Sample of translations of Vodou songs and annotations drawn from Benjamin Hebblethwaite’s *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English* (2011)

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...Si pa te gen Lwa, nou tout nou ta neye!  
Si pa te gen Lwa, nou tout nou ta peri o nan peyi letranje.  
Nou soti nan Ginen,  
Men nan men, pye nan pye!  
Nou prale yon kote, lè n rive n a va posede!  
Anba kal negriye, nou prale yon kote,  
Tou benyen, tou pourdre ak Gwo Lwa a, n ape navige!

If there weren’t Lwa¹, 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 Ginen²,  
Hand bound to hand, foot bound to foot!  
We’ll go to a place, when we arrive we’ll own it!  
All bathed and powdered³ with the Great Lwa,  
We’re sailing!

**General comments:** Slavery became a national industry in Dahomey, in Saint-Domingue (now Haiti), and, financially and managerially, in France (Métraux 1958: 20). The torture of slavery and the spiritual resources needed to survive and overcome it remain a permanent theme in Vodou songs. This song refers to the Middle Passage and the central role of the Vodou lwa in protecting the lives of enslaved Africans. From its point of view in the colony, the song also looks forward to a time when Haiti is independent.

¹ **Lwa**  
The lwa are pulsating and vital forces that sustain the universe (*Beauvoir 2011*). The lwa are immaterial spiritual beings, forces, or spirits. The lwa are spirits created by God; they are also ancestors of great importance who have become the patrons of specific domains.¹ The lwa can be forces of nature, deceased humans who have been made divine, or mysterious spirits with complex characteristics. The lwa are *sakre* (sacred) and they *pale nan tèt* (speak in the heads) of their servants.² 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!”³

² **Ginen**  
A word with many meanings that can refer to the lwa, the dwelling place of the lwa, the servants of the lwa, and the afterlife paradise where the souls of Vodouists return. It generally refers broadly to Africa. Historically, the term Ginen is a reference to West Africa’s Guinea region. In this song Ginen refers to Africa. We retain the Haitian Creole spelling rather than use “Guinea” since Ginen refers to a much broader vision of Africa than just the modern state of Guinea.

³ **powdered**  
“To be powdered” refers to the protection provided by the lwa. *Poud* (powder) in Vodou refers to magic powder. Oungan (Vodou priests) earn money by selling powders that purport to provide success in business or love or protection from malicious forces.

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2. J.L. in Hebblethwaite (2011)

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 lafann mi o, an nou met têt ansanm pou n ka sove peyi a.

Three Paters, oh three Ave Marias¹, we believe in the God² who gave us life, but there is Ginen³.  
In Ginen, oh there are lwa, there are lwa, oh, Oh the family³ is in Ginen, let’s put our heads together so we can save the country.

¹ **Three Paters, oh three Ave Marias**  
This expression of course originates in the Catholic church. Haiti’s religious culture is often described as syncretistic and stratified because many people practice both Vodou and Catholicism but assign them different roles. J.L.’s song, like many Vodou songs, shows a dual alliance and an underlying quest for unity.
God  “God” is the Supreme Being in Vodou. Since Bondye is disconnected from human matters, the lwa are viewed as essential intermediaries. God is too great to dance, like the lwa, “in the heads of earthlings.” In Vodou thought, God is not envious that humans worship the lwa because God has no vices like jealousy and because God is indisputably the greatest power. After the catastrophic earthquake of January 12, 2010, the oungan Max Beauvoir pointed out that God did not cause the earthquake in Haiti because God does not meddle in human affairs. Spatial imagery is common in comparing God to the lwa: God is anwo (above) and lezany (the angels/lwa) are anba (below). God is devan (in front) and lèsen (the saints/lwa) are déyè (behind).

But there is Ginen While all Vodou songs assert the primacy of Bondye, the lwa work lockstep with the Supreme Being. Other songs describe dual alliances: “I serve God, I serve the Charm . . . / I serve God, I serve the Three Marasa bowls.” These lyrics are characteristic: “After God, it’s us [the lwa] who are commanding.”

Family A reference to the community of Vodouists associated with a lakou (family compound) or an ounfò (temple). Lafanmi is expected to uphold the traditions and values of the family compound or community.

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3. Marcelin (1950a) in Hebblethwaite (2011)

Ala lwa mache nan dlo, Look how the lwa walks on water¹,
Se Danbala o! Oh it is Danbala²!
Ala lwa mache nan dlo, Look how the lwa walks on water,
Se Danbala o! Oh it is Danbala!
Papa Danbala se tèt dlo! Papa Danbala is the water’s spring!
Papa Danbala se tèt dlo! Abobo! Papa Danbala is the water’s spring! Abobo!³

¹ Water An important metaphor in Vodou. The lwa and ancestors such as Danbala and Simbi live anba dlo (under the water). Many Vodou pilgrimages are to places where water flows (e.g., Sodo and Basen Ble). Water is a metaphor for spirituality, mysticism, renewal, and purity. Water also refers to insight into mysticism. Some Vodou priests with impressive healing powers are said to have lived for a period of seven years under water or in the sea. Eminent oungan and famous political figures are said to spend lengthy periods under water, where they receive directions from lwa.

