



Sacred Stories from the Haitian Diaspora: A Collective Biography of Seven Vodou Priestesses in New York City

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A twelve year old girl, Magritte Alexandre, was in the midst of receiving her first Holy Communion at the Port-au-Prince Cathedral when she was suddenly possessed by a Haitian *mysteré*, or spirit. Later, as a young woman, she was initiated into the traditional Haitian religion known as Vodou, and soon afterward she emigrated to New York City where she now lives with two of her six children. Deeply religious and observant of the major Vodou rites, Magritte Alexandre is one of many Haitian priestesses, called *manbos*, serving the Haitian community in New York with a traditional healing base from her homeland.¹

Magritte Alexandre is not unlike the six other manbos of this study. Their voices echo one another with remarkable consistency. As they tell their oral histories, a collective biography emerges, interweaving a shared spiritual calling and a shared historical destiny. Though each woman is unique unto herself, their collective spiritual biography can tell us both about the resiliency of African-based religion in the Americas, and about women's spirituality, for the Haitian manbo is a particular manifestation of spiritual, economic, and social female power.

Their stories also reveal another important dimension: the manbos tell us how they must change their religious practice in order to fit their New York surroundings. As recent immigrants, these women must constantly negotiate the drastic cultural differences between Haiti and the United States. Some things that have profound effects on ritual practice are the extreme commodification of time in New York, the lack of space, and United States race relations. The Haitian exodus into New York has had far-reaching consequences on Haitian traditional spiritual practice.

Because of a secrecy ethic, and the need to protect the religion against persecution, Vodouists are not in the habit of theorizing their practice to outsiders. Much of the cultural transmission of practice, for that matter, takes place through performance and not through direct speech. This is one reason for an oral historical approach informed by ethnographic method: the dyadic encounter of oral history can be considered in a wider ethnographic context. In this way it is possible to link the historical agency of these seven women with the larger processes of social change they themselves shape.

These seven manbos are actors in a historical drama that begins with a thirty-year-long exodus of Haitians fleeing from the United States-backed

Duvalier dictatorship. Now, an estimated four hundred thousand Haitians live in the New York metropolitan area alone.² (Already Haitian Creole is the second most common foreign language after Spanish in the New York City public schools.³) Haitian immigrants are fleeing the many crises facing Haiti, which include land erosion, deforestation, drought, poverty, disease, malnourishment, land scarcity, and overpopulation, added to which are the effects of the drastic inequity of resources between classes, widespread corruption, and political instability. The study of Vodou must be set against this backdrop of *lamizé*, or misery, which is the reality for the majority of Haitian people who emigrate, and is ultimately the reason that these seven manbos made their way to New York.⁴

Physical, emotional, spiritual, and social healing are the main enterprises of Vodou. Whereas in Haiti there are virtually no doctors, dentists, psychiatrists or a national judiciary system for the vast majority of the population, in New York, some Haitians develop a multi-layered approach to resources: they use hospitals, psychiatrists, social workers, and courts in conjunction with traditional Haitian healers, depending on the situation and their social status. Long-time, affluent Haitian New Yorkers may be less inclined to seek the assistance of a manbo or *oungan* (a male priest), or they may do so in secret. On the other hand, undocumented residents comprise the majority of the Haitian population in New York, and they are less likely to use city resources. Reluctant to expose their status by visiting schools, hospitals, or law offices, recent immigrants may be more comfortable relying on traditional methods of problem solving based in Vodou culture.

Vodou is a family religion in Haiti, which combines a plurality of African spiritualities with a veneer of French Catholicism. Its influences are from the Fon, Wolof, Ibo, Yoruba, Kongo, and many other West African ethnic groups who were forcibly deported and taken to Haiti during the slave trade. Haitian Vodou is documented to have played a major role in the slave revolution in Haiti and, after independence in 1804, African-based religion remained a major cultural force throughout Haitian history.⁵ Cultural practice varies by region and, in the countryside and often in the cities, the tradition is referred to as "*sevi Iwa*," or "serving the spirits," instead of Vodou.⁶

