nevertheless, certain constituent elements and principles universal within the context of Vodou belief are found in all of its ritual forms (Deren 1953: 19).

The *Houngan* (priest) or *Mambo* (priestess) presides over the service, and, within an improvisational framework, modulates the participation of musicians, who are singers and drummers, dancers and other members of the congregation.⁷ The *Houngan* or *Mambo* employs the *ason*, a sacred rattle, which is made of a calabash and its stem-handle. The gourd itself is surrounded by a decoration of snake vertebrae or beads, so that when shaken, it produces a sound (see Figure 2, p. 116).

The *ason* is not, technically speaking, a musical instrument, but may be used to lead the musicians and dancers or to facilitate the arrival and departure of the *lwa* during possession (Denning and Phillips 1979: 48-50). The *Houngan* or *Mambo* acts as a director of divine and human traffic, so to speak.

Others may assist the priest or priestess in carrying out ritual activities. The *Laplace*, usually a man, carries a sword and sometimes directs movements. The *Hounganikon*, usually a woman, uses the *chacha*, another type of gourd rattle, to lead the vocal action (see Figure 3, p. 117). *Hounsis*, at various levels of initiation may carry banners or enforce silence at certain points in a ceremony (Denning and Phillips 1979: 55).⁸

In Haiti, ceremonies usually take place in a *peristyle* (a covered, but otherwise open area) near the *Hounfor* (altar room). In the center of the *peristyle* is the centerpost (the *potomitan*), which is believed to act as a conduit for the arrival of *lwa* into a ceremony. Denning and Phillips describe the opening of a ceremony as beginning with the pouring of libations on the ground. Leaders of the ceremony enter in procession and salute the cardinal points (north, south, east and west), the *potomitan* and the drummers.

Veves (ritual sand paintings) may be drawn on the ground before, during or after the salutations (1979: 47-48). *Veves* depict aspects of the *lwa* and are usually made from yellow corn meal or white wheat meal. They are complex, intricate designs, examples of which are shown in Figure 4 (p. 118) and Figure 5 (p. 119). *Veve* designs are improvised to suit a particular occasion. It is important to understand that they are not preserved beyond the time of a given ceremony (Denning and Phillips 1979: 55).

Ceremonies are held to honor specific *lwa*, to facilitate the passage of the dead and to celebrate initiations (Denning and Phillips 1979: 54). Woven through all aspects of the ritual forms, that is, through the songs that are sung, the music that is played and the dances that are danced, is an intense emotional commitment that is clearly exhibited by the participants.

The properly passionate execution of these elements is what attracts the *lwa* to the ceremony. Not only is enthusiastic involvement in the creation of song and dances a satisfying activity in and of itself, it is crucial to the successful invocation of the *lwa*, which is the ultimate goal of the ceremony (Lowenthal 1978: 403-4). The excitement of sound and motion attracts the Divinities. The warmth of living energy generated when the ceremony heats up opens the way for the *lwa* to appear (Brown 1993: 134-5).

Desmangles (1994) concurs with these authors, adding valuable gestural information, warning that when the *lwa* is about to come into the ceremony, people must not cross their arms in front of their bodies because there must be no barriers of any kind between one person and the others in the ritual space. Such impediments might stop the flow of the *lwa* into the community.

The *Lwa*⁹

Within the two principal Vodou rites, *Rada* and *Petro*, the *lwa* are grouped into related familial categories called 'nations'. Many of the *Rada* Divinities, who exhibit benign and dignified characteristics, are drawn from African origins. The more violent *Petro* Divinities emerged from the Creole society in the New World and are connected with slave rebellions and insurrection.

A family of *lwa* is joined together by particular physical and temperamental features, and these related *lwa* usually share variations of the same name and are said "to walk together" (Lowenthal 1978: 393). The *lwa* within one family represent a system of male and female sub-types who demonstrate a particular array of emotional characteristics in their relations with human beings. They represent a form of multiple personalities among the Divinities. Ceremonies are often organized to honor a particular *lwa*, with songs and dances designed to invoke his or her presence (see Schmiderer 1990: 1). However, which Divinities actually come forth during spiritual possession is the choice of the *lwa*, not of the devotees, thus, the *lwa* actively participate in their own worship (Lowenthal 1978: 403).

Descriptions of the *lwa* most closely associated with the dances will serve to shed light on the multi-faceted interactions between people and spirits in Vodou rituals. *Legba*, *Damballah*, *Erzulie*, *Ogou* and *Gede* (described below) belong to the *Rada* rite and its related dances.

1. *Legba* is the first *lwa* to be addressed.¹⁰ Although he is not associated with any particular dance, he is usually invoked through song at the opening of every ceremony. As the doorkeeper, he is considered to be

Lord of Beginnings. His image has been transformed from that of the young father in Africa to the old father in Haiti (Denning and Phillips 1979: 26). *Papa Legba* guards the crossroads between life and death and between natural and supernatural domains. He links visible and invisible worlds. All supplications are transmitted through him. One of his icons is a cross and his color is white (Deren 1953: 37; 96-98).

2. *Damballah* is "the gentle snake of the primal seas" (Desmangles 1992: 124). The supple movements of the snake are wedded to the rippling motions of water in the image of *Damballah*. His wife, *Ayida Wedo*, is symbolized by the rainbow and by the waters of springs and rivers. *Damballah* is the ancient and benevolent father who binds past to future and offers the peace of paternal protection. He represents continuity and the living quality of cosmic motion. Along with *Legba*, his color is white (Denning and Phillips 1979: 26-7; Deren 1953: 114-16).

3. *Erzulie* is the goddess of love and beauty. A graceful dancer, she combines a generous spirit with a jealous nature. Contradictions of character abound among the Divinities, as they do among the humans upon whom the *lwa* are often modeled. The coquettish *Erzulie* enjoys luxuries, jewelry, sweets and champagne. She symbolizes creativity and the human yearning for an ideal. Her color is blue (Deren 1953: 137-141; Desmangles 1992: 43, 132).

4. *Ogou* leads a family of great spirit warriors. Stately, and with the measured character of strength and power, *Ogou* triumphs in battle. He represents authority, and in the aspect of *Ogou Feray*, he is patron of ironsmiths; those who forge weapons. Occasionally, he represents the diplomat or statesman. His icons are the saber and the machete (Deren 1953: 130-33; Desmangles 1992 145-47). His color is red (Wilcken 1992: 23).