² Danbala The serpent lwa, Danbala Wèdo, along with Ayida Wèdo, were the first lwa created by God. Danbala is associated with the Kongo, Nago, Petwo, and Rada rites. He and his partner, Ayida Wèdo, represent conception, birth, life, family, love, sexuality, fertility, inspiration, good fortune, movement, continuity, harmony, wisdom, and destiny. He is married to Ayida Wèdo but loves Èzili and other females. Some say that Danbala is the father and Ayida Wèdo the mother of all other lwa. Danbala likes things to be pure and clean; he avoids illness. Danbala and Ayida are represented as two snakes in their vevè. They wind up their bodies under the water to support the weight of the earth. When possessed, servants of Danbala manifest snake-like movements, climb trees, and do not speak but hiss and dart their tongues in and out. A basin with water is found in ounfò dedicated to this couple. Danbala dwells in freshwater springs and is associated with large snakes. Danbala encircles the globe and is a wise and successful man. He is represented as Saint Patrick, who is pictured in chromolithographs driving snakes out of Ireland. His color is white; his offerings include syrup, eggs, milk, flour, rice, and hens, and all of these must be white.

³ Abobo A ritual Vodou praise acclamation of the Rada rite. Vodouists shout Abobo! between songs. The acclamation is sometimes accompanied by the smacking of the mouth with the fingers.
Papa Legba nan ounfò mwen! Papa Legba is in my temple!
Atibon Legba nan ounfò mwen! Atibon Legba is in my temple²!
Alegba Papa nan ounfò mwen! Alegba Papa is in my temple!
Ou menm ki pote drapo nan Ginen! You bear the flag in Ginen!
Ou menm ki pote chapo nan Ginen! You wear the hat in Ginen!
Se ou menm k a pare solèy pou lwa yo. It’s you who will shade the sun for the lwa³.

¹ Atibon Legba The lwa who rules crossroads and paths, as well as the guardian of all entries.² Atibon Legba is also known as Alegba. Legba is served in the Danwonmen, Kongo, Nago, Petwo, Zandò, and, in particular, Rada rites.³ Although Legba was originally a Nigerian Nago lwa, in Haiti he is mostly associated with the Rada rite of Dahomey, probably because Legba was well established in the Dahomey region before the slave trade. Legba is the barrier between the living and the dead and between the natural and supernatural. Legba is an old and sexually frigid man who can no longer walk without crutches; his followers are obliged to assist him. Legba’s bones have so little consistency that they are virtually nonexistent. Legba is portrayed as a hunched-over elderly man who wears a broad-brimmed straw hat and leans on a crutch and a cane; however, he is extremely strong.³³ He smokes a long terracotta pipe and carries a makout (woven straw bag). His broad hat protects the other lwa from the sun.³⁴ Like all lwa, Atibon Legba is invisible. He supervises roads, paths, gardens, courts, dwellings, and crossroads. He sees all that is done and hears all that is said. Legba believes that the world envies him because he is a king. As a result, he easily utters threats. Legba rarely appears in the services; when he possesses his chwal (horse), the person shows aspects of the lwa’s old age.

² Temple A Vodou temple complex or compound under the authority of an oungan or a manbo. Lasosyete ounfò (temple society) refers to the members of a given temple.³³ In the Fon language, the term hunço refers to a Vodou hut and hunxwé to the house of a vodun (lwa) or a Vodou convent.³⁶

³ It’s you who will shade the sun for the lwa In any service, Legba has priority over all other lwa. All milokan (a single vèvè for several lwa) include Legba.³⁷ The first three songs and dances are obligatorily dedicated to him. Legba is one of the most important lwa of Vodou mythology because he allows humankind to communicate with God and all other lwa.³⁸

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References
i Jil and Jil 2009: 53, 72, 323.
ii Beauvoir 2008b: 313.
iii Ibid., 257.
iv Jil and Jil 2009: 71.
v Ibid., 372.
vi Allen 2010; Jil and Jil 2009: 75.
ix Beauvoir 2008b: 279.
x Ibid., 220.
xr Beauvoir 2008b: 234.
xii Marcelin 1950b: 123.
xiv Soimaud, personal correspondence, 2010.
xv Murrell 2010: 79.
**Bibliography**