According to the popular theology of *sevi Iwa*, *Bon Die*, or God, exists as a remote creator, the first to be worshiped during a religious service. After God, a pantheon of deities called "mysteres," "Iwa," "angels," or "spirits" comprises a spectrum of forces available to humans for spiritual knowledge and healing. One's ancestors are also remembered and venerated, and many manbos and oungans work closely with a type of

ancestor spirit called *Gede*, who appears to them through spirit possession, dreams, or omens.⁷

The Spiritual Ordeal of the Haitian Priestess

Each manbo in this study spoke of a spiritual "calling"—each woman felt the *Iwa* chose her to do healing work. In Creole, they used the word "reklame," which means that the spirits "claimed" them. Virtually all began to be regularly possessed by the spirits in early adolescence, between the ages of nine and fifteen. Possession, in the uninitiated, gives the appearance of a loss of physical control, sometimes accompanied by convulsions. Once initiated, or even spontaneously in certain cases, the spirits seem to take over the person's body to walk, talk, and perform healings. Magritte Alexandre, for example, was at the balustrade in Haiti receiving her first Holy Communion:

The priest saw I had fainted. He said he'd communion me anyway. He didn't understand the state I was in. They stood me up, they gave me the host. It was my first communion, at 12 years old. And when they finished, they went with me to my house. It was when I got home the people at home saw I had been mounted by a mystere. I had a cousin who had [spiritual] knowledge. She spoke with the mystere, and it was then that she saw it was a white mystere. It was Dambala.⁸

Manbo Jakline was around nine years old and at school when she began to be possessed: "Sometimes at school, it took me. They thought I was sick. So they made another student take me home. But my mother knew what I had."⁹ Manbo Marie was also nine years old: "One day there was a little boy who was sick. My spirit came on my head, and treated the baby, and cured the baby. I was only nine."¹⁰ As the girls began to be possessed regularly by spirits, the majority of their families reacted negatively. Most parents were concerned that the girls were too young to be so heavily involved in spirit work.

Manbo Edilia was a girl of thirteen attending Catholic school in Haiti when she began to be possessed by spirits. As agents of the French dominant culture, the priests were basically anti-Vodou. But since her grandmother served the spirits, she reports little resistance on her family's part: "I was in Catholic school, with all the priests. They don't like that, you know. And that caused a lot of problems for me in school. Sometimes I got bad grades because sometimes in school the spirits come in me, and all the kids go wild because they never see that." She continues:

But it was my grandmother. She had it, you know, she was a manbo. She used to have the spirit, she used to make food, dancing, parties. And I was little, I was watching her. And one day, they had a party and the spirit come to me. Come in me. You know? Then that's when, they know the spirit wants to participate in me. Since then, I have been watching my grandmother do everything, I am learning. The spirits want me. They want me to do the job. So far, I do a good job because a lot of people thank me for what the spirits do.¹¹

After this initial pattern of spiritual calling in adolescence, some of the women undertook the step into formal spiritual service. In the urban centers where most of these women are from, this involves an initiation.¹² Called *kanzo*, it is a seven-day service during which the initiate is secretly renamed and taught how to control spirit possessions in themselves and in other people.

For all these women, however, the phenomenon of the calling continued. The disruption of spirit possession and omens began again, and it became clear to them that they were being asked to become manbos, to devote even more of their time to spiritual practice and healing. Most resisted this call, because it can be both physically and emotionally demanding. More often than not they became sick during this period, or suffered extreme misfortune. Some said that they did not choose to be manbos at all, but that they were forced to succumb to the spiritual pressure of the call. They said that once they did, the sickness vanished. In Edilia's experience the pattern was very clear: "They picked me to take the *asson*.¹³ Yes, they told me. I dreamed, and they came in people's heads also. And I was sick because of it. It was as if one side of my body was paralyzed. I couldn't get up. Because I didn't want to do it; I was too young . . . I took the *asson*, and that final day, I was never sick again."

Jakline echoes this experience, but instead of being sick, she believes that the spirits kept her from finding work until she became a manbo and "took the *asson*." Actually, she said, she found work as soon as she made the promise to become a manbo. "I started to have problems. The spirits wanted me to cultivate them . . . for me to take their responsibilities . . . For example, I couldn't work. When I arrived somewhere to work, I put in an hour and then they fired me. So it was a problem since if I couldn't work in a factory, I couldn't work anywhere . . . It was because of the spirit. It put up barriers for me."

