Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English
Benjamin Hebblethwaite with the editorial assistance of Joanne Bartley, Chris Ballengee, Vanessa Brissault, Erica Felker-Kantor, Andrew Tarter, Quinn Hansen and Kat Warwick

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Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English:
Chapter headings and vèvé

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Vodou fundamentals

• Bondye, Marasa, Lwa, Dantan
• Hierarchical with a priesthood
  – Hereditary and non-hereditary religion
  – Initiation as the entry way to Vodou and ascension to the priesthood. Special ceremonies.
• Vodou is non-apostolic, non-prescriptive
  – Persecuted and exploited historically and contemporaneously
• Domestic (shrines) and public Vodou (altars)
• Constructed and found altars
Vodou fundamentals

• The sky, the earth and under the water are the resting places of the lwa
• Religion that is drummed, danced and sung
  – Possession & possession rituals
  – Serving and feeding the lwa and the community with animal sacrifice and feasting. Maintaining balance.
• *Xenophilia* and *heterodoxy*, not xenophobia and orthodoxy
• There is no central authority; each *oungan* or *manbo* determines what is right for his or her community
What is Vodou? Historical ethno-linguistic origins of Vodou: West Africans + Central Africans + Creolization.

Slave trade: Dahomey (c. 1680-1750) + Kongo (1750-1791).

Vodou is a synthesis of the Traditional African Religions in West and Central Africa and it is the creative unification of those religions through Creolization.

Because of the slave trade and colonization, Vodou and related ATRs religions are found in Brazil, Haiti, Jamaica, Trinidad, U.S.A. and throughout the African Diaspora.

Map from: http://www.slaverysite.com/Body/maps.htm
A sketch of Vodou history

- Vodou and its antecedents are thousands of years old
- African religions Creolize in Saint-Domingue, c. 1680 – 1791
- Vodou priests and practitioners fight for independence, 1791-1804
- Synthesis and maintenance in Haiti, 1804-2011
- 1804-1860 – absence of the official Catholic church in Haiti
- Aristide’s 2002 presidential decree in support of Vodou
- Expansion into the U.S. with the Haitian Diaspora since 1960
Lafanmi o ‘Oh the family’
on Racine Figuier’s album, *Dantò* (1999)

Lafanmi o,
an n rasanble (Ayibobo!) nan demanbre a
n pral fè seremoni an. (Adje se la m pral fè maji a mache!)
Limèn balen nan—o an n rele lwa yo.
Sonnen ason an—rele Papa Legba.
Nan kafou a, o nou angaje.
Papa Legba—ouvè baryè pou lwa yo.

Oh my *kith and kin*,
let’s *assemble* (Ayibobo!) for the family’s Vodou *ceremony*,
we’re going to do the *service*. (Oh my that’s where I’m going to do magic!)
Light the *candle*—oh let’s call the *lwa*.
Shake the *rattle*—call Papa *Legba*.
At the *crossroad*, oh we’re in *trouble*.
Papa Legba—*open the gate* for the lwa.
What is Vodou? Basic elements of a Vodou ceremony:

The Vodou priestess (manbo) shakes the sacred rattle (ason) and bells (klochêt) to salute the main stations in the Vodou temple, direct the drummers, and call forth the lwa.

Photograph on left by Jérôme Soimaud.
The altar (pe) on the left: for the lwa Èzili Dantò. The altar displays the symbols of the lwa. Èzili Dantò’s heart-shaped diagram (vèvè) has been traced in front of the altar to consecrate the space. Oungan Marcenat’s altar on right.

*Urban altar (Miami, U.S.A.)*  
Photograph by Jérôme Soimaud

*Rural altar (Belle-Rivière, Haiti)*  
Photograph by Ben Hebblethwaite
--The drummers (*ountò*): in a ceremony they provide the rhythmic foundation for ritual, dancing, and possession.

--Drumming insistently calls the lwa and it drives the lwa into the head of the lwa’s horse (the one possessed).

Vodun drumming in Benin (Rouget 2001). Three drums (Rada); sacrificial blood is splashed on the drum because it has a sacred status in Vodun (*a vodun dwells within it*). Fon/Haitian Creole: *gan* = ogan; *agida* = agida
Rada

Kongo-Petwo
Foula: the ounGAN consecrates the drums (potomitan, worshipers, audience) with pulverized rum and creates an intense religious atmosphere.
The centerpost (*potomitan*): the symbolic tree around which all Vodou worship circles. The lwa rise and descend through this channel that links the three domains of the lwa: the sky, the earth, and the water (center photograph by Jérôme Soimaud).