5. *Gede* is the "*Legba* of the underworld" (Deren 1953: 102), the ruler of death's timeless crossroads. Because life and death are seen as cyclical, *Gede* is associated with the renewal of life. Since death "eats up" life, *Gede* loves to eat ritual foods. One of his several sides is that of the sly trickster, and in that guise, he uses phallic imagery and lewd gestures to encourage people to laugh at death. Although he often performs in a joking manner, *Gede* delivers good counsel (personal communication, P. Hall-Smith, October, 1994). *Gede's* colors are black, white and purple. His primary icon is the cemetery cross (Wilcken 1992: 24). All Souls Day in the Roman Catholic liturgical calendar (November 2), marks the annual celebration for *Gede* Divinities (L. Williams n.d.: 12). One of his *personae* is Baron *Samedi*, keeper of cemeteries and of old bones. Baron *Samedi* enjoys making fun of humanity's unflinching preoccupations with the erotic (Deren 1953: 102-108; Denning and Phillips 1979: 41). How Baron *Samedi* makes visual jokes about sexuality and death will be revealed in a later discussion of his dance, *Banda*.

Spirit Possession

Regardless of variations found in ceremonial forms wherever Vodou is practiced, the most characteristic (and common) observable element is that of spirit possession (Lowenthal 1978: 411; and Williams 1991: 306-8 for relevant discussion in a West African [Krachi] context). The altered states of consciousness involved in possession are actively sought, and voluntarily entered into, by Vodouisants.¹¹

Basically, the altered state of consciousness means that the usual personality of the possessed individual is displaced by that of the *lwa* for the duration of the possession (Denning and Phillips 1979: 9-10). Desmangles describes possession this way:

This invasion of one's person by a *lwa* results in the temporary displacement of one's own personality by the envisaged mythological personality of the *lwa*. Possession is therefore considered a quintessential spiritual achievement in a believer's religious life, because it represents a direct engagement with the spirit world. It is also a public commitment to the religion that heightens one's exercise of religious authority in the community (1992: 3-4 - italics added).

Once possession has been established, it is the *lwa* who dances, not the worshipper (Schmiderer 1990: 3). The physical body of the possessed person becomes the *lwa*'s channel of expression. The person who has been 'mounted' by a *lwa* may be dressed in clothing appropriate to that particular *lwa*. He or she will speak in the *lwa*'s characteristic voice and will exhibit postures, gestures and complexes of action signs typical of the *lwa*-in-residence. When the possession ends, the 'everyday self' returns, and the person receives no deferential treatment by virtue of having been possessed (Denning and Phillips 1979: 10). As Desmangles pointed out, the individual's exercise of religious authority in the community is heightened. Although possession is a learned and highly desirable phenomenon in Vodou religious life, it can be a somewhat frightening experience, depending upon factors related to the adeptness of the person possessed and the distinctive characteristics of the mounting *lwa*. All the *lwa* choose whom they will visit.

Sometimes the receiver of the *lwa* resists the possession, and there may be a sense of physical struggle between the departing and arriving personalities (Rigaud 1969: 47). Trembling and convulsive movements may occur in the muscles of the possessed as the *lwa* enters the congregation to perform acts of admonition, encouragement or treatment (Kiev 1961b: 136). The *lwa* may confer unusual powers upon the possessed: for example, a person who does not know how to swim in everyday life may be able to swim while in a possession state. The *lwa* offer protection, provide counsel, deliver punishment and warn of danger (Rigaud 1969: 48).

Not all who attend a particular ceremony participate in the singing or dancing, but everyone is considered to be a participant in the overall ritual. Some are self-appointed to take care of those who do become possessed so the possessed person doesn't injure him or herself. Eventually, contact is made

with all present, as the *lwa* greets and speaks with the congregants (Desmangles, from field tapes/notes, 1994).

During possession, it is not the bio-social *persona* of the possessed individual that is important, but the *persona* of the *lwa*. Gender, for instance, is not a pointed issue among the *lwa*, as cross-gender possession is common. A man possessed by Erzulie may be dressed like a woman and will speak like a woman. According to Desmangles (field tapes/notes, 1994), we may no longer talk about "him" at the point when Erzulie becomes manifest. In everyday Haitian life, homosexuality exists, but it is commonly a source of ridicule. In the context of a Vodou ceremony, however, a man who speaks and dresses like a woman or a woman who speaks and dresses like a man is accepted because it is the *lwa* who is speaking. People may laugh, but they take Erzulie's (or any other representation) seriously too. What is not highly respected in the ordinary secular affairs of daily life becomes more seemly in a ritual context.

The Music

Songs play an important role toward bringing the *lwa* into a ceremony. Songs may be dedicated to a *lwa* and may invoke the *lwa*'s presence through a call and response pattern among members of the congregation (Schmiderer 1990: 2). The musical structure of the songs is straightforward and does not contain harmony (Courlander 1973: 184). Musical complexity is the province of the drums and supporting percussion instruments, whose players execute polyrhythmic patterns, sometimes in multiple metres. The drum rhythms are temperamentally inseparable from the dances (Wilcken 1992: 25 and 104).¹² So inseparable are rhythms and dancing, Katherine Dunham reports that it would be difficult for a Haitian dancer to demonstrate a dance phrase without humming the relevant rhythm -- and when the rhythm is lost from memory, so is the dance (1983: 21). Identifiable rhythmic patterns convey an emotional mood associated with a specific family of *lwa*: these are what dominate the drumming. Within these recognizable patterns, there is much latitude for improvisation on the drummer's part.¹³

The typical percussion ensemble for *Rada* rites consists of three variably pitched drums: the *maman* (the largest), tuned to a relatively low pitch, the *seconde* (medium sized), tuned to a middle range pitch and the *bula* (or 'baby'), tuned to a higher pitch. Following African traditions, the drums are fashioned from indigenous Haitian woods and other natural materials (Courlander 1973: 10 and 1960: 190-93 -- also see 'RADA' in Figure 4, p. 118). In addition to the drums, there may be a forged metal bell played with a detached striker (the *ogan*), or an empty gourd enclosed in a netting of beads (the *shekere*). The drum head or its wooden sides may also, in *Rada* rites, be played with sticks called *cata* (Courlander 1960: 193, 199-200). In contrast, *Petro* rites employ two drums, which are played by the drummers' hands only (Wilcken 1992: 33-4).

It is the drumming which fuses . . . individuals into a single body, making them move as one, as if all of these singular bodies had become linked on the thread of a single pulse . . . (Deren 1953: 235).

Sometimes the drummers compel the dancers' movements; at other times, the dancers evoke rhythmic articulations from the drummers (Courlander 1960: 129). Visual and spatial proximity between dancers and drummers is crucial to this interaction.

In general, the drummers are in charge. They do not sing at their drums, although they sometimes make rhythmic vocal sounds (Courlander 1973: 183-4). Drummers rarely become possessed (Huxley 1966: 176). Métraux declares that the verve and concentration of all ritual participants depend upon the drummer's "mastery of rhythm and upon the vitality of his touch" (1972: 178). Stamina is also a key factor: the drums are never silent during ceremonies that may last five or six hours.

Desmangles stresses the crucial function of the drummers to the success of the ceremony by telling us they often know more about the theology of the rites than the priest or priestess does. The drummers must translate complex religious sentiments connected with the mythology into music and they must communicate those conceptions to the congregants through the medium of sound. They have spontaneously to capture the spirit of the event, as well as the spirit of the community in order to invoke the presence of the *lwa*. The drummers must be able to recognize which *lwa* has arrived and to change rhythms accordingly. They keep the spirit alive in the ceremony, simultaneously maintaining what seems to some a paradox of involvement and detachment.

