Lakou Souvnans Prayers
Recorded by Benjamin Hebblethwaite, November 2, 2012,
at Lakou Souvnans in Gonayiv, Haiti
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To watch the video from which this material was transcribed, click here.

Sèvitè Bien-Aimé: Pour a little water in front of papa Kebyesou, he’s the owner of the house.

Ongan Alisma: Papa Kebyesou, your child was away. I entered to come visit you. I am in all your hands so you all will always protect me. I am a child of the house. I was outside and I entered and I have some foreigners who are on a tour. It’s my pleasure to accompany them to bring them inside Lakou Souvnans. So they can see what is in our home because a lot of foreigners always think that Vodou is the devilry; Vodou is sorcery; Vodou is evil doing; we are always ready to tell them no, what they think is not true. We bring them to the truth so they can see the difference. Vodou does good; we don’t do harm. Ginen does not take part in harm, it only takes part in good. I was away, I entered. I come before you all at the feet of my
pou nou toujou pwotekte mwen. Pwoteje mwen e ban fôs kouraj pou nou fè travay Ginen an kòmsadwa.

Man: Ayibobo!

Sèvitè Bien-Aimé: Kite m di de mo. Alò ou konnen, frè m ak sè m yo, gen on gran diferans nan Vodou an. Moun k ap fè sòseri—moun k ap tchwe moun yo—yo nan Vodou an tou men nou menm nou pa fè sòseri. Se lamaj blanch ke n fè. Nou pa fè maji ditou se lwa yo ki di kijan pou bagay la fêt. Il y a un trè gran differans [There is a big difference] ant nèg k ap fè sòseri a e nèg k ap fè maji blanch la. Nou menm, se menm jan a legliz ke nou ye. Lè w vin isit la, nou te gen dwa pa pale w de lwa ditou nou di w se jan evanjelis.


Ongan Alisma: Mètrès Ezili ou konnen—bon se manman nou tout. Ou se on manman de bon kè. Mètrès santi bon, mennen menen, ki kapab ede nou avanse nan tout sa n ap antreprann. Nou vin remèt nou, ak tout fannmi an, ak tout lòt ki akonpanye nou, nan de pla men w. Ou va sovgade [protect] yo, ede yo, pwoteje yo ba yo fôs kouraj pou travay mother, at the feet of my father, for you all to always protect me. Protect me and give me strength and courage for us to do the work of Ginen thoroughly.

Man: Ayibobo!

Sèvitè Bien-Aimé: Let me say a couple of words. Well you know, my brothers and sisters, there is a great difference in the Vodou. People who do sorcery—people who are killing people—they’re in Vodou also but as for us, we do not do sorcery. We do white magic. We don’t do magic at all, it’s the lwa who say how things are to be done. There is a big difference between people who do sorcery and people who do white magic. We are just like the church. When you come here we could have not at all spoken to you about the lwa and told you it’s evangelism. There are two lodges. One is when the sun is hot; It’s Jean Baptiste. The other is when the sun sets; it’s saint Jean Evangelist. So, we are in the blood of Saint Jean Evangelist. Here, Saint Jean Baptiste is also very powerful. He’s the father of Badè; a man we consider certain. These are the lwa we serve. These are the lwa that allow us to progress. These are the lwa we work with. Over here is mistress Ezili, It’s our lady of mercy; the patron of Souvnans. You can also speak to Mistress.

Ongan Alisma: Mistress Ezili, you know—well she is everyone’s mother. You are a mother with a good heart. Pleasant smelling mistress, lead lead, who can help us progres in all that we undertake. We come to submit ourselves, with the whole family, with all the others who accompany us, in your two hands. You’ll protect them, help
Ginen an kontinye fèt nan lapè avèk kè kontan.

Man: Ayibobo!


Se misye ki pouvwa dacha. Li bay travay tou. Se on nèg nou konsidere. Se nèg pa nou.

Ongan Alisma: Sen Jozèf, ou tande? Papa Loko jodi a nou prezante nou devan ou a tout bon fwa. A bon kè nou, n ap konsantre pou nou fè travay Ginen an nan lapè ak kè kontan. Jodi a mwen prezante devan w a tout pati lòt mwen yo, a tout akonpayiman mwen yo pouke w ba nou fòs kouraj e pòtinite pou nou fè travay Ginen an nan lapè ak kè kontan pou nou vanse pou pi devan.

Manbo Alisma: Ayibobo!


Man: Ayibobo!