Above: Vodouists at a found altar Souvnans near Gonaives
A Vodou priest (*oungan*) traces a diagram (*vèvè*) to honor the lwa and consecrate the place of the ceremony (photographs by Jérôme Soimaud)
Salutation: the Vodou priestess (manbo) shakes the sacred rattle and bells as she salutes the main stations of the Vodou ceremony: the altar, the drums, the centerpost, the vèvè, the Vodouists present (photograph by Jérôme Soimaud)
Two Vodouists greet each other during a ceremony (photograph by Jérôme Soimaud).
Worship: the lwa dance in the heads of their servants. Revelation is living and open. The lwa reveal Bondye. Revelation cannot be frozen in books.
The lwa mount their servants. The Vodouist is a vessel. The individual is temporarily ridden by the lwa; the lwa manifests her or his characteristics.

All photographs by Jérôme Soimaud
Composure and calm are expected of Vodouists. Emotion is reserved for war and possession (Blier 1995: 81).

All photographs by Jérôme Soimaud
Animal sacrifice: feeding the lwa with blood and preparing a feast for the lwa and their servants

Photograph on the right by Jérôme Soimaud

http://www.life.com/gallery/62471/image/ugc1251681/inside-haitian-vodou#index/7
A manbo officiates a Petwo ceremony involving the sacrifice of a pig.
Milo Marcelin’s (1950a & b) songs and texts
Benjamin Hebblethwaite and Joanne Bartley

Danbala Wèdo se koulèv dlo!
Danbala Wèdo is the water snake!
Chèché Danbala, ki bô oua ouè-li?
Look for Danbala, where will you see him?
Papa Danbala se koulèv dlo,
Papa Danbala is the water snake,
li plongé en ba d’leau!
he dives under water!

37.

37.
Simbi Andezo, sa yo di moun?
Simbi Andezo, sa y a fè mwen?
Sa y a di m?
Mwen prale lan simityè;
mwen prale chache pwèn mwen.
Mwen prale chache pwèn Makaya;
mwen prale chache pwèn Simbi Andezo.
Mwen prale chache anba, nèg;
mwen prale chache pwèn.

Simbi Andezo, what do they say to people?
Simbi Andezo, what will they do to me?
What will they tell me?
I’m going to the cemetery;
I’m going to seek out my magic charm.
I’m going to seek out Makaya’s charm;
I’m going to seek out Simbi Andezo’s charm.
I’m going to seek down yonder, brother;
I’m going to seek out a charm.
Appendix A: Dictionary of Vodou Terms (Hebblethwaite with contributions from Bartley, Tarter, Hansen and Warwick)

Anaylz; Anaïs  This lwa is the daughter of Èzili Dantò.68

anba dlo  See dlo.

andezo; an de zo  The an de zo lwa are of “two waters or substances” and therefore are worshiped in both Rada and Kongo-Petwo rites.69 Legba and Simbi are examples of an de zo lwa.

andwayne  The “blessing and naming of an infant” is a ritual that Oungan Nelson Marcenat conducts two weeks after he has delivered a child. In Nago (Yorùbá) culture, the name is chosen on the ninth day.70  See non vanyan.

angaje  The lwa are called by those who are angaje (in trouble).71
82.
Lafanmi o, an n rasanble nan **demanbre** a, n pral fè seremoni an.
Limen balenn nan – o an n rele lwa yo.
Sonnen ason an – rele Papa Legba.
Nan kafou a, o nou angaje.
Papa Legba – louvri baryè pou lwa yo.

82.
Oh my kith and kin, let’s assemble at the home ritual, we’re going to do the ceremony.
Light the candle – oh let’s call the lwa.
Shake the rattle – call Papa Legba.
At the crossroad, oh we’re in trouble.
Papa Legba – open the gate for the lwa.
Appendix A: Dictionary of Vodou Terms (Hebblethwaite with contributions from Bartley, Tarter, Hansen and Warwick)

degrade mò  A ritual to separate a dead person from his or her principal lwa. See desounen.

degre  A magical protective device. See pwen.

deka  An object used by a Vodou priest or priestess to call the lwa. See ason.

dekanpe  A substance that wards off evil spirits.

dekoupe  The middle size of the three Rada drums. See segon.

demanbre; demanbwe  A sacred place where the family ancestors are buried. A demanbre is a gathering of extended family to feast and honor ancestral Vodou lwa. It is also a sacred piece of land in which the lineage of ancestors is buried. See babako; kandjanhoun; lakou.