Space/Time

In Vodou thought, the physical venue of the ritual is considered sacred only during the time it is used for ritual performances. At other times, it is viewed as an ordinary space and may be put to other uses (Desmangles, field tapes/notes, 1994). The open space of the peristyle is covered by a sheltering roof, often made of banana leaf thatching, supported by poles (Dunham 1983: 17). Mentioned earlier (p. 99 above), the center-post (*potomitan*) represents the center of the universe, and the four peripheral supporting posts represent the cardinal points of the universe. These points do not (although they might in some cases) correspond with true geographical directions. They define the conceptual space of the Vodouisants' metaphysical world (Desmangles, field tapes/notes, 1994).

. . . the floor of the *peristil* symbolizes the profane world, while the vertical pole (*potomitan*) in the center of the *peristil* represents the *axis mundi*, the avenue of communication between the two worlds. Although the downward reach of the *potomitan* appears to be limited by the *peristil*'s floor, mythologically its foot is conceived to plunge into *Vilokan*, the cosmic mirror. The point at which the *potomitan* enters the *peristil*'s floor symbolizes the zero point. During the ceremonies, the *potomitan* becomes charged with or "polluted" by the power of the *lwás* (Desmangles 1992: 105 - italics added).

The *potomitan* signifies a vertical/horizontal cross (and intersection) of axes. The horizontal axis (the floor or ground out of which it arises) is the visible, mortal world, while the vertical axis (signified by the *potomitan* itself), is the invisible, immortal world of the spirits (the *lwa*). The metaphor of a mirror, reflecting human and spiritual space, which includes past, present and future time, is applied at the point of intersection of these two imaginary axes. At certain times during a ceremony, Vodouisants may touch the *potomitan* or kiss the ground in recognition of these concepts (Deren 1953: 35-7).

Inversion and retrogression are important concepts in Vodou rituals. Sacred movement proceeds in a counter-clockwise direction around the *potomitan*, which is a reversal of the normal order (Desmangles 1992: 104, and interviews, 1994). Deren describes a relevant instance in which the *Laplace* enters the *peristyle* by moving backwards into the space, suggesting a "mirror held up to time" and the fact that ceremonial time moves conceptually backwards to a mythical time when an ancestral spirit became transformed into an honored *lwa* (1953: 34-5).

My interviews with Desmangles revealed many pertinent Haitian concepts of time: to begin with, in a ceremony, real (ordinary) time stops. There is an interchangeability of secular and sacred time at the beginning and ending of the ritual. Ceremonies take place in a kind of "no-time" time -- an eternal time, which is a-historical. Concepts of time are tied to the contents of the activities performed in space. Polychronic (f. Gr. *chrono(s)*; time) concepts pervade the Caribbean, where people prefer to maintain multiple levels of social contact simultaneously, rather than pursue monochronic ideals of single-minded task completion so popular in the United States. A polychronic view of time juxtaposes nicely with the polyrhythms of Haitian music and the chronosemic movements of Haitian dancing.

Embodiment

Deren reminds us that in the Haitian worldview, Cartesian dualism does not exist.¹⁴ Spirit, mind and body are mutually (and, we might add, equally) committed. The archetypal concepts that consolidate around a given *lwa* must become embodied by the living person within ritual action (1953: 27-29, 11). This (the devotee) is the only vehicle through which the *lwa's* messages may be manifested. Physical and temperamental characteristics may be shared between the *lwa* and the person possessed (Lowenthal 1978: 393). The possessed devotee becomes "the ambulant *axis mundi*, the point of contact between the sacred and profane worlds" (Desmangles 1992: 107).

There is "power conveyed in posture rather than in the label of a name or definition" (Deren 1953: 11). Each *lwa* has unique bodily attitudes and an expressive carriage that are part of his or her personal identity. A possessed person usually does not remember the experience afterwards but may recover parts of it in dreams. There seems to be a kind of muscle memory attached to the postures assumed and actions performed by the *lwa-in-residence*, residues

of which may later be retrieved by some part of the person's mind that was absent during possession (Huxley 1966: 209).

While Huxley sees the experience of possession as a mask of the entire body, not just of the face (1966: 208), Lowenthal suggests that in addition to receiving praises offered by the faithful in song and dance, the *lwa* possess the bodies of their servants so that they may enjoy singing and dancing themselves, activities in which only the whole embodied person may participate (1978: 406).

Certain specific bodily parts are associated with the incorporation of the *lwa*, who is thought to enter the head (Desmangles: interviews, 1994), but spirits may also "ride" the back of the neck (Brown 1991: 136; Huxley 1966: 208). Movements of the shoulders at the beginning of possession may indicate the struggle within the person who is trying to maintain his or her own personhood while being taken over by the spirit. Perhaps the spirit is looking for a place to lodge. Movements of the shoulders express an uneasiness about the potential loss of equilibrium (Desmangles interviews, 1994). Additionally, priests and priestesses who have strong intuitive powers are said to have "the gift of eyes" and are believed to be able to see spirits directly (Brown 1991: 134).

Physical contact between people may be a means of transmitting spirit from one person to another. Two people, one or both of whom may be spirit possessed, hold hands and turn their bodies underneath their raised arms (a move called ritual "twirling"). Sometimes the two will also touch heads as they turn, passing the spirit from one head to the other. The joining of hands symbolizes the commitment of people to share life's suffering and happiness equally, as members of the Vodou community (Desmangles interviews, 1994).

The left side of the body is the 'sacred side. In an extension of the mirror metaphor, the left hand is the reflection of the commonly used right hand and is therefore symbolic of the chaotic order of the spirit world, opposite to that of the human world. Therefore the left hand is the hand that serves the *lwa* and transmits the spirit into the body of another person. When a woman presents an infant to the *lwa*, she carries the child on her left arm (Desmangles interviews, 1994).

Since the *lwa* so freely utilize their servants' human capabilities of speech and physical action to reveal themselves during possession, the notion of disembodiment plays an important part in Vodou mortuary ceremonies. *Desounen* ("uprooting of the sound") is a rite of passage performed to remove the potential for divine expression from the cadaver, which no longer has the properties necessary for lively sacred enactments, such as singing and voicing of the *lwa*'s teaching. The dead person will never breathe nor speak again, a fact which is underscored by the placing of cotton in the ears, nose and mouth of the deceased. These acts may offer a symbolic way for the bereaved to face and accept the loss (Desmangles interviews, 1994).

Some General Features of Haitian Dancing

The significance and semantics of Haitian secular and ritual dances comes from meaning bestowed upon danced actions by the people who dance them.

[T]he quality [of a dance] resides in a sense of ulterior reference . . . in the very manner in which it is done . . . it is a statement addressed not to men but to divinity (Deren 1953: 227).