Sèvitè Bien-Aimé: On this side is Saint Joseph; it’s Papa Loko. He’s a man who’s considered certain in Vodou because it’s Papa Loko. Earlier there was a woman who said something about the sèp affair. It’s Papa Loko who is essentially the owner of the sèp concept. He stays in the prison, also. When things go wrong, things happen badly, it’s Papa Loko who goes and takes this person to put in the sèp. So it’s Saint Joseph, it’s a man we consider certain but he’s also in the market. He’s the ultimate force. He gives work also. We have consideration for him. He’s one of us.

Ongan Alisma: Saint Joseph, do you hear? Papa Loko today we present ourselves in front of you in good faith. With our good hearts, we’ll concentrate to do Ginen’s work in peace and happiness. Today I come before you with all my other parts, with all my accompaniments so you can give us the strength of courage and opportunity to do Ginen’s work in peace and happiness so we can progress further ahead.

Manbo Alisma: Ayibobo!

Sèvitè Bien-Aimé: This is Saint Pierre. There are two Saint Pierres. One who has the key and one who has the rooster: both are our guys. But the converted version of Saint Pierre is Tobakò; it’s Papa Tchasou. It’s a guy we fully count on. There are two rites here: the Grenadya rite and the Chasè rite. Papa
Grenadya.

Ongan Alisma: Papa Tchasou o non de Sen Pyè m konnen se ou menm ki pou ouvri pòt la. Se ou menm k pou bay tout nèg liberasyon yo e se ou k kondane tou. Jodi a nou vin prezante devan ou a tout pati lòt ki akonpanye mwen pou nou vin mande ou fòs kouraj e kontinwite pou ede nou pou nou gen plis limyè e plis bon kè toujou pou nou fè travay Ginen an.


Ongan Alisma: Mesye dam, mwen menm mwen vin remèt tout sosyete pa mwen, tout pati lòt mwen, tout fami an e, tout piti ritwèl mwen yo nan de pla men w. Kòm ou te kòmanse avèk nou deja pou ba nou frechè kontinye ba nou frechè kòmsadwa. Menm Rafayèl ki akonpanye nou jodi a se paske gen lasante ki koz li ka akonpanye nou, vin avèk nou la jodi an. Nou mande plis sante toujou, plis fòs kouraj pou tout pati lòt yo. Frechè n ap bezwen e delivrans.

Ongan Alisma: Gentlemen ladies, I come to submit my whole society, all the others, the whole family, and all my ritual children into your two hands. Since you already started refreshing us, continue to refresh us earnestly. Even Raphaël who accompanied us today, came with us today because of good health. We ask for continous good health, more courage for all the others. We’ll need refreshment and deliverance.


Tchasou is essentially the owner of the Chasè rite. Papa Kebyesou is the owner of the Grenadya rite.

Ongan Alisma: Papa Tchasou in the name of Saint Pierre, I know it is you who has to open the door. It is you who has to liberate all men and it is you who condemns, also. Today we present ourselves before you, with all the others who accompany me, to come ask you for the strength of courage and continuity to help us be more enlightened and to have better hearts to do Ginen’s work.

Sèvitè Bien-Aimé: The water is the strength of Souvnans. Whatever the illness or whatever the case, we bathe him. We give him water to drink. We consider the source to be certain. Just as the water runs cool we would like the water to run cool for Michlet wherever he is so that everything goes well. Mister misses of the sources, you can speak to them.

Sèvitè Bien-Aimé: It’s Saint Jerome who has the key of the Vodou temple: he has the key to paradise, he has the key of the temple. Saint Papa Zènadan! He’s one of the chiefs of the Chasè. So Michelet, he’s
Ongan Alisma: Papa Zènadan m se on pitit meme jan ak tout lòt pibit yo e m konnen konpasyon pou tout pitit, lanmou pou tout pitit. Mwen te deyò. Jodi a mwen rante mwen vin prezante mwen devan w ak tout pati lòt yo ki akonpanye m. Kote ke ouvri pòt la pou resevwa nou anbyen e nou prale anbyen. Nou mande w fòs kouraj e kontinwite; pou w ede nou travay nou nou toujou panse anvè Vodou a, pou nou kapab rann Vodou a respwisote.

Sèvitè Bien-Aimé: Nou ta mande yo tou, mesye kameraman yo, èske se pou on magazin y ap travay oubyen èske se pou on jounal on bagay kèlkonk?