demann  A prayer request written on paper and placed on an altar. The demann is submitted to the lwa with a lit candle in hand.

derechanj, derechany  See rechanj.

desele  Unsaddled; when the chwal (horse) is no longer ridden by the lwa.
Manje Legba & Kay lwa m boule
on Racine Figuier’s album, Dantò (1999)

Manje Legba sou dife, l ap boukannen.
Sèvis la pral konmanse o. (Bilolo!) (x2)
Devan baryè a se la m trase vèvè m
ane a pou m fè sèvis lwa yo.
Nan pwent baryè a se la m trase vèvè m
ane a pou m fè sèvis lwa yo. (Ayayay!)
Papa Legba, kouvè a pare
Atibon Legba, kouvè a pare,
Èzili Dantò, kouvè a parç

Legba’s food is on the fire, it’s roasting.
Oh the service is going to begin. (Bilolo!)
In front of the gate is where I traced my vèvè
this year so I can do the service of the lwa.
At the end of the gate is where I traced my vèvè
this year so I can do the service of the lwa.
Papa Legba, the table is ready
Atibon Legba, the table is ready
Èzili Dantò, the table is ready
Kay lwa m boule, Racine Figuier

Kay lwa m boule, li tounen sann o. M ape mande sa ka ranmase lwa yo? Mezanmi, kay lwa m boule, demanbre a la woy. An n (Fò n) rasanble pou n ka ranmase lwa yo.

My temple of lwa burned down, oh it turned into ashes. I’m asking what can gather up the lwa? Oh my, my temple of lwa burned down, Oh the ceremony is here. Let’s (We must) get together in order to gather up the lwa
Themes in Vodou songs

• Songs about Bondye (God), the lwa, the Marasa, and the ancestors (mythologies and attributes)
• The importance of serving the lwa
• The history and the African origins of Vodou
• The culture and organization of Vodou
• Philosophy and worldview
• Songs about nature & medicine: natural places where lwa dwell and medicinal or symbolic plants and trees
Themes in Vodou songs

- Apologetics (defense of Vodou)
- Songs about Vodouists and Vodou objects and symbols
- Animal sacrifice and feeding the lwa
- Family, community, spiritual family
- Conflict and conflict-resolution
- Vodou-Catholic songs
The Functions of Vodou Songs

• Invocation of the lwa (*rele lwa*)
• Response and prayer to the lwa
• Leave taking or farewell to the lwa
• *Booms* (cyclical songs reserved for special ceremonies held only once every seven years)
• Reproach or satire (*chante pwen*)
• The conveyance of themes
Structure and features of songs

- Short and repeated.
- Chorus and verse. Call and response.
- Compressed and coded parables about the lwa and their servants (Carvalho 2008: 426; Mason 1992; Verger 1999)
- Cryptic tricksterism (Karen McCarthy Brown 1991)
- West African language retentions, blessings, warnings, signs, oracles, praises, cosmologies and relationships
Vodou as a hereditary religion
Racin Bwa-Kay-Iman, Sa’m fè moun yo (can you hear the ogan?)

Since I was small, I have been singing for the lwa.
Oh it wasn’t a little guy who showed me how to sing.
Ever since my mother’s womb,
my great lwa have claimed me. Bilolo!
Oh heavens, who showed me how to sing, man/God!
(Beauvoir 2008b: 220)

Afoutayi! - Yi!
Bila bila - Kongo!
Lè bounda fache, kote l chita? – Atè!

Depi m piti, m ap chante pou lwa yo. Bilolo!
Se pa ti nèg ki te montre m chante o. (x 2)
Depi nan vant manman m,
gwo lwa m yo reklame mwen. Bilolo! (x 2)
Se pa ti nèg ki te montre m chante o
Adje, (ti nèg) ki te montre m chante, msye/Bondje!
Appendix A: Dictionary of Vodou Terms
(Hebblethwaite with contributions from Bartley, Tarter, Hansen and Warwick)