By this time Jakline had already moved to New York, but did not yet have a green card. The only work available to her and many others in her

position was extralegal unemployment in factories. To be repeatedly fired from those jobs meant that she faced being unable to support herself at all. Ultimately, she went to Haiti to perform the required ceremonies: "Then I made a promise. As soon as I made the promise, I began to organize myself. And then peace."¹⁴

Marie's story of spiritual calling is perhaps the most drastic. She felt she was given a choice between serving as a manbo and death: "I get sick, sick, headache, I can't eat. They came to me and they showed me an *asson*, and they showed me a grave. And they said I could pick. They showed me in my dream."¹⁵

A common pattern runs through the manbo's stories. In all their cases, the women said the Vodou spirits communicated that they would be required to perform intense service to the religion, to become priestesses. As they resisted, they became ill, but when they agreed to take on the deeper responsibilities, they were cured.

These stories of adolescent fits, and then later disturbances, are stories specific to the Haitian context. In selecting the narrative according to traditional Haitian signs, the manbos are constructing an absolute reality where the spirit world governs the earthly. From this spirit world meaning can be found, advice sought, and healings obtained. Likewise, according to its meanings, illness can occur and can only be remedied in spiritual terms.

These stories of adolescent trouble and spiritual calling are culturally constructed narratives dependent on Vodou culture for meaning. "This is the key to cross cultural analysis, which must recognize that stories, to be coherent, must therefore be selective. In any narrative, some aspects of the events are privileged and some are ignored entirely; thus meaning is made."¹⁶ "A sacred story," says Stephen Crites, "forms the very consciousness that projects a total world horizon."¹⁷ These women all perceive these events in their lives as parts of an important story about their relationships to the spirits. Their stories of the calling become sacred stories of the most meaningful order, and other events in their lives fall into place in subsidiary spiritual value.

New York and the Transformation of Spiritual Practice

These seven manbos are part of the second Haitian "diaspora" which has taken so many people away from Haiti. All the manbos were born in Haiti and emigrated to the United States before they were thirty-five years old. Some are "working" manbos who see clients daily; some simply work for their families. They are now aged from twenty-seven to sixty-seven and have been in the United States between eight and thirty years.

The manbos are kept quite busy helping the people who ask for their

assistance. Interestingly, they are, perhaps, a more valuable resource for their community here than they were at home. This is because once a Haitian person leaves Haiti, the very role that Vodou plays in everyday life must be renegotiated. There, the creolized mix of Africa and France is the foundation for all cultural forms, and Vodou is at the very core of the culture. In New York, the closer Haitian immigrants move toward assimilation, that is, toward contact with mainstream ideologies, the more they confront a break with Vodou as an unarticulated cultural assumption. New surroundings become the occasion to articulate traditional practice. Manbos and oungans become valuable sources of knowledge and cultural identity.

Besides passing on their knowledge and practices to the community, Haitian ritual experts are agents of change in the transformation of the religion in New York. The differences in cultural constructions of time, in urban geography and architecture, and in society force manbos and oungans to adapt. Most Haitians have come to the States to work, so necessity dictates that they adapt to the American work-week schedule. As Black and undocumented workers, they are often exploited and overworked, and they must learn to "fight against time." Haitians must cope with great stress and exhaustion, and all the subsequent health problems and psychic trauma. "Working" manbos and oungans provide a culturally familiar resource.

The help of oungan and manbo is sought for a wide variety of reasons: physical and mental illness, bad luck, and love and marital problems are some of the most common. Work problems are another major category. Lwa, or spirits, are consulted to ask for magic which can help increase productivity and decrease exhaustion at work. Yves Boyer is a musician who travels between Haiti and New York, and is a careful observer of the effects of immigrant life: "I know Haitians here who go to oungan just because they're tired on their jobs. So the oungan will give them a bath, so they won't be tired. To make them work straight, because they work sixteen hours at a time each day."¹⁸ Other problems beset undocumented Haitians in the work place, a few being underpayment, sexual harassment, violence by mafia or union members, and lay-offs. Very few official community service groups are available to them for help. The psychological trauma involved in the financial struggle is often extreme. "People that come here are suffering. They can't eat. You couldn't eat in your own country. Why do you have to come to another strange country and starve?"¹⁹

