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The Rite of Baptism in Haitian Vodou

Elizabeth McAlister

On a Saturday night in March in the year 2000, the members of an Afro-Haitian *sosyete* (society, congregation) in New York City gathered to celebrate an important religious holiday. They recited prayers, sang, and offered food at the feast days of two important deities: Danbala, the ancient and venerable serpent, and Loko, patron of the priesthood. The service was also the occasion for a rite of passage; the smallest member of the *sosyete*, a one-year-old baby, was baptized and put under the protection of God, the angels, and the spirits of Afro-Creole traditional religion.

It was a small gathering of perhaps twenty-five people, most of whom were extended family. "Papa Emmanuel," the godfather, was an *oungan* (priest) initiated into the mysteries of the tradition. He, in turn, had initiated most of his family, and they gathered often to pray. Although most of the family had been born in Haiti, they had lived in the United States for many years, and Emmanuel's *sosyete* was probably the oldest Vodou congregation in the United States. They were multigenerational, spoke both English and Haitian Creole at home, and worked at a variety of occupations, including teaching, social work, and the performing arts. In the *sosyete* were several non-Haitian members who had married Haitians or were initiated by Papa Emmanuel in New York.

The prayer service was held in March on the Saturday night closest to Saint Patrick's Day, because the Vodou deity Danbala has been associated with the Catholic Saint Patrick ever since the colonial period in Haiti. To understand Afro-Haitian religion, it is important to remember the conditions under which it was formed. Its history goes back to the terrible time of slavery, when French Catholic slaveholders bought and forced African peoples of different backgrounds into plantation work. These Africans came from diverse cultures, including the Fon of Dahomey, the Yoruba, and the Kongo. Finding themselves thrown together under the brutal regime of the French, they developed common ways to practice their religions. They forged a worldview that encompassed cosmology, philosophy, belief, ritual, medicine, and concepts about justice and aesthetics. Some parts of

this worldview we can trace to its Dahomean roots, others to the Kongo. There is also a great deal of Catholic influence in the religion, and this is clear, when Haitians who are initiated in Vodou also practice Catholicism, perform the sacraments, and maintain special devotions to the saints.

Afro-Haitian religion was unknown to most Americans before the 1970s—or it was only known through the incorrect and demonized images of "Voodoo" seen in Hollywood movies. The reality of Haitian Vodou is becoming better known now that hundreds of thousands of Haitians have immigrated to the United States since the 1970s. There are large Haitian communities in Miami, New York, Boston, Chicago, and Montreal. Most Haitians in the United States are Catholic, and some of them are also *sevite* (servants), who serve the spirits of Vodou.

The religious world of Vodou is populated by numerous unseen forces who originate in various African and European societies. The most important force is undisputedly God the Creator, who is called by his French name, *Bon Dieu* (the Good Lord) or by his name in Haitian Creole, *Gran Mèt* (literally, the Great Master). Because *Gran Mèt* seldom reveals himself to humans, they rely on a series of other spiritual beings. Haitians pray to Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and all of the Catholic saints. In addition to these Christian entities, there are many *lwa* (spirits, angels), who communicate with *sevite* through divination, dreams, and possession. These *lwa* have names such as Legba, Marasa, Loko, Danbala, Ezili, Kouzen Azaka, Ogou, Jean Petwo, Bawon Samdi, and many others.

The unseen world of the spirits is conceived as an elaborate universe that mirrors our world. The dead and the spirits are separated from the living by an invisible body of water, a vast sea that recalls the Atlantic Ocean that the African ancestors had to cross during the slave trade. The spirits and the dead live in the land *an ba dlo* (under the sea), a land called Ginen (mythical Africa). In a ceremony that must be done at least one year and a day after a *sevite* dies, priests or priestesses call the recently dead back from under the waters, and send them on to God. Ancestors who were particularly important, powerful, or memorable may cycle back again as spirits, to help in healing, guidance, and protection, to make life more bearable for the people still alive on this earth.

