CHAPTER 1

The World of Vodou Songs

The Roots of Vodou

Vodou is the hereditary spiritual tradition of African descendants in Haiti (Jil and Jil 2009). Throughout the ages, Vodou has been transmitted by the elders to the children:

Depi m piti, m ap chante pou lwa yo.
Se pa ti nèg ki te montre m chante o.
Adje, kite m montre chante Bondje!
Depi nan vant manman m,
gwo lwa m yo reklame mwen. Bilolo![1]

Since I was small, I have been singing for the lwa.[2]
Oh it wasn't a little guy who showed me how to sing.
Oh heavens, let me teach God's songs!
Ever since my mother's womb,
my great lwa have claimed me. Bilolo!

Vodou, or serving the *lwa* (spiritual beings and forces), is a religion, philosophy, culture and way of life that comes mainly from two major regions in Africa: Dahomey (Benin, Nigeria) and the Kongo. Dahomey was a large African kingdom and empire that spanned three centuries until the French invasion and colonization in 1892.[3] It included parts of the countries currently known as Ghana, Togo, Nigeria, and Benin, the seat of its power. Fon, Yorùbá, and Ewe were the three important Dahomian ethnolinguistic groups in the early colonial period of Saint-Domingue (c. 1680–1750; see Bellegarde-Smith 2006). The second major influence came from the Kongo, which supplied the majority of slaves in the late colonial period (c. 1750–1791). On the eve of the Haitian Revolution in 1791, the Kongo population equaled the Dahomian population (Jil and Jil 2009: 199). Among the hundreds of African ethnolinguistic groups transported on French slave vessels to Saint-Domingue were the Adja, Akan, Ayizo, Bambara, Edo, Fulah, Hwla, Igbo, Igala, Mayi, Mede, Moudong, Nago,

Ouatchi, Petwo, Rada, Savalou, Seneka, Wangòl, and Yagba communities (see Blier 1995: 83; Jil and Jil 2009; Rigaud 1953: 26; Yai 2008: 234). Vodou songs are important historical records in their preservation of these and many other African ethnic, cultural, and geographical terms. In Africa today, descendants maintain traditions related to Haitian Vodou and provide a rich source for comparing traditions (see Brand 2000a: 15; Monsia 2003; Rouget 1991, 2001: v).

The first wave of slaves shipped to Haiti came from the kingdom of Dahomey and its peripheries (Jahn 1961: 29–30).[4] Slavery became a national industry in Dahomey, in Saint-Domingue, 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 meditation in Vodou songs:

Si pa te gen Lwa,[5] 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 poudre ak Gwo Lwa a,
n ape navige!
(Beauvoir 2008b: 335)

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!

Although African influences are fundamental and tangible in Vodou, they are creolized or blended into a coherent Haitian Creole religious and cultural system (Michel 2006: 30). Comparatively, Vodou shares traits with Korean shamanism and with the old religions of Greece and Rome (Castor 1998: 28; Métraux 1958: 23).[6] Those religious systems involve piety and sacrifices to deities and ancestors, patterns familiar to Vodouists. Today the Atlantic perimeter is home to diverse groups that inherited, maintain, or adopted African religions and philosophies (Murrell 2010: 1). Vodou songs are a testament to the tenacity and genius of the ancestors who taught and practiced these ancient traditions in the dreadful conditions of Saint-Domingue.

Orientation, Motivation, Methods, and Structure of the Book

Vodou songs constitute the living memory of a Vodou community. They belong not to a fixed tradition but to one that is constantly evolving. Changes, clarifications, additions, and subtractions shape the