To some Haitian immigrants, the idea of making appointments with strangers and carrying out grievances is foreign. Sometimes a more organic

response is to seek the assistance of an oungan or manbo. Manbo Cocotte recalls a small job she did for someone. "My friend had a person on his job who didn't like him. So I take a snake skin, put it in his shoe. So he could always walk like a snake, slow."²⁰

Like the snakeskin example, healing is often based on a reconciliatory ethos. Certain rites are performed and prayers are spoken to end arguments, smooth disagreements, or render people less visible to their opponents. Cocotte explains another job: "I did these things for this girl who somebody was hurting her. Whoever hurt her had to come back and say I'm sorry . . . So the person came to her and said I'm sorry."²¹ Other jobs involve traditional remedies for physical problems. Pregnancy, amenorea, and asthma are three commonly treated conditions. The manbo often works with herbs either imported from Haiti or available in New York from private importers.

Working manbos and oungans with good reputations are constantly complaining of overwork themselves, because of how much they have to pray for other people. "I spend hours on my knees praying every night," one oungan often tells me.²² In working with the many difficulties and problems of community members, they bear an especially heavy burden as spiritual and psychological healers.

Aside from issues of employment, one of the most significant obstacles for Haitians who serve the spirits in New York City is its urban geography and apartment dwelling. For one thing, the natural sites of spiritual energy—trees, pools, rocks—can no longer be acknowledged, since there are none to be found except in public parks.²³ Some people even believe that the New York ecology is hostile to the spirits. Edilia noted: ". . . in New York, it's too closed. It's not open enough. Too much buildings, too much windows. It's not open enough. You need big areas. There's remedies, there's medications it is impossible to find here . . . [things] that grow in Haiti and don't grow here."²⁴ Magritte commented on the implications of the cold weather on ritual: "Some things that you need to do you can't do because the ground is too cold. Or you can't find a location."²⁵

Even cultural constructions of personal space differ drastically for the New York Haitian. Port-au-Prince seems more spacious than New York, even though it might be even more overcrowded in material terms: "When Haitians are in Haiti, their idea of liberty is not limited. There is no such thing as invading someone's space. Because [the Haitian] is in Haiti, he considers all the space his own . . . When he gets here, he sees some space is closed to him. Doors are closed with locks."²⁶

The urban context forces upon those who serve the spirits a complete formal restructuring of inhabited space. New York, with its labyrinth of paved streets and apartment buildings, is the extreme opposite of the Haitian countryside. In New York, however, people must use what they have access to, so for many the basements of tenement houses become sacred spaces. Long and narrow, the spaces are far different from those in Haiti. Usually there is no pre-existing pole to use as a *poto-mitan*, a ritually important center post built in the middle of the temple room. Floors are concrete and not earth packed. Often there are water leaks, rats, mildew, and inferior electrical capacity.

The basement setting nevertheless becomes the embodiment of sacred principles, and as such the manbos carefully design it to reflect traditional values of circularity and community. Above all, it is a safe space where spirit possessions can occur. In this redesign, space is necessarily economized and reconfigured so that maximum symbolic value can be achieved in a minimum amount of space.

In addition to shortages of space in New York, another significant difference for Haitian immigrants is how the Caribbean and the United States construct time. The Haitian peasant's view of time is based on event time, or natural time. Seasonal changes, the harvest, and the rising and setting of the sun govern daily life. In New York, the industrial capitalist system commodifies time, making every minute a potentially money-making or money-losing one. The effects of this cultural time difference on spiritual practices are enormous.

In Haiti it is likely that a working manbo or oungan would not have an outside job; also, they would expect many people in their family or community to have a great deal of time available for ritual work. In New York, however, those who can find employment work long hours to meet their own basic requirements in addition to trying to send money to Haiti. This means there is less time to perform complicated rituals. Edilia speaks about the strain of working two jobs as a nurse's aid and as a manbo: "In Haiti, I don't have to go to work, I can only do this. I can just do my manbo work, so everything is Okay . . . [Here] I go to work, and when I'm done I sometimes find somebody at home waiting for me. Understand? You don't have time to do certain things." She also spoke about the problem of finding community members to assist her during ceremonies: "Here in New York you don't easily find people to help you. Maybe if a friend has the day off, they can come give you a hand, but people won't just leave work to come help you do something."²⁷