Ongan Alisma: Non, nou genyen Inivèsite Laflorid e Inivèsite Dyouk ki vote on ti bidjè pou mesye dam sa yo kapab deplase vin fè enpe rechêch de Vodou paske etranje yo toujou konnen Vodou a se vye bagay ke l pratike; se sòseri; se malfektè.

Sèvitè Bien-Aimé: Lasòseri, moun k ap tchwe moun nan li nan Vodou a tou men moun k ap kidnape moun nan l nan Katolik la tou wi.


Ongan Alisma: Papa Zènadan I am a child just like all the other children and I know compassion for all children, love for all children. I was outside. Today I entered to present myself before you with all the others who accompanied me. Open the door and receive us well and we will leave well. We ask you for the strength of courage and continuity; for you to help us work so we can always think in terms of Vodou, so we can reciprocate the Vodou.

Sèvitè Bien-Aimé: We would ask them also, the cameramen, are they working for a magazine or are they working for a journal or something specific?

Ongan Alisma: No, we have University of Florida and Duke University that voted on a little budget so these men and women could leave to do a bit of research on Vodou because the foreigners always think that Vodou practices bad things; it is sorcery; it is evildoing.

Sèvitè Bien-Aimé: Sorcery, people who kill people is in Vodou also but people who kidnap people is also in Catholicism.

Ongan Alisma: These people are here to defend Vodou to show to the foreigner what Vodou means. What role Vodou plays in the life of each person. What importance Vodou has in the life of each person. Vodou does not preach evil. Vodou does not practice evil. Vodou does

Ongan Alisma: Manman Sè m konnen ou se manman nou tout sou pwoteksyon w, sou limyè w, kontinwite w, fason ke w klere chimen mwen. M kapab di ke mwen fèt nan peristil. Mwen leve nan peristil. Mwen se on Ongan depi nan kòmansman rive jodi an e w ban m pòtinite pou mwen travay. Mwen kòmanse de klas anfantin jiska segondè a rive a linivèsite. Manman Sè ou toujou ban m fòs kouraj, pwoteje m e w konnen si nou pa kenbe ke wòb ou nou pa ka mache. Se ou menm ki pou kase mete nan bouch nou. Se ou k pou kase mete nan men nou. Se ou k pou pwoteje nou e ou k pou ede nou vanse pou nou rive la jodi a. Ebyen jodi a m vin devan w pou nou prezante tout pati lòt yo, tout fanmi an devan w nan de pla men w pou w kontinye pwoteje nou pou n pa dekouraje. Pase nou p ap bliye Vodou a en ap travay pou Vodou.

Ongan Alisma: Mother Sè I know you are everyone’s mother based on your protection, your enlightenment, your continuity, the way you light my path. I can say that I was born in a Vodou temple. I was raised in a Vodou temple. I am an ongan from the beginning to now and you give me opportunity so I can work. I started in preschool up to secondary school to university. Mother Sè you always give me strength courage, protect me and you know if we don’t hold on to the tail of your dress we cannot walk. It’s you who feeds us. It’s you who provides for us. It’s you who protects us and you who help us progress so we arrive here today. Well, today I come before you so we can present all the others, the whole family in front of you in your two hands for you to continue to protect us so we aren’t discouraged. Because, we will not forget

good. These people are here to prove to the foreigner what they perceived. What they are reading in books, what they are hearing—it’s not true, so they can stop slandering Vodou.
Man: Ayibobo!

Sèvitè Bien-Aimé: Ou konnen Michlè se Vodouwizan ke m ye men m on tijan entimide. Yo di mwen w ale nan Badjo; w ale nan Soukri; ou vin isit la. Sa w ap chèche?

Ongan Alisma: M ale nan Badjo. M ale nan Soukri. Lakou sa yo—Souvnans—mwen leve ladan yo. Depi m tou piti m ap mache ladan yo, vin nan tout sèvis ladan yo. Se tout plèzi jodi a—m ap vini an Ayiti epi mwen jwenn yon gwoup chèche ki ta renmen konnen kèlke choz de Vodou de bon ki pou al edike lòt moun k ap panse mal de Vodou yo. Se tout plèzi pa m pou m mennen yo nan twa gran Lakou mwen konnen ki egziste nan mond lan, e ki andedan lakay mwen menn nan Gonayiv—pou m ta mennen yo vin wè laverite a.


Man: Ayibobo!

Sèvitè Bien-Aimé: Michelet you know I am a Vodouist but I am a bit intimidated. They tell me you went to Badjo. You went to Soukri. You came to visit here. What are you looking for?