This author also emphasizes the dancer's ability "to concentrate on a concept" that stands behind the movements of a dance. The concentration influences the state of mind that accompanies the performance (1953: 241). Lowenthal (1978: 407) and Schmiderer (1990: 2) concur, adding that the invocational dances preceding the arrival of the *lwa* into a ceremony must demonstrate the appropriate fervor and must hint at the temperament of the expected *lwa*, regardless of whether the invited *lwa* is the one who actually turns up.

The relationship between specific dances and their identifying drum rhythms must be seen as one of fusion, *not merely accompaniment*,¹⁵ because "Some foot patterns outline specific drum parts. The predominant pulse is always visible in the dance" (Wilcken 1992: 108). Describing her own experience, Deren says, "one does not move to the sound, one is the movement of the sound, created and borne by it" (1953: 253).

There are moments of hesitation, suspension and stillness within Haitian dances, but these occur less often than the *tableaux* and poses that typify, for example, ballet-dancing. The Haitian dancer is almost always in motion. Movements range from smaller and more subtle to larger, more intense actions. Bodily parts that are engaged in near-imperceptible moves usually act as stabilizers for those parts that may be simultaneously making larger, more dramatic statements.

It is interesting to speculate about the possible relationship between a Haitian dancer's use of the downward pull of gravity and the mythological downward pull of the spirit world. If the Vodouisant becomes an "ambulant *axis mundi*", as Desmangles points out (1992: 107), then the central vertical axis of the dancer and the vertical axis of the *potomitan* could be seen as one and the same -- at least so closely identified that, spiritually, they amount to the same thing.

A possessed devotee becomes a medium whose feet are planted in the sacred mirror and whose body is the vertical line whereby the revitalizing forces of the universe flow to the community (Desmangles 1992: 107).

Likewise, Deren observes that "the foot of this vertical plane rests in the waters of the abyss, the source of all life (1953: 35-6) and furthermore,

[T]he sign of the cross-roads is always the juncture of the horizontal with the vertical, where the communication between worlds is established and the traffic of energies and forces between them is set up (1953: 36).

Courlander sees “an attitude of strong frontal assault against natural forces such as gravity, or direct submission to those forces” (1960: 130).¹⁶ Theoretically, if a dancer fully experiences gravity’s downward pull, he or she will also discover the equal and opposite upwards thrust that provides buoyancy — a quality also evident in Haitian dances. However, it is said that the possessed person becomes “heavy” with the spirit. This weightiness is particularly evident in movements of the head, which is often pulled off-balance during possession.

The use of turns (and turning) occupies an important place in Haitian dances. Some writers even call these turns *pirouettes*, but Haitian turns do not fit that classification, which is from the technical language of the ballet dancer’s lexicon. The performance of a pirouette requires standing on one leg in a relatively stationary position, revolving around one’s central axis, while balanced on the ball of the foot (*piéd à trois-quatre*) or *sur la pointe*. Haitian turning is typically executed using two bare feet on the ground.

Brown remarks on the fact that “dips and turns” often precede the arrival of the *lwa* (1991: 61). It is believed that the *lwa* may enter the head of the dancer during moments of spinning. Also, turns often mark a break in the established patterns of a dance, and they are often marked by changes in rhythm. Wilcken observes that “possession occurs when the *kase* [break] becomes a climax of accumulated tension . . .” (1992: 104).

Six Haitian Dances Described:

YONVALOU¹⁷

This dance exemplifies Deren’s conception of a dance as a “meditation of the body” (1953: 240). As it usually opens a ceremony, *Yonvalou* is meant to instill the dancer with a prayerful attitude of looking inward -- of listening internally. It should establish a feeling of hypnotic calm that foreshadows trance and possession (Hall-Smith interviews, 1994; Deren 1953: 257).

Two bodily postures are common: (1) the torso is either upright, balanced on slightly bent legs (*Yonvalou debout*) or (2) folded forward in a crouching position (*Yonvalou doba*) balanced on deeply bent legs (Schmiderer 1990: 9). The arms assume various positions throughout, from alongside the body to positions overhead. More than any other of the Haitian dances, through its self-contained, yet expansive patterns, *Yonvalou* utilizes a sense of circular, rotational movement inherent in all of its characteristic articulations of the body.

Yonvalou is associated with *Damballah*, the benign snake, and the motion of water. It employs serpentine undulations of the spine, shoulder girdle, arms and hands. *Damballah* is said to “rule the spine”. The supple, small pulsations that flow through the spine represent either the movements of a snake’s body or waves of the ocean, or both, simultaneously (Schmiderer 1990: 2; Hall-Smith interviews, 1994).

An action-sign involving wrist and hand conveys double metonymic meaning: the shape of the hand may represent the head of a snake, and/or its movement may indicate the rippling motion of water. The movement of the pelvis may be seen as that of a boat riding the crests of ocean waves (Hall-Smith interviews, 1994). The symbolic movements of the snake or the waters represent the continuity found in "all dynamic motion in the cosmos . . . all things that are flexible, sinuous and moist . . . all things that fold and unfold, coil and recoil" (Desmangles 1992: 125).

NAGO

Performed in honor of the *Ogou* family, this dance makes statements about the strength of the warrior spirits and their invincibility in battle (Schmiderer 1990: 2). It also expresses the warriors' courage and their desire to control the forces of nature (L. Williams n.d.: 9). The element of fire is closely connected to the *Ogou* family of *Iwa* (Wilken 1992: 23). The posture of *Nago's* dancers is dignified and the chest acts as a movable shield. The hand, held in a fist, moves toward the chest (shield) to illustrate how warriors are prepared to face enemies. Most of *Nago's* moves have an angular quality: the dancer executes precise, clear changes of direction, culminating in positions solidly anchored to the ground. At the same time, the dancer displays keen alertness because *Ogou* is constantly vigilant (Hall-Smith interviews, 1994).

Two distinctive action signs are to be found in *Nago*: (1) chopping motions in the air with an imaginary machete, because *Ogou Feray* is associated with the element of iron, and, of course, fire and weapons-making; and (2) a dancer sustains one fully extended arm raised to shoulder level at his or her side, and with a movement that includes the spine and the opposite arm and hand, the moving hand sweeps across the top of the stationary, extended arm, starting from the hand, continuing inward toward the shoulder and over the top of the head. This action signifies "bathing the body in fire" because

When *Ogoun* himself is present, he may pour rum on the ground and light it. . . . Those who are present gather the fragrant fumes in their cupped hands, as if it were a liquid, and wash their bodies with it (Deren 1953: 133 - italics added).

IBO

This dance celebrates the triumph of slaves over their oppressors (Desmangles interviews, 1994). Emotional overtones of pride, arrogance and resistance are present (Schmiderer 1990: 4; Wilken 1992: 23).

The captured slaves from the Ibo tribe [present-day Nigeria] were famous for their refusal to be subjected to slavery by the French colonists. Their pride made them prefer suicide, rather than be [sic] held in bondage for the rest of their lives. Consequently, the French colonists gave special instructions to slave carriers not to bring too many Ibos into St. Domingue (L. Williams n.d.: 9).