One way that almost all manbos and oungans in New York economize time is to shorten ceremonies into hours that in Haiti would take weeks or

even months. The *kanzo*, or initiation, is the most clear-cut example. Kanzo in Haiti takes at least seven days, but in New York, most perform the ceremony over a long weekend, permitting the initiates to return to work with only one day missed. Manbo Marie explains why: "Listen, seven days, three days, it's the same. But in Haiti you have more people to help you. Everybody comes to help you. But in New York people are busy."²⁸ Marie is expressing a principle of conservatism and economy that most New York Vodouists have employed in the face of conditions unsympathetic to their practice. They manage to consolidate seven days worth of ritual into three days, and make it as spiritually meaningful in its essence as before.

One oungan explicitly linked ritual economy with the commodification of time in New York when he described the way he fit two ceremonies into one. "The mixing of ceremonies was a factor of time," he explained. "In Haiti they have more time than we do. People who are here over five years learn that time is their enemy and they will change."²⁹ Oungans and manbos gracefully and creatively sculpt new rituals out of the new "time zone" in the United States. In order to condense the ritual action successfully, the priest must know which actions are the essential ones and which can be abridged.

Vodou services are musical and performative, everyone drawing on a common base of ritual knowledge and experience. A common problem during a New York service is that a few people carry the entire responsibility of singing and dancing while others are simply onlookers, their interest in the tradition having developed since emigration. Edilia explains that she has *ounsis*, or ritual children, in Haiti but none here to help her sing: "I kanzo [initiated] many people. I have a lot of children . . . In Haiti they are always around. But when you're here, you could have only one who comes. They don't serve because they don't have time."³⁰

The New York Ethos: Sorcery and the Commodification of Time

In the struggle to establish and maintain their lives, while also sending money to families in Haiti, some Haitians forego the daily spiritual practices associated with the *Ginen* spirits, or symbolically "pure spirits," in order to receive the more immediate benefits of seeing an oungan or manbo who can help work magic. Although it is not possible to detail here the differences between "serving the spirits" and sorcery, it is important to stress the distinction worshipers make between the two categories of practice. Serving the spirits is considered a completely different activity from magic, and is treated so in the community.

According to traditional Haitian belief, the "pure" Ginen spirits are a reference to Guinea, or symbolic Africa. They are inherited through family lines, and they cannot be used to control others or inflict harm. Ginen are thought to be stronger protectors, but they often take a long time to help the supplicant.³¹ When working with Ginen spirits, the emphasis is on healing and not on profit making. Magritte stresses, "If God is willing, if I can help a friend, I help them. But I don't do it to get rich." Ginen Iwa, or spirits, though considered healers, are also considered to be slow to work: "If Ginen is working, whatever it is if you do it using Ginen spirits, it takes time. Because Ginen are slow. You have to wait. You have to have patience."³² Petwo Iwa, on the other hand, work fast, and can be bought. The Petwo rites are heavily infused with practices from Kongo spirituality and Kongo systems of magical attack and defense.³³ In New York, when faced with the many crises of relocation, undocumented status, and prejudiced employers, these Kongo-derived practices can be used as a method of problem solving or self-defense.

While the Ginen spirits cannot be bought and will not bring wealth, Petro Iwa can be bought in order to make money. Lwa who can be bought are willing to work faster, but at greater cost. New York Haitians, who are running against the clock to establish themselves and earn money, may consider paying this cost to economize time. A pact with the Iwa ensues, with the Iwa demanding extremely high payments. This is not considered an honorable practice, because one repudiates one's inherited Iwa for the sake of money.³⁴ Manbo Cocotte describes such a pact: "Like I know my cousin, he has a spirit and he bought the spirit . . . He got a *zombi* on his leg. This wasn't a spirit like Ginen. No, this was a thing he bought, for money. To get him money. That has sacrifices, not like the Ginen spirits. It's not natural. He has a few natural, but he bought more to give him money, to bring people to him."³⁵