Ongan Alisma: I went to Badjo. I went to Soukri. These yards—Souvnans—I was raised in them. Ever since I was very little I’ve been going to them, going to all the services in them. It’s all my pleasure today—I’m coming to Haiti and I find a group of researchers who would like to know certain good things about Vodou that will educate other people who think ill of Vodou. It’s my pleasure to bring them to three Great Vodou yards I know exist in the world, and is inside my home in Gonaïves—so I can bring them to the truth.

Sèvitè Bien-Aimé: The yards are not the same. Lakou Badjo is the same as us. In fact, on the contrary, in the past we were the patron of Lakou Badjo. Money or family removed those things. From the era of Zantray, Badjo had a cow it used to kill every seven years and Souvnans would go kill the cow. After a certain time, the elder went to go kill the cow and the guys mounted the cow. Ever since then they’ve been divided with Lepè. I, myself, am Badjo’s family. I am in the area of Badjo. My mother is an ounsi of Badjo. Soukri is Kongo. There is a very big difference between Kongo and Dahomey. You see I have problems with the guys. The Kongo lwa do pretty much everything. The Kongo lwa are strongest in creating bòkò and thieves. If it’s for
Petwo; we are Rada. But, we are family. In the stream, at the head of Kanal Madanm stream, one branch goes to Soukri, and then one comes to Souvnans. So we always work it out. But the difference that exists, there are a bunch of guys who are very misbehaved who we do not allow into our house.

Ongan Alisma: We know there’s a difference between the nations of the yards—of Soukri, of Badjo, of Souvnans—and I am always preaching this difference abroad. We know Lakou Soukri is Kongo. Lakou Badjo is Nago. Lakou Souvnans is Dahomey.

Sève Bien-Aimé: Nago is a part of Dahomey. We have a little drum school here. As we are beating the drums and we show the children how to sing: a number of difficult sounds. For example a person who comes from the city, a person who didn’t know Vodou, they can’t dance Nago. That’s why we show them.

Ongan Alisma: You do training for them.

Sève Bien-Aimé: Training in the drum school. Nago is very difficult. They have a number of rites they include in Nago but we do not. Monday night we enter them into Nago, do a good part of Nago. But, Nago and Dahomey drums are different. Nago is drummed with two hands. But, it’s the same family. I am really happy you brought a group of foreigners here. The yard is a great yard. We went to Africa; we went to Benin; we saw saw...
ale an Afrik; n ale o Benen; nou wè nèg yo pa gen Lakou. Se nou menm ki gen Lakou. Men sèl diferans yo genyen, yo pi fò pase nou. Yo pa pase nan Kafou. Yo pa pase nan simetyè. Tout ekspedisyon yo se nan gran bwa ke yo fèt. Rèv nou depi nou vin isit la n ap travay pou nou te fè yon gran bwa pou Souvnans. Etan nou nan gran bwa, se pou n te fè on forè sakre tou. Gen on pòlit isit la k te vann tè a nou te mande achte tè a. Tout goumen m goumen avèk yo pou m achte tè a, m pa ka achte tè a. M prèske kite afè gran bwa a tonbe. Bouskeman m achte demi kawotè; alò mache a konn fèt la. Kounye a m voye mache a nan tè ke m achte a. M plante pye bwa ladan l. Men se pa sa. Se pa demi kawotè an bwa sèlman ke m te fè yon forè sakre pou m te menm jan a an Afrik. Paske kèlkeswa oungan an—oungan k pi pòv an Afrik la—li gen kat kawotè, twa kawotè, plante pye bwa. Men nou menm nou pa genyen. N ap mande tou papa nou, etan se on moun ki te fò nan Vodou an, ki renmen Vodou an, kijan fè misye pat fè yon gran bwa? Men alò se de politik diferan paske misye gen on seri de bwa ke l koupe mwen menm m pa t ap koupe l. Si on moun koupe pye bwa bò isit la, m ap mete w nan prizon.

Ongan Alisma: Ebyen Vodou a nou konnen se nou tout men an men ki pou met ansanm ki pou fè travay la. Se sa menm n ap chèche.