The *Ibo* dance employs the same two basic body positions as *Yonvalou*, but with different intentions.¹⁸ When the dancer is in a crouched position in the

Ibo dance (a position superficially similar to the position in *Yonvalou*), the movements represent the downtrodden attitudes and social position of people who have been held in slavery for a long time. The feet remain close to the ground and there is a 'weighted' quality to the body, gained from the imaginary chains that bind ankles and wrists (Hall-Smith interviews, 1994). Yet, even here, the hope of escape is suggested in subtle but continuous movements of the spine and shoulder girdle. The pulsing of the shoulders, produced by the capacity of the shoulder blade to glide easily against the underlying ribcage, implies that the arms will be free to fly open to the sides – a movement symbolizing the breaking of the chains that bind the wrists. Similar movements of each leg, in turn, represent the release from the ankle chains. When the dancer assumes an upright posture, the exaltation of the liberated body shines through in the proud carriage of head and chest.

The head (or one hand held in a fist with the first finger extended) may perform small side-to-side shaking actions signifying 'no'. Here, we see the slave's emphatic statement that his former master may no longer exert the forces of oppression over the slave's life (Desmangles interviews, 1994).

BANDA

Two themes related to the character of *Gede* are combined in the dance called *Banda*: sexuality and death, both being inevitable aspects of human life. *Banda* is danced at funerals to assist the passage of the dead to the world of the spirits (Métraux 1972: 192). Within Vodou thinking about death is the notion of rebirth (L. Williams n.d.: 12), which produces flagrant parodies of provocative sexuality, a prominent feature of the *Gede* character. In these often humorous displays, one dancer may challenge another dancer of the same or opposite sex or a dancer may challenge a drummer in an escalating contest to see whether *Gede's* outrageous eroticism can best be expressed in movement or sound.

As chief of the *Gedes* and Lord of the Cemetery, Baron *Samedi* is always danced in a flamboyant fashion. His props and costume consist of a bowtie, a Bowler hat, a formal tailcoat and a cigar. Sometimes he carries a cane, and he may have some parts of his face and body painted white to represent the bones of the skeleton. Sometimes Baron *Samedi* wears sunglasses to hide his eyes from the light (Hall-Smith interviews, 1994). Whether or not the performer has any of these props at his or her disposal, during the dance, a dancer will perform the actions of tying the bowtie, tipping the hat and flicking the cigar ashes on the ground. The cigar smoke comes from a weed that is associated with *Gede's* healing powers (Desmangles interviews, 1994). Sharp contraction/release movements of the pelvis are meant to depict the releasing of sperm onto the ground, thus symbolizing the continuity of the life cycle (Wilcken 1992: 107).

Desmangles also points out that *Banda* makes a political statement. That is, a person may put on an air of importance and may, indeed, be an important person in the social hierarchy, but none of that means anything before the *Iwa*, who are more important, thus the mockery expressed by the character of *Gede*

in *Banda* may reflect the general disappointment of the Haitian peasantry in how they have been treated by their government. Haitian feelings about death are marked by a similar rueful humor: it is inescapable, so the best thing to do is to laugh about it.

CONGO

In keeping with the intermingling of Haitian sacred and secular life, the Congo dance has mixed properties. That is, being a restful dance, *Congo* may offer relief from other more intense dances within a whole ceremony and may be requested by a visiting *lwa* (Hall-Smith interviews, 1994 and Mètraux 1972: 189). The *Congo* also bridges old and new world-cultures, showing gracious characteristics of both the African (Congo) people and European social dances within a Creole amalgamation (Wilcken 1992: 24). Lavinia Williams tells us the dance symbolizes beauty and love (n.d.: 12).

Congo may be danced by individuals or as a male-female partner dance. The movements are flirtatious and smoothly sensual, punctuated by luxurious turns that accent first one hip, then the other. All the body parts participate in the fluid, gentle seduction of *Congo*. In contrast to the blatancy of *Banda*, the sexual suggestion in *Congo* is sophisticated and subtle (Hall-Smith interviews, 1994).

CONTREDANSE

This dance is a Creole invention that resulted when the slaves and rising mulatto class observed the social dances of French plantation owners, offering yet another example of how Haitian lower classes could make fun of or satirize the customs of their haughty overlords. The *Contredanse* may be performed as a square dance by male and female partners, with a caller who announces the moves and injects social commentary into the dance (Desmangles and Hall-Smith interviews, 1994).

First for their own recreation, then as freed people, the former slaves adapted the French dance to African steps, introducing drums and sometimes the *vaccins* or bamboo pipes, developing a style that has the strict grace of the minuet, plus a freedom, litheness, and a Haitian touch of malice in the parody of their former master's restrained jiggling. In the folklore troupe version, the men advanced, retreated, up and back, touched their partners, fanned overheated behinds with leaves; bowed and scraped and simpered (Gold 1991: 67).

The dancer's body is conceived as if divided up along cultural lines: the noble posture of the French aristocrat is evident in the carriage of the head, neck, shoulders, arms and chest. Women flash imaginary fans while below, pelvises send forth their snide sexual invitations.

The *Contredanse* is sometimes accompanied by a violin or flute in addition to drums (Lowenthal 1978: 402 and L. Williams n.d.: 27). It contains the *balancés* and *révérences* of the French *Quadrille* and *Minuet* blended with circular hip movements typical of some (though by no means all) West African dances.

Conclusion

As citizens of a small country marked by inequitable extremes of wealth distribution and high rates of illiteracy, Haitians find in their Vodou religion, besides communion, sources of entertainment and artistic expression which bring "dignity into lives which would otherwise be brutalized and crushed by poverty and the back-breaking labour of the fields" (Métraux 1972: 363-64). Desmangles (1992: 81) tells us that the *lwa* make use of all the physical attributes of voice and movement that belong to their servants during possession and

In a sense the living depiction of the *lwas* in the bodies of their devotees replaces the literary and artistic vehicles upon which mythologies of other cultures often rely for the portrayal of their deities; one comes to know the *lwas* only by observing them, or by "becoming" them (Desmangles 1992: 98).

As Vodou emerged from what imported African slaves remembered of their oral traditions and does not, even in present-day forms, employ written theological materials, it may be concluded that the action signs of these moving participants provide liturgical explication. The body is the 'paper', so to speak. The embodied actions are the written or unwritten texts.

Lynn Martin

NOTES:

¹ 'Haiti' is an Arawak word meaning 'mountainous'. It is the name given to the eastern half of the island originally known as Hispaniola and later as Saint-Domingue. This name was given to the new nation when a slave rebellion established Haiti as an independent country in 1804 (Desmangles 1992: 30 and Denning 1979: 23).