In seeking an oungan or manbo in this capacity, Haitians are both conserving time and solving a problem. The way one man sees it, magic is the most logical Haitian response to adverse circumstances in New York. In the face of increasing violence and the proliferation of handguns in New York, magic is felt to be a solid and powerful form of protection: "If you give an American problems, and he can't go to a court, he can buy arms and shoot you. Now in Haiti, Haitians learn to fear arms, because they doesn't have the right to arms—only the macoutes and the military have them. So he's afraid of them. When he has a problem, he turns to his natural weapons; he goes to a oungan and he gives him a *kou'd poud* [lit.: 'hit of powder']."³⁶

A *kou'd poud* is a powder with chemical and/or magical properties that will affect another person. In the absence of adequate medical facilities, Haitian *dokte fey* (lit.: "leaf doctors") make these natural powders as medicine for people in the countryside. Of course with the power to heal comes the power to harm, so along with recuperative powders there are powders that can dizzy, blind, make ill, burn the skin, paralyze, and even kill.³⁷

There are Haitians who go to see oungans here because they have problems at work. They're illegal. There are people with legal rights at their work, in the unions, who can't accept that an illegal person might be taking a union person's work. . . Those people go to a oungan so he can give them a *kou'd poud* he can put on them so they don't bother him any more.³⁸

If it is true that many Haitians renegotiate their relationship with Vodou when they move to the States, then it is probable that the majority of them begin by seeking the counsel of traditional healers, without actually joining Vodou societies, becoming initiates, or singing at ceremonies. There are more oungan and manbo in private practice than there are organized *ounfo*, or temples, with elaborate ceremonies. Often the bottom line is money: it costs a great deal to hold a satisfactory ceremony, and most Haitian people are already struggling to send money to Haiti, and to establish themselves in the States. "If it's good for them, they do a ceremony, they return to all the traditions. If it's not good for them, they leave Vodou in its place, they use only the Kongo arms."³⁹ And the majority of Haitians are on the Kongo side than those on the Dahomey side . . . On the Kongo side with the things you call *wanga*,⁴⁰ you find what's more material, more physical . . . It's because of all the pressure.⁴¹

When analyzing the effects of their struggle in the United States, some Haitian Vodouists see a logical connection between New York and sorcery. Sorcery is supposed to work faster, and can be used to gain wealth and in self-defense. Relationships with inherited, family-based spirits can seem less imminent. Marina pointed this out: "Especially here, you will find more bad than good. In Haiti they have certain reasons for doing bad. But here . . . they're trying to get you sick [with powder] so they can get your job. This is what they need here. . ." She believes that there might be more magic performed in New York than in Haiti because people can wait to go home to serve the family spirits: "They'll wait until they get home, to do the good. But here they'll go ahead and do the bad."⁴²

In this race to economize time and earn money, some Haitian people utilize the talents of the working oungan or manbo instead of practicing everyday service to the lwa. In order to obtain results quickly, some people consider buying spirits using sorcery in order to defend themselves or effect change. These are some ways ritual practice is condensed and economized in New York.

Vodou and the Second Generation

With the move to New York, many Haitians start to rethink their cultural identity and to formulate principles that may have gone unarticulated in Haiti. For young or second-generation Haitians who are in school, contact with mainstream culture is heavy, and they must be both bicultural and ready to theorize both cultures to themselves and to their parents. One big difference between their reality and their parents' reference point back in Haiti is the locus of cultural hegemony, and the shift from France to the United States.

Perhaps the biggest issue within the Haitian American community is the generation gap that is accentuated by an even broader culture gap. Haitian children must respond both to Haitian traditional culture and to American mainstream culture. They tend to have an extremely strong ethnic identity, distancing themselves from African-Americans and forming Haitian students' clubs in most city high schools and colleges.⁴³

Sometimes the generation gap produces clashes, and sometimes American reality is negotiated into a Creole accounting. Picture parents who may have grown up farming land in the Haitian countryside, raising children who have only seen cityscapes, and who are culturally fluent in television and popular music. United States and Vodou culture also mix together in individuals. Cocotte, who is a twenty-three year old manbo born in Haiti but raised in Brooklyn, referring to the popular poster of Nastasia Kinski lying with a snake wrapped around her body, gave this commercial image her own Vodou interpretation: "And some women marry a snake. And they open a drawer every day and get money. Like there's this white girl as a matter of fact. She took a picture with a snake all over her. They say she had a baby she couldn't find out who was the father. Do you know who I'm talking about? The poster?"⁴⁴

Children are more often than not present at Vodou ceremonies in New York, although they are usually in the periphery, playing in another room or just watching. There are, however, exceptions. Since spiritual development is an individual matter, if children show an affinity with the lwa or are even possessed by the lwa, then adults simply allow them to express themselves. At one initiation in a New York *ounfo*, or temple,

four people were initiated, one of whom was a fifteen month old baby, accompanied by her mother. The oungan abridged certain of the rites for her sake, so as not to tire or upset her, but symbolically, he performed everything he did for the others.