Sèvité Bien-Aimé: Se jounalis la ki te vin envite mwen. M te di misye m on tijan pa tèlman dakò avèk misye paske isit la trantesyen oktòb nou fémen. N ap retouen premye madi a oubyen premye

that the guys didn’t have yards. We are the ones who have yards. But, the only difference is that they are stronger than us. They don’t go through crossroads. They don’t go through cemeteries. All the expeditions are done in big forests. Ever since we’ve been here our dream has been to work to create a big forest for Souvnans. While we are in the big forest, we would also create a sacred forest. There is a child here who sold land; we asked to buy the land. No matter how hard I fought with them to buy the land, I couldn’t buy the land. I almost let go of the big forest business. For the moment I bought half an acre; so the market happens there. Right now I send the market to the land I bought. I planted trees in it. But, that’s not it. It’s not only half an acre in woods I did, I want to do a sacred forest so I could be just like [they are] in Africa. Because, whoever the oungan—the poor oungan in Africa—he has four acres, three acres, to plant trees. But us, we have nothing. We are also asking of our father, as a person who was powerful in Vodou, who loved Vodou, how come he didn’t create a big forest? Well it’s different politics because he had a series of trees that he cut and I wouldn’t have cut them. If a person cuts a tree here, I will put you in prison.

Ongan Alisma: Well in Vodou we know that it’s all of us hand in hand who have to work together to do the work. That is really what we’re searching for.

Sèvité Bien-Aimé: It’s the journalist who invited me. I told him I disagreed with him a little because we are closed here on the thirty-first of October. We’ll return on the first Tuesday or the first
vandredi mwa desanm nan. Se kat desanm n ap rekòmanse. Pwiske se jounalis Vodou a oubyen jounalis Souvnans ke l ye se misy ki fè m vin la jodi a paske kay la fèmen. Depi kay la fèmen nou menn nou pa resevwa moun isit la. Nou ta renmen ba misye on ti chans pou l di de ti mo tou, epi dam sa avèk on etranje tou nou ta renmen pale. Nèg ki t ap pilote m nan tou m ta renmen ba misye lapawòl.


Friday of the month of December. We resume December fourth. Since he’s the Vodou journalist or the journalist of Souvnans I came here because the house is closed. When the house is closed we don’t entertain people here. We would like to give him a small chance to say a few words also, and then also this woman and a foreigner would like to speak. I would also like to let the guy who drove me speak.

Raphaël: I say a loud Ayibobo for Sèvité Bien-Aimé who took this initiative to heart. I left and went to his house. We sat talking and I talked to him about the details. We have ongan Michelet Alisma with the ladies and gentlemen who come from the university; they come to know what they’re saying about Vodou and why we take radio microphones to transmit Vodou. They are on the same wave length as us. They would like to know what anomalies are in Vodou to make them call Vodou evil; what sorcery is in it. But, in all religions they always have sorcery. There is always everything but they always show Vodou as something that is nothing at all in the world. It’s a suspicious religion. They came to see, with their very own eyes, what Lakou Soukri, Lakou Badjo, Lakou Souvnans has.

Sèvité Bien-Aimé: Unfortunately for Vodou, the majority of people in Vodou are uneducated people. Most oungan in the country can’t read. Not long ago the minister of culture did a colloquium for the whole country and I was the only one who had a little drum school. After that there is nothing. It’s been our dream since we’ve been here to make a health center. Eighty percent of people who
Pi gwo pwoblèm nou genyen isit la avèk fanm gwòs la. Fanm ki ansent la, depi se moun Souvnans, vin benyen isit la. Li vin swiv. Degaje w pou w wè si fanm sa p ap ka fè pitit. Lwa yo fè nou jwenn mwayen pou nou di fanm nan byen bonè ale lopital paske se sezaryèn pou l fè.


come to Souvnans are people who would go to the house of the bòkò. The biggest problem we have here is with the pregnant woman. The pregnant woman, if it’s a member of Souvnans, comes to shower here. She gets into the habit. Try and find a way for this woman not to have kids! The lwa help us find a way to tell the woman really early to go to the hospital because you need a caesarean section.

Sèvitè Bien-Aimé: That is the work room. This is the bed. This is where I sit; it’s where I receive people. But this bed, there’s a lot of talk about this bed. People never touch this bed. We sit here; we work here. Like, on Tuesdays, on Fridays, people come here. This is where we receive them. This bed, they say a series of things about it but, we know it’s the bed of Papa Kebyesou. They say it’s the bed of Dessalines—a bunch of gossip—but no one ever lies on the bed. We have a ceremony we do each Easter Sunday. We have the sash of the ounsi. When the ounsi come they place the sash here. The person who is doing the head service also. Also, all the initiates, they place the packet here. After that people never touch the bed. Whoever the person, it’s something we consider certain. It’s the greatest good Souvnans could have, for me: it’s the bed and also the large earthen jars.