² There is wide divergence in the spelling of terms used in Vodou rituals. For example, the following variations appeared in the source material for this paper, e.g. Vodoun (Courlander), Vodou (Desmangles), Voodoo (Rigaud and Métraux), Voudoun (Deren), Vodun (Schmiderer), Vaudau (Lowenthal), and Vaudaux (Wilcken, citing Moreau). Early writers tended to use French spelling. Under the influence of African oral traditions, Creole has been for several centuries a spoken (but not written) language. Only recently have efforts been made to codify Haitian Creole for literary and anthropological purposes. I attempt to use consistent spellings of Vodou terms, except for direct quotations, where the author's spelling is retained. Regardless of preferred spelling, the word 'Vodou' was a term used by the Dahomean people to signify "spirit" or "deity" (Courlander 1960: 8. 'Vudu' is also found in the Ewe language (a people divided between eastern Ghana and western and northern Cameroon (D. Williams, personal communication, November, 1994).

³ Formulated by Williams between 1971-75, semasiology is a theory of human actions that developed within the larger field of British social anthropology. Semasiologists systematically examine how meaningful human actions become signs or symbols in movement when performed by an agent with specific intention (Williams 1981: 221). The data studied include dances, rituals, sign languages or any other system of performed actions in which the moving human body is the articulating agent. The semasiological body is the instrument of expression within ordered, rule-based systems of significant human actions (Williams 1975: xvi, 3-4).

⁴ Personal interviews conducted with dancer/teacher Pat Hall-Smith and Dr. Leslie Desmangles, Chair, Department of Religion at Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut, in October and November, 1994, contributed substantially to my understanding of embodiment and symbolic gesture within Haitian rituals and dances. My sincere thanks are extended to them for their assistance.

⁵ The word 'Bondye' is a creolization of the French word 'Bondieu' (Courlander 1960: 357).

⁶ Owing to political pressures and a declining economy in Haiti between the late 1950s and the present, steady streams of emigration have populated Haitian communities throughout metropolitan New York, primarily in the boroughs of Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens (Laguerre 1984: 21). Schmiderer, whose Doctoral fieldwork was carried out in Haiti (1990), recently compared Vodou ceremonies in Haiti and New York. She reports that elements related to the music, the dances and manifestations of spiritual possession are similar in source and settlement locations. Differences are more pronounced in elements related to *locations of ritual spaces* (indoors in N.Y., outdoors in Haiti) and the amount of elaborate paraphernalia such as altar decorations, costumes and banners (less in N.Y., greater in Haiti).

⁷ *Houngan* means 'spirit chief' in the Fon language (Courlander 1960: 10). I was unable to discover the socio-historical origins of the word *Mambo*.

⁸ *Hounsi* is a Dahomean term meaning 'spirit wives' (Courlander 1960: 10).

⁹ This word is usually Anglicized as 'Loa', pronounced LOW-ah.

¹⁰ In the Ewe (pronounced roughly, 'EH-vay') language, as it is spoken by *Vudu* devotees in the Volta region of eastern Ghana, the word *legba* can signify 'statue', 'idol' or any manifestation of a Divinity (personal communication, D. Williams, November, 1994).

¹¹ Space prevents extended discussion here, but in general, it may be said that they are *heightened* states of consciousness which aren't achieved through external means -- drugs, etc.

¹² It becomes necessary to speak of dance classes here, both because the study of Afro-Caribbean dancing is widespread in the United States and because many people's initial and continuing experience of Haitian (and other) ritual music and dances (like my own) is gained through classes. For those not familiar with what goes on in such classes (and with full awareness that a dance class is different from a ritual ceremony), students are nevertheless exposed to the interactive relationships necessary between dancing and drum rhythms and they are taught to respect the spiritual and religious basis of the dances.

¹³ So subtle is improvisation in a master drummer's repertoire that an anecdote is relevant: in one of Jean-Léon Destiné's classes, I made an audiotape of Alphonse Cimber (pronounced 'sim-BARE') playing a favorite Haitian rhythm. Having studied drumming for several years with Montego Joe (a Jamaican drummer), I tried duplicating the rhythm by playing along with the tape I'd made, and *it was just here I discovered the meaning of rhythmic improvisation and variation*. I couldn't follow the tape. Although the basic rhythm was consistent and recognizable throughout, Cimber played minutely subtle variations with almost every repetition, making it impossible for a novice to keep up.

¹⁴ Space prevents more than this rather bald statement of a fundamental issue; however, I would want to direct interested readers to a thorough discussion of Cartesianism and its disastrous effects on human movement studies of any kind in Farnell (1995), with particular reference to Chapter 1: *The Nineteenth Century Legacy* and Chapter 2: *Bias Against the Iconic*.

¹⁵ This relationship of danced action signs to rhythm isn't the same as that which exists in *Bharatanatyam*, in which the dancer is expected to improvise her own musical rhythm by "playing" or "drumming" with her feet upon the floor. Like *Bharatanatyam* dancers, Haitian dancers may employ various bodily parts to accent one or more of the polyrhythms. However, Haitian dancers aren't expected to supply an additional, explicit rhythmic line. I have, however, seen highly skilled Haitian dancers create visible counter-rhythms that weren't being played by the drummer.

¹⁶ Those of us whose understanding and practice of Haitian dances and body language has "an American accent", so to speak, often find it hard to achieve such an experience of gravity. This may be because of cultural conditioning towards standards of airborne flight, so highly prized in our indigenous forms of ballet and modern dancing. Or, it may be connected to our tendency to believe that if an application of physical force doesn't seem to work, *more* force is the way to go.

¹⁷ *Yonvalou* is a Wydah word taken from the language of a people by the same name who live in Dahomey (Deren 1953: 60).

¹⁸ Too often, when two body positions (or handshapes) resemble one another structurally, it is assumed that meanings are the same.

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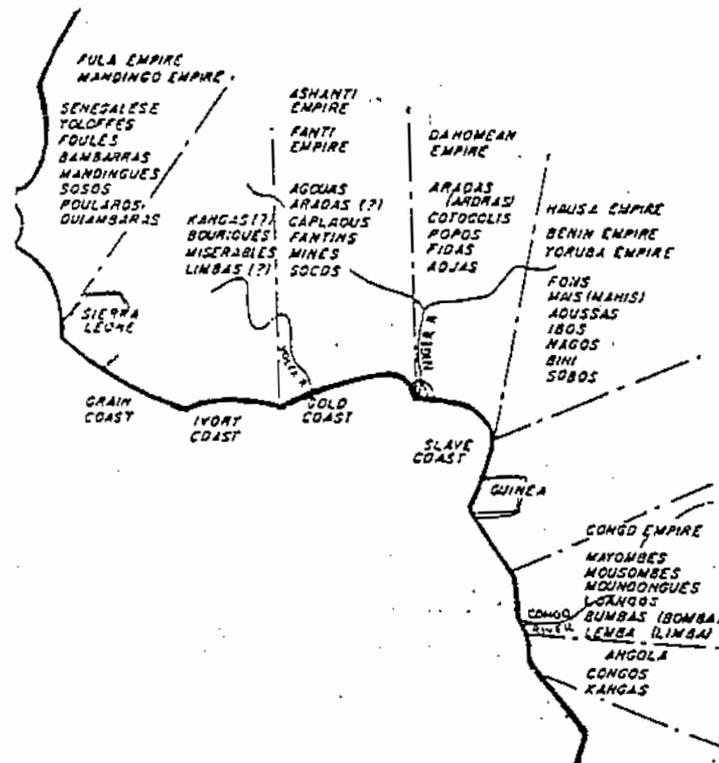


Figure 1. African Origins of the Slaves.