Afro-Haitian religion can be understood as an ongoing set of relationships and conversations between humans and the world of their ancestors, the Afro-Creole spirits, and the Catholic saints. The living are connected to one another through family and social networks and can become "brothers and sisters" who are initiated by the same godmother or godfather. The living also remain connected to those who have recently died. Prayers are regularly offered to *les morts* [the dead], who are believed to be making their way on a spiritual journey to God. People perform complicated rituals for family members who have died recently, in order to help them on this journey. But it is the *lwa* [spirits] who guide people through the unseen world into life and through unto death, and it is the *lwa* who accompany the dead back to God.

Vodou and Catholicism are similar in that they both look to God as creator, judge, and ultimate animator of the life of the world. But the spiritual worlds of the two traditions are different. Vodou sees the universe as two mirrored worlds

separated by an ocean, whereas the Christian cosmology consists of the earthly, the heavenly, and the infernal realms. Vodou offers the lwa and the recently dead as spiritual guides, whereas Catholicism features the Trinity, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the saints.

How, then, do people in Haiti manage to live in the worlds of Catholicism and Vodou at the same time? It is a complex question that scholars and theologians have tried to answer, with much disagreement in the process. Haitian people do manage to practice both Catholicism and Vodou, sometimes separately and sometimes together. To see just how, we have to look at the way that people live their religious lives, how people pray, and how they mark important rites of passage such as birth and death. We must try to understand which spiritual entities people "work" with, and how. One way to do this is to look to see which world people are engaging with when they perform religious ritual.

The unseen worlds of Vodou and Catholicism do overlap in fundamental ways; spiritual beings are appointed by God to reveal truths, to protect people, to help people make moral choices, and to guide them in living and dying. The saints and the spirits, as well as the ancestors, are all forces it is possible to petition through prayer and through spiritual "works." The religious work of Vodou sometimes calls for Catholic rituals to be performed. Besides holding novenas, baptism is probably the most common ritual. Not only can people be baptized, but most ritual objects in Vodou are also baptized in order to be prepared for contact with the spirits. The process of baptism does several things; it singles out a person or a thing to be consecrated, it introduces the person or thing to the spirits and angels, and it gives the person or thing a new name that the spirits and angels can recognize. In this way, the person becomes a new member of the unseen worlds of both Catholicism and Vodou. The person is now a child of God in a renewed way, ready to continue on the spiritual journey toward God.

There is a proverb in Haiti that says "*Pitit se richès*" (Children are wealth). It is very important that a baby's life begin properly and that its relationship to God, the angels, and the spirits be clear and direct. The baptism of a baby in the Afro-Haitian religious world accomplishes several things. Though they hold baptisms in houses or Vodou temples, *sèvitè* believe baptism to be exactly the same as the Catholic ritual. As a Roman Catholic sacrament, baptism removes original sin from the baby and makes of the baby a new person who, through the grace conferred by baptism, enters into the Christian community. The ritual of baptism recalls the New Testament story of John's baptism of Jesus at the Jordan River, told in Matthew 3:13. By following Jesus' example, Christians believe they can join Jesus to become a child of God, and be saved after death.

Through the rite of baptism, *sèvitè* see themselves as belonging to the world of Catholicism, and generally perform all the other Catholic sacraments as well. Ironically, sometimes parents who have already baptized their baby in a Vodou house, will also baptize in a Catholic church, because in Haiti it is only there that they can obtain the important baptismal certificate needed to enter school or get a passport. In this way, the world of Catholicism overlaps with the official world

of government bureaucracy. This is not the case with Vodou, which, because it is the religion of the poor majority, has been devalued and unrecognized by most governments in Haitian history.

Besides engaging with the unseen world of Catholicism, removing original sin from the baby, and joining the baby to the Christ, baptism in a Vodou house formally introduces the baby to the world of Vodou. After receiving the sacrament of baptism, the baby is presented to the spirits and angels. This introduction is appropriate because it is thought that babies can actually see the spirits. A baby is considered to be pure innocence, incapable of intending harm. In this state of innocence, babies are thought to be able to communicate directly with the spirits. Consequently, it is important that they be baptized and placed under divine protection.