At the eve of the big party where the initiates are reintroduced to the community, this baby walked around the middle of the ceremony, clapped the correct rhythm, and at times seemed to be briefly possessed. "Let's let the oungan stop and she can finish the ceremony," they joked. Her involvement was accepted as being completely natural. Cocotte reported that children growing up in the United States can still be called and possessed by the lwa. "The kid might not speak Creole but the spirit will," she said.⁴⁵

Conclusion

From the oral histories of these seven manbos in New York City, certain distinct patterns are clear. All the women have become practicing spiritual healers after a series of perceived divine "callings," and messages, despite varying degrees of family resistance. In most cases, they arrived at the higher level of priestess, or manbo, after a period of intense sickness or suffering—paralysis for one, headaches for a second, joblessness for a third. All are capable of performing various sorts of healing therapies for clients, from ritual procedures to ensure job security, to administering herbal medications for physical maladies.

All these women command a much sought-after and highly personal kind of social power. Clients arrive in search of resolutions to problems, and other manbos and oungans invite them to assist at their ceremonies. They are in positions to build networks and community, to serve as leaders in the community, and to be power-brokers between the earthly and spirit worlds.

These women are also historical agents in a moment of intense social change, both for their community and for their religious tradition. During a period of mass movement from Haiti to New York, these women have had to renegotiate Haitian traditional values into American constructs of space and time. They have developed ways to sculpt the essentials of ritual action within drastically constricted physical spaces, such as tenement basements and small apartments. Likewise, they have learned how to effectively perform a seven-day ceremony in three days, in addition to other economizing measures, to cope with the relative lack of time in a New Yorker's life.

Because of their increased opportunities to travel back and forth to Haiti, these manbos have begun to interpret this historical moment, the last third

of the century, in a very telling way. Haiti has come to stand in opposition to New York as the place and time for "pure" traditional worship, where one is more likely to go to serve the Ginen spirits and the ancestors. New York in this era is logically governed by sorcery, because of the difficulties of being Black and undocumented, because of the commodification of time itself. Listening to these Haitian women informs us about urban American culture, for in their practice they are astute cultural critics.

Notes

1. Some names in this paper have been changed at the request of the participants, and some preferred their ritual names be used. I wish to express my deep thanks to everyone interviewed for sharing their stories and their concerns with me and the reader. Thanks also go to Jon Butler, Nancy Cott, and Robin Nagle for their editorial suggestions.

2. Constance Sutton, and Elsa Chaney, eds. *Caribbean Life in New York City: Sociocultural Dimensions*. (New York: Center for Migration Studies of New York, 1987).

3. Michel Laguerre, *American Odyssey: Haitians in New York City*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1984) 30.

4. For a lengthy recapitulation of the post-Duvalier Haitian situation, see the three-part series by Mark Danner, "A Reporter at Large (Haiti)," *The New Yorker*, November 27, December 4, and December 11, 1990. For an historical analysis, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti. State Against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990).

5. See C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963); Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, *Haiti: The Breached Citadel* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), and Leslie Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

6. Glenn R. Smucker, "The Social Character of Religion in Rural Haiti." in *Haiti—Today and Tomorrow: An Interdisciplinary Study*, eds. Charles R. Foster and Albert Valdman. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984) 56.

7. Gede is associated with birth, sex, and death—all those times in life, as Karen McCarthy Brown points out, when a person is naked (personal communication). For an account of the life of one manbo, see Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. (Berkeley:

University of California Press, 1991).