lwa  An immaterial spiritual being, force, or spirit. The lwa are spirits created by God; they are also ancestors of great importance who have become the patrons of specific domains.\textsuperscript{838} Sèvi lwa (to serve the ancestral spirits) refers to calling the lwa and serving as their chwal (horses) in possession; it means to sing, chant, divine, offer food and drink, sacrifice animals, construct shrines, observe taboos, make ritual cuisine, and follow rules.\textsuperscript{839} Afè lwa (business of the spirits) refers to Vodou practice, and fè sèvis lwa is “to conduct a Vodou ceremony.” To gen lwa, like monte, is to be temporarily possessed by a Vodou spirit. A gwo lwa refers to any revered Vodou lwa who dates from at least the Haitian Revolution. The terms lwa achte (purchased lwa) and lwa bèflè (beautiful flower lwa) refer to fiery lwa called on at a Petwo service. A lwa bitasyon (lwa of the farm) is the lwa who is established on a farm to protect it. A lwa blan (white lwa) is an undefiled lwa; a lwa bosal (wild lwa) is any violent and unidentified lwa. A lwa djab (djab lwa) refers to the Petwo rite. A lwa Ginèn (Guinean lwa) refers to the Rada rite. Lwa je wouj (red-eyed lwa) refers to an aggressive Petwo lwa. A lwa who originates in the New World is a lwa kreyòl (Creole lwa). A lwa mèt tèt is one’s principal protective lwa, and he or she receives allegiance. Lwa pwen (point lwa) refers to a Vodou spirit who provides special protection or powers. A lwa rasin (root lwa) is one’s ancestral lwa. Lwa zenga is a lwa who is deaf or without ears.
Many entries in the Dictionary of Vodou Terms are *encyclopedic*:

A *mare lwa* (tying the lwa) is a ceremony to restrain a troublesome lwa. *Ranvwa lwa* (sending of the lwa) expedites the lwa back to the woods or Africa.\(^{840}\) Four hundred and one lwa and *orisha* are typically counted in Haitian and Yorùbá tradition, respectively.\(^{841}\) The pantheon of lwa reflects *xenophilia* and *heterodoxy* in that new lwa are happily incorporated and are so diverse that they defy any acknowledged standard.\(^{842}\) The lwa can be forces of nature, deceased humans who have been made divine, or mysterious spirits with complex characteristics; they have specific symbolic (e.g., Èzili Dantò’s *ponya* [daggers]) and iconographic (e.g., chromolithograph) attributes. Many of these key attributes reflect core aspects of Haitian culture and society (e.g., the symbolic link between Èzili Dantò’s daggers and her inspiration of the indigenous army during Haiti’s war of independence). The lwa are *sakre* (sacred) and they *pale nan têt* (speak in the heads) of their servants.\(^{843}\) The authentic and valued lwa are inherited through the family; as one songs says, “This Lwa is my father’s Lwa, / I’m going to beg in order to serve them!”\(^{844}\) In Yorùbá culture, as in Haiti, failure to serve the *orisha* or lwa causes a *dangerous disorder*.\(^{845}\) The lwa are usually anthropomorphized because as great ancestors, they have names, personalities, preferences, relationships, children, weaknesses, among other human qualities.\(^{846}\) In Yorùbá religious philosophy, the deities are immortal even if they have human or natural origins.\(^{847}\) At the same time, each lwa has extraordinary powers. The expression *lwa danse nan têt (li)* (a lwa dances in his or her head) refers to possession. In this book, *lwa* is used in the English discussions and the word can be singular or plural. A clue to the origin of *lwa* may be found in the Yorùbá and Fon words for a priest of Ife, Babaláwò (the father of secrets), where *láwò* refers to what is secret and mysterious.\(^{848}\) See *djаб*; *lesen*; *lespri*; *papalwa*; *Vodou*; *zanj*. 
Konbit Zaka, Boukmann Eksperyans, 1995

Travay m ap travay o
Kouzen Zaka, m ap travay avè w, tande
Travay m ap travay o
Zaka Mede, m ap travay avè w, tande
Kouto digo m nan men m
Djakout mwen sou do m
M ap sekle
Kouto digo m nan men m
Vye alfò sou do m
M ap sèkle
Jou m g on fanm, l ale kite m,
Demen m ap jwenn youn lòt o (x 2)

Oh I’m working away
Kouzen Zaka, I’m working with you, you hear
Oh I’m working away
Zaka Mede, I’m working with you, you hear
My sickle in my hand
My straw bag on my back
I’m weeding
My sickle in my hand
My old napsack on my back
I’m weeding
The day I have a woman, she goes and leaves me
Oh tomorrow I’ll find another (x 2)

Travay m ap travay o, m ap travay avè w
Zaka mete m travay (x 2)
M pa t panse si m te ka fè travay sa yo
Zaka mete m travay la nan bitasyon mwen
Kouzen, m ap travay avè w, tande
Kouzen, Kouzen, n ap travay avè w, tande