Baptism rituals can be stand-alone ceremonies participated in by family members who bring their baby to a priest or priestess of Vodou. Baptism can also be done in the middle of other rituals, as is the case with the rite reprinted here. Catholic rites performed within Vodou rituals use the formality of European ceremony to signal moments of importance, and also to remember that to live in a Creole community means one must be able to move constantly between two cultural worlds.

In the ritual performed in New York, the ceremony had arrived at the point where the congregation was invoking the powerful spirit called Papa Ogou. Papa Ogou is the patron of metalworking, especially of iron, but his command extends to all matters of war and soldiering, discipline, and technology. Papa Ogou is one of the most important lwa in this house in New York, and at this point, Papa Ogou had emerged from an *ba dlo* to possess Papa Emmanuel. Possession by the spirits, although it sounds foreign and scary to anybody not familiar with it, is a very common ritual behavior in many of the world's religions. The spirit is believed to come from the unseen world and materialize in the present world, to inhabit briefly the body of the worshiper. A similar principle is at work in the Pentecostal and Holiness worlds, where the Holy Spirit "comes down" and physically touches believers in Christ, who "speak in tongues" in a special spiritual language.

In Vodou, spirit possession is one of the most important goals of many rituals, because the spirits not only arrive in our world from the other side of the waters but also often arrive with a kind of human consciousness; they can talk, sing, and communicate with people. The members of a Vodou society will typically salute the spirit with special ritual movements, and then they will wait to see whether that spirit has a special message for them. The spirit may stop and talk, bring advice, a healing touch or even an admonition to people within the group. All in all, the arrival of the spirit is an important moment and gives *sèvitè* something they cannot necessarily find in Catholicism: direct, face-to-face contact with the divine. In Vodou, the unseen world of the spirits often, and regularly does, break through into the material world.

Let us return to the baby and his baptism. The small New York apartment of the oungan has been tidied and the furniture has been pushed back against the walls to make room for prayer. Against one wall a table makes up a large altar. A

statue of Saint Patrick is at the center, and a large vase of flowers sits before it. On either side of the statue are dishes of diverse foods, two cakes, candles, and bottles of liqueurs, rums, and gin. Lit candles illuminate a crucifix, a gourd strung with beads (called an *ason*), a small bottle of holy water, and a simple white enamel cup of water.

Papa Ogou has arrived to possess the priest Emmanuel during the celebration ceremony for Papa Danbala and Papa Loko. Papa Ogou/Emmanuel is busy giving advice to the family members, who have gathered around to talk with him. He looks over and catches sight of one his goddaughters with her baby, sitting at the edge of the room. He beckons for them to make their way over to him, and within seconds Papa Ogou has called the congregation together to baptize the baby. It is a spontaneous ritual but virtually the same as if it had been planned in advance.

The mother explained that she was pleased that Papa Ogou decided to conduct the ritual himself. The new mother had been planning to come to Papa Emmanuel especially for baptism. When she was pregnant, he had called on God and the spirits for special blessings for the health of the unborn child. He had also given her a spiritual "work" to perform for Saint Claire, together with a series of prayers, so that the birthing would not hold complications. As it turned out, the baby came quickly and easily.

The baptism began with standard Catholic prayers: the recitation of the Lord's prayer and three Hail Marys, all in the formal French of the Haitian Catholic world. After that, the congregation sang a French canticle special to baptism. Its last line, "Accept my promise, Lord Jesus," represents the baby, who is promising himself to Jesus. Because the baby was too young to speak, the congregation spoke for him. A second song reiterated the same theme, and then it was time to baptize the child.