8. Interview with Magritte Alexandre, November 1990, Crown Heights, Brooklyn, New York. "Pret-la we m'dekompose. Ke li di l'ap komune'm kan mem. Men li pa kone eta ke kisa ke' m genyen. Yo kembe'm, yo ba'm losti-a. Paske se premier komunyon m'ap fe. A douz an. Epi leu you fin komunye'm, y'ale avek mwe lakay mwe. Se leu m'rive lakay mwe moun lakay we se yon miste ki monte'm. Mwe te gen yon kouzine mwe, gen konesans. Li pale avek miste-a, se leu-a li we s'on miste blan. Se Dambala."

9. Interview with Manbo Jakline, November 1990, Harlem, Manhattan, New York.

10. Interview with Manbo Marie, June 1987, Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York.

11. Interview with Manbo Edilia, "Sa te la," November 1990, Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York.

12. Among countryside dwellers, spiritual practice varies according to family tradition.

13. The sacred rattle used by priests and priestesses.

14. Interview with Manbo Jakline, November 1990, Manhattan, New York.

15. Interview with Manbo Marie, July 1988, Brooklyn, New York.

16. Louis O. Mink quoted by David E. Farris, "Narrative Form and Oral History: Some Problems and Possibilities," *International Journal of Oral History* 1:3 (November 1980): 160.

17. Stephen Crites, "Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. (Vol 1971): 296

18. Interview with Yves "Chico" Boyer, June 1990, Brooklyn, New York.

19. Interview between Lois E. Wilcken and Marina, March 11, 1982. I thank Dr. Wilcken for kindly sharing this interview with me. For a musical analysis of Haitian religion in New York, see Wilcken's "Vodou Music Among Haitians Living in New York: A Symbolic Approach." M.A. thesis, Hunter College, 1986.

20. Interview with Manbo Cocotte, June 1987, Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Conversation with "Gros Roche," April 1989, Bronx, New York.

23. There are reports by citizens and police of sacrifices made in city parks, however, which are sometimes used by Haitians as well as other African-based religious practitioners.

24. Interview with Manbo Edilia "Sa te la," November 1990, Brooklyn,

New York.

25. Interview with Magritte Alexandre, November 1990, Brooklyn, New

York.

26. Interview with Yves Boyer, June 1990, Brooklyn, New York.

27. Interview with Edilia "Sa te la," November 1990, Brooklyn, New

York.

28. Interview with Manbo Marie, June 1987, Brooklyn, New York.

29. Interview with "Apre Dieu," 1983, Bronx, New York.

30. Interview with Edilia "Sa te la," November 1990, Brooklyn, New

York.

31. For a very informative article on the ethos of *Ginen*, see Serge Larose, "The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Voodoo," in *Symbols and Sentiments: Cross-Cultural Studies in Symbolism*, ed. I.M. Lewis (London: Academic Press, 1977): 85-116.

32. Interview with Magritte Alexandre, November 1990, Brooklyn, New

York.

33. See John M. Janzen, *Lemba: 1650-1930: A Drum of Affliction in Africa and the New World* (New York: Garland, 1982).

34. It is hard to find someone who will speak about this from first-hand experience, and it is possible that this is not an actual practice but rather a way to accuse people who are more prosperous.

35. Interview with Manbo Cocotte, June 1987, Brooklyn, New York. Note that the word *zombi* has many meanings in Haiti. *Zombi* refers to part of one's soul. A person whose soul has been captured by a sorcerer is also called *zombi*. It also has to do with magical manipulation of the recent dead, and can be in the form of a powder, an object, or a person "raised from the dead."

36. Interview with Yves Boyer, June 1990, Brooklyn, New York.

37. According to Wade Davis, the "zombi poison" that is said to be used in rare cases to slow the metabolism and cause brain damage can also be in powder form. See his *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

38. Interview with Yves Boyer, June 1990, Brooklyn, New York.

39. In the sense of "weapons."

40. Any magical object or act involving attraction or self-defense.

41. Interview with Yves Boyer, June 1990, Brooklyn, New York.

42. Interview between Lois E. Wilcken and Marina, 1982

43. For an analysis of Haitian ethnic identity, see Carole Charles, "A Transnational Dialectic of Race, Class, and Ethnicity: Patterns of Identities and Forms of Consciousness among Haitian Migrants in New York City." Ph.D. Thesis, Suny-Binghamton, 1990.

44. Interview with Manbo Cocotte, June 1987, Brooklyn, New York.

45. *Ibid.*