These are the African tribes which are recorded as having been brought to Haiti. Their placement on the map indicates their approximate geographical area. From Deren 1953: 59.

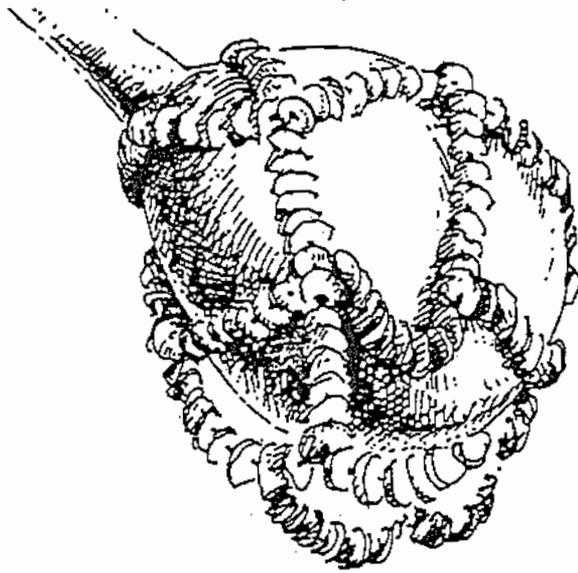


Figure 2. The Sacred Asson.
From Denning and Phillips 1979: 50.

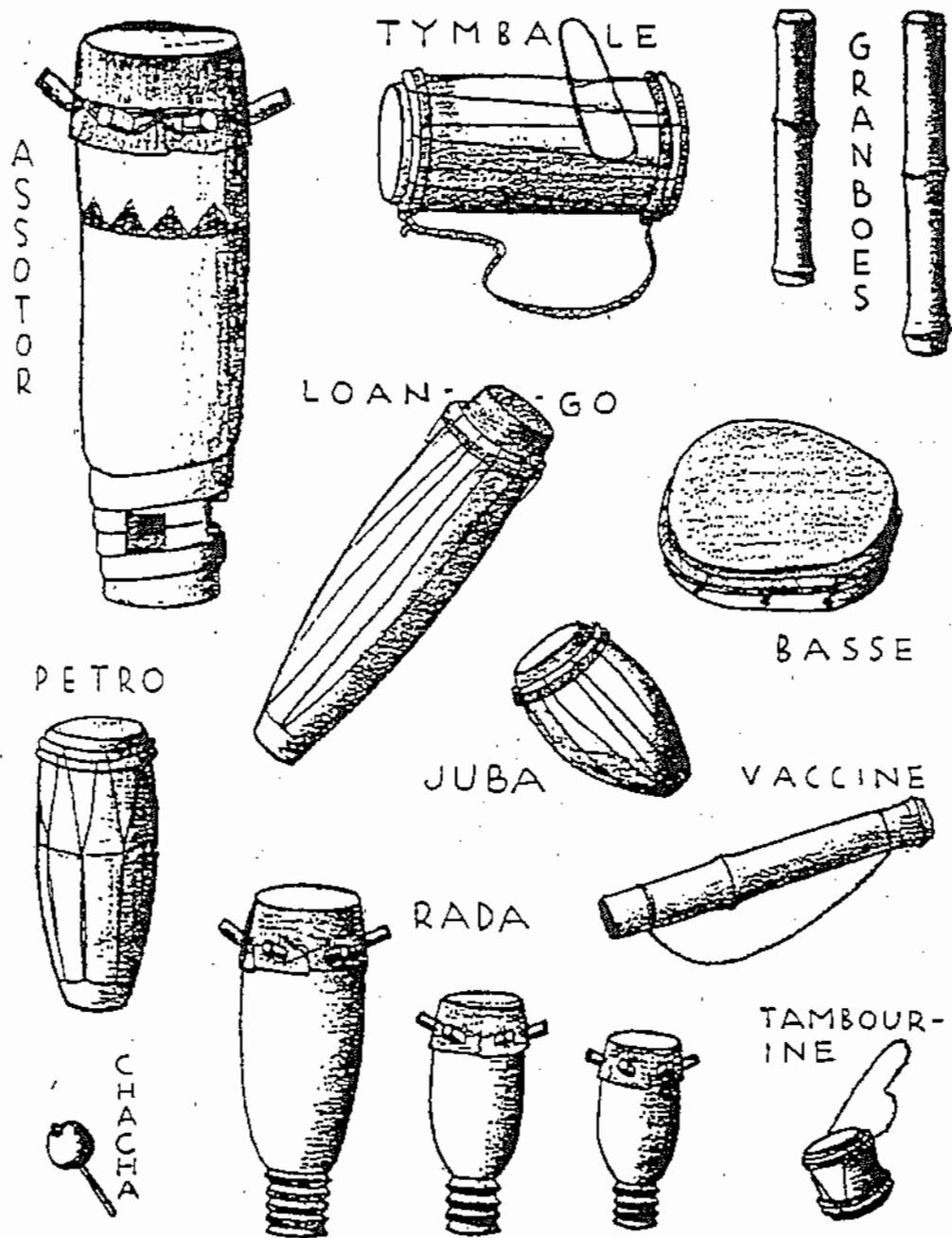


Figure 3. Musical Instruments
From Courlander 1973: frontispiece.