Papa Ogou/Papa Emmanuel turned to the baby's godmother (whom he had himself appointed from among the women in the family). "What will you name this child?" he asked. At this, the godmother gave the child a *non pwen* (literally, point name), also called a *non vanyan* (honor name). This special name is particular to Vodou and is usually a cryptic phrase with many meanings, depending on the context. These special names in Vodou are not gendered, and they can be given to both boys and girls. This is the name that the person will use when communing with the spiritual world. If the child grows up to become initiated, he or she will likely be given a different *non vanyan*, and this newer name will reflect the developed, adult self. One's name, like one's personality, moral life, and circumstances, then, can change over time in the world of Vodou.

Holding her baby, the mother, who was initiated years earlier, sucked in her breath and waited to hear the name of her child. Her own name, *La Paroisse* (the parish [bell]), referred to the parish church bells that announced the mass. The name indicated that she was mandated to be vocal, to bring people together in the religious world, and to work in the community. She wondered what name her child would be given. In an instant, the godmother spoke. "*Sa'w wè-a, se sa*" [What you see is what it is], she pronounced. Heads nodded in agreement. This polyvalent name expressed

that the child has no secrets but is as he appears. It could also indicate that the child would be received just as he presents himself. This would be an admonition that the child must have good manners and present himself properly to the world.

Papa Ogou/Papa Emmanuel dipped a sprig of leaves into his bottle of holy water, and shook some droplets of water onto the baby. As he did this, he recited a prayer, which began with his own name in Vodou, Big Rock: "Big Rock, who has achieved the rank of priest, who holds the *ason*, and who understand the mysteries of Africa." After identifying himself, he baptized the baby "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

Immediately the congregation recited the next prayer, which is a basic prayer in Vodou that mirrors the form and the function of the Nicene Creed. In this prayer, the *sèvitè* acknowledges the primary sovereignty of God, and next, of the saints, the spirits, and the angels in the unseen world, as well as all that exists in this world. The prayer goes on to state that God has created two roads for each person: a road close to God and a road far away from God. Everyone has free will to choose which path he or she will take. This statement explicates the morality within Vodou and the idea that God has offered people the free choice to live a moral life or an immoral one. It is clear that within the world there are moral choices, both seen and unseen, that can be productive or destructive.

The prayer finishes "by the power of the great judge who rules the heavens, the earth, the great judge of Ginen." The close of this prayer refers to the judgment that people will be subject to at the crossroads, that is, at the moment they move from the living world to the world of the dead. This concept of judgment after death is akin to the Judgment Day of scripture, yet the reference to Africa moves the judgment to the other world below the waters, the world of Afro-Creole spirits. Interestingly, the end of the prayer moves from French to the Creole language, signaling again the move from the Roman Catholic world into that of Vodou.

After this prayer, the priest typically launches a very long prayer that invokes the *lwa*, each in turn, in a particular ritual order. The invocation, all in Creole, begins with Legba, the deity who stands at the crossroads, at gates, and in doorways, and who is the unseen usher who controls movements of spirit and people from one world to the next. Legba is creolized, or "syncretized," with Saint Anthony of Padua, and so Saint Anthony is invoked at the same time. After Legba, the other spirits that the particular congregation worships are called one by one by the priest, many of them together with their Catholic counterparts. This is an Afro-Creole ritual that is added onto the Roman Catholic baptism. It is done here because in time each person in Vodou will begin a relationship with their *mèt tèt* (literally, the master of the head), a kind of "guardian angel" specially protecting and governing that person. Since a small baby does not yet have a guardian angel, the priest invokes all of them, so that each spirit is invited to guide and protect the baby.

It is likely that somebody will be possessed by one of the *lwa* at this point during the general celebration. In this baptism, Papa Ogou had already come to "dance" in the head of the priest himself. It may have been a sign that Papa Ogou

wished to claim the child as his *mèt tèt*. Generally, however, the *mèt tèt* is not revealed until the person is much older.