Oh I’m working away, I’m working with you
Zaka put me to work
I didn’t think I could do those tasks
Zaka put me to work here on my farm
Kouzen, I’m working with you, you hear
Kouzen, Kouzen, we’re working with you, you hear
Oh leaves, save my life from the misery I’m in. My child is ill, I run to the house of the gangan, oh Simbi. My child is ill, I run to the house of the gangan. If you’re a good gangan, oh save my life from the misery I’m in.
Conclusion: The goals of *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*

- Investigate basic aspects of the Vodou religion and culture
- Collect the *source texts* in Vodou’s actual language, Haitian Creole, and produce an English translation
- Bring linguistic methods to Vodou studies: sketch of Haitian Creole grammar; orthographical modernization of all texts in the standard spelling of Haitian Creole; lexicographical and etymological research in the Dictionary of Vodou Terms
Conclusion: The goals of *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*

- Wed the illustration and defense of Vodou and Haitian Creole to interpretation and analysis
- Bilingual or trilingual books that use a side-by-side format provide the means for the accelerated study of the respective languages and cultures
- Establish a foundation for the growth of both secular and Vodouist scholarly *exegesis* and *criticism* dedicated to Vodou sources
- The Vodou Archive: [http://ufdc.ufl.edu/vodou](http://ufdc.ufl.edu/vodou)
Other related books in Temple’s list:
http://www.temple.edu/tempress/index.html
If there weren’t Lwa, as for us, we’d all drown!
If there weren’t Lwa, as for us, oh we’d all perish in foreign countries.
We come from Ginen, hand bound to hand, foot bound to foot!
We’ll go to a place, when we arrive, we’ll own it!
In the hold of the slave ship, we’re going somewhere, all bathed and powdered with the Great Lwa, we’re sailing! (Beauvoir 2008b: 335)
Hereditary and protective properties of lwa

I have something in my head, it’s when I’m in trouble. They will see what’s in my head. I’m going to see what’s in my head. But when I’m in trouble, my mother’s lwa are unchained. (J.L.’s song 144)
Ethics and philosophy

They pay me money to do evil,
I don’t want to!
If I do evil, God is going to turn against me.

I thought I was poor, oh I was poor,
when I looked, I saw there were worse off;
oh I mustered my courage.
While I was napping,
the one worse off stole my calabash bowl.
Look, it’s in the calabash bowl
that he takes care of all his business in this life.
Never say you’re the worst off,
there are those who are even worse off.
1. There is God; there are the lwa
   who are giving you all you need. (J.L. 49)

2. It is God who gave me the lwa to hold on to.
   What shall I tell the lwa, oh what shall I say! (Marcelin 16)

3. I serve God, I serve the Pwen,
   Tchakou, tchakou, the great Lwa are with me.
   I serve God,
   I serve the Three plates of the Marasa.
   Tchakou, tchakou,
   men are not Gods in this country.
   (Beauvoir 2008b: 279).

   There is nothing here except Bondye! (Marcelin 15)
   [God is everything]
Vodou-Catholic Songs

83.
Mari ou sen, ou se manman Bondye;
nou se pechè, o lapriyè pou nou.
Avan n ap sèvi lwa yo,
n rele Bondye avan.
Mari ou sen, ou se manman Bondye.
Nou se pechè, o lapriyè pou nou.

83.
Mary, you are holy, you are God’s mother;
we are sinners, oh pray for us.
Before we are serving the lwa,
we call upon God first.
Mary, you are holy, you are God’s mother.
We are sinners, oh pray for us.

86.
Twa Patè, o twa Ave Mariya, nou kwè nan
Dye a ki ban nou lavi a, men gen Ginen.
Nan Ginen, o genyen lwa, genyen lwa o
nan Ginen lafanmi o, an nou met
tèt ansanm pou n ka sove peyi a.

86.
Three Paters, oh three Hail Marys, we believe in
the God who gave us life, but there is Ginen.
In Ginen, oh there are lwa, there are lwa oh,
oh the family is in Ginen, let’s put
our heads together so we can save the country.

Vodou-Catholicism
• Parallel
• Stratified
• Overlapping at the peripheries
• Apologetics
Èzili Dantò prete poulè pou nou an la
pou m fè maji a mache / m pral fè maji a mache
Se ou k mache, se ou ki wè (atò o) (bis)

Adje m pral fè maji a mache
Èzili Dantò prete poulè pou nou an la
pou m fè maji a mache / m pral fè maji a mache
Se ou k mache, se ou ki wè (atò o) (bis)

A w a prete m poulè pou nou an la
pou m fè maji a mache
m pral fè maji a mache
Religion and its role in preparing us for death