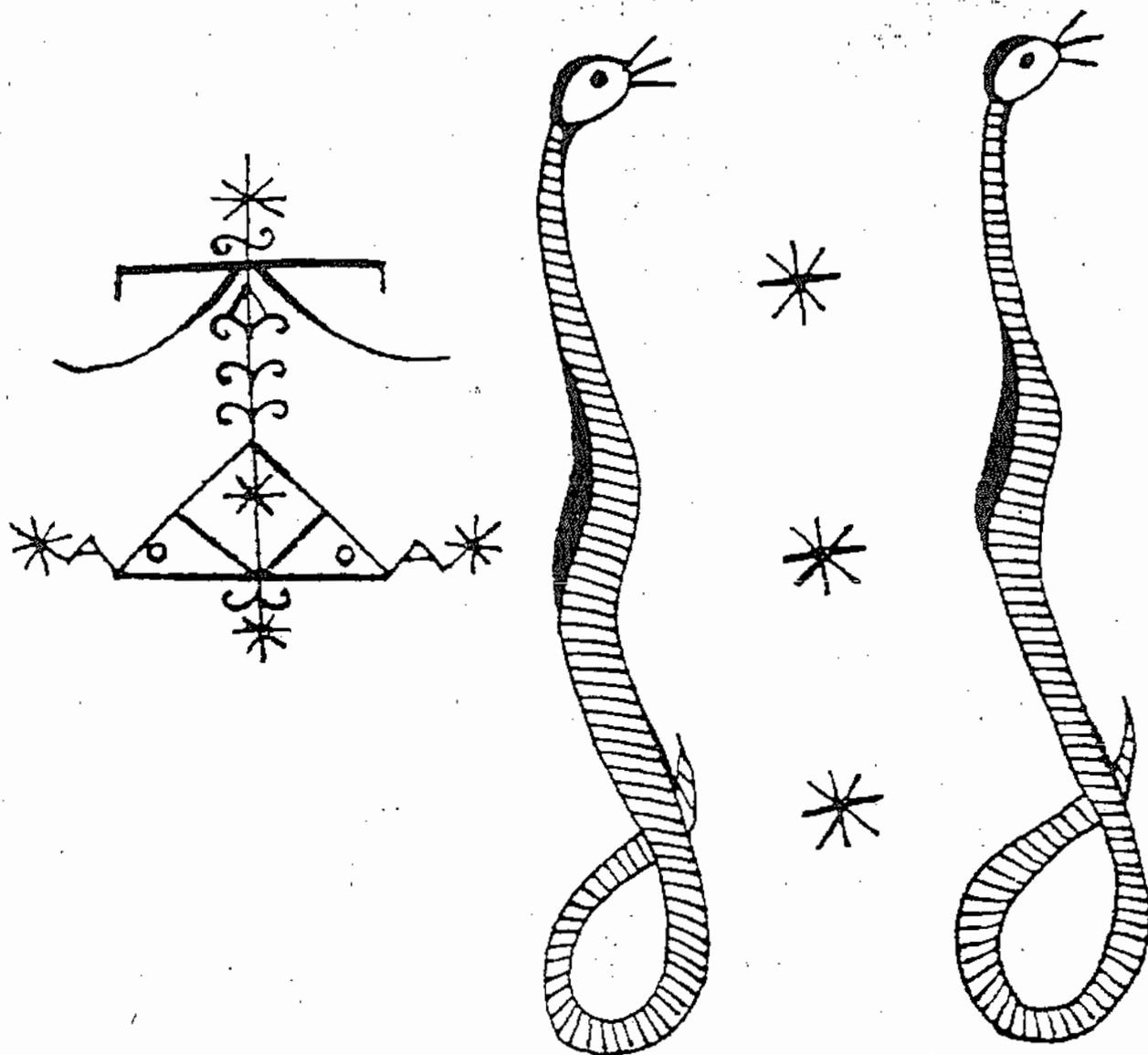


Figure 4. Vevé of Ogou Fer (left) and Vevé of Damballah and Aida We'do
From Rigaud 1969: 101 and 110.

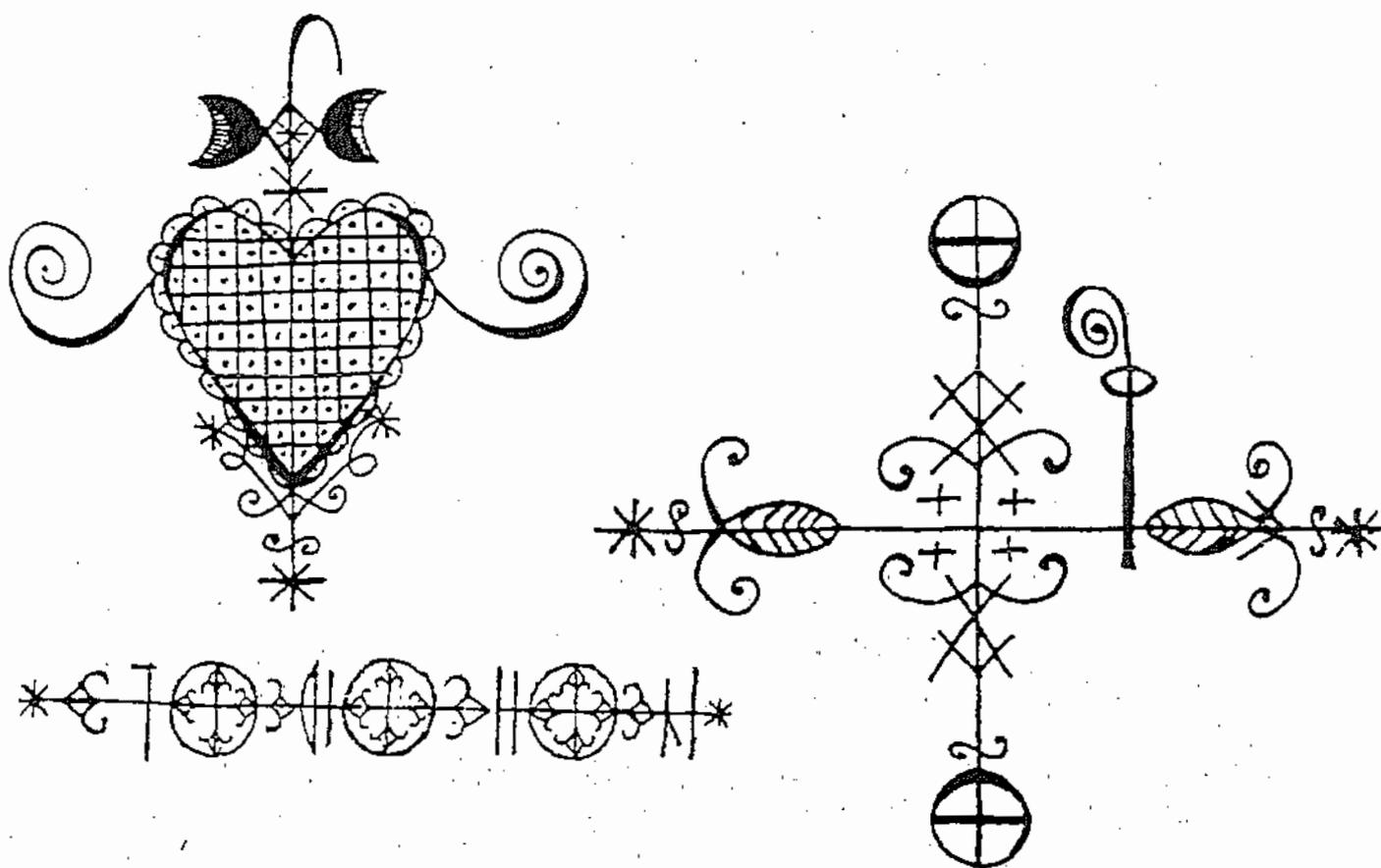


Figure 5. Vevé of Erzulie (top left), Legba (right), Drums and Ogan.
From Deren 1953: 235 and Rigaud 1969: 110.