At the end of all the prayers, the atmosphere of the baptism becomes light and celebratory. The final song is a happy one the congregation sings as they parade the baby around the room with his new godparents. In New York, Papa Ogou/Papa Emmanuel handed the baby's mother a bottle of champagne from the altar, a form of congratulations for introducing her baby to the grace and protection of the unseen world.

The ritual reproduced here was recorded by the author in March 2000 in New York City. I would like to express my deep thanks to Papa Emmanuel and his Société La Fleur d'Or for their permission and assistance with this essay. Much of the interpretation of the ritual presented here is from interviews with Papa Emmanuel and with his son, "Après Dieu." This essay is dedicated to the sweet little boy "Sa'w wè-a, se sa."

Further Reading

Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001); Donald J. Cosentino, ed., *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995); Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: Chelsea House, 1953); Elizabeth McAlister, "Vodou and Catholicism in the Age of Transnationalism: The Madonna of 115th Street Revisited," in *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration*, edited by R. Stephen Warner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998, pp. 123–60).

The Ritual of Baptism

The priest asks the mother to bring the baby forward and asks the godfather and godmother to join them. He presents the godfather with a candle, which he is to hold throughout the ceremony.

*Oungan (in French): In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit
Society in chorus (in French):*

Our Father, who art in heaven
Hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our trespasses
As we forgive those who trespass against us
And lead us not into temptation

But deliver us from evil
Amen

Hail Mary, full of Grace
The Lord is with you
Blessed art thou among women
And Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus
Holy Mother of God, Have mercy on us sinners,
Now and at the hour of our death
Amen
[Three times]

Society sings this hymn together:

Before all I take this oath, on my honor
And I give glory to my God
I want to love you without end
More and more
Accept my promise, Lord Jesus

And then this hymn:

I pledge my promise in this baptism
On my behalf others have sworn
On this day I speak for myself
I pledge myself today freely
I pledge myself, I pledge myself, I pledge myself today freely
I pledge myself today freely

Oungan (in Haitian Creole): What name do you choose for this child?
Godmother: I call him "What you see is what it is."

The oungan asks for a small bottle of holy water (collected on a visit to a Catholic Church). With a small sprig of leaves he shakes several droplets of water onto the baby.

Oungan (in Haitian Creole):

By the power of the great oungan "Big Rock"
Oungan of Africa
Oungan of the highest rank
Oungan who holds the sacred rattle
Ki gweto Ki Gwewun Bogidi [ritual language; untranslatable]
I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit

Society together chants this prayer in French:

Yes God, Yes God
I believe that you are in your place
I believe that the mysteries (spirits; angels) are in place
I believe that all is in its place
Oh God, hear my words and grant my prayers

Lord, you have created two roads
 Everyone has the right to take the road he pleases
 Without interfering in the choices of others
 By the power of God

Prayer continues, switching to Haitian Creole:

By the power of the great judge in heaven
 By the power of the great judge on earth
 The great judge of African Guinea

By the power of Saint Antoine de Padua Legba Atibon
 Ago Agosi Agola
 [Then the other lwa are invoked; here is a partial listing:]

Marasa
 Loko
 Aiyzan
 Danbala
 Sobò
 Bade
 Silibo
 Agasou
 Bosou
 Belekou
 Agwe
 Mètres Ezili Frèda
 Dereal
 Papa Pierre
 Jean Dantò
 Manbo Ezili Dantò
 Adjedje
 Agawou
 Kouzen Azaka Mede
 Ossagne
 Ogou
 Bawon
 Grann Brijit
 Gede
 Petwo

At the end of the long invocation, the congregation breaks into celebration, and people take the elbows of the godfather, godmother, and the mother holding the baby and parade in a circle. The drummers present play a simple beat while the congregation parades and sings, in Haitian Creole.

Oliban's baptism was good, Yes God!

Oliban's baptism was good
 I'm carrying the *koyo* [homebody] in a rocking chair.

After a short break while people admire the baby and drink a bit of water, the congregation returns to finish the original ritual, the celebration of the spirits Danbala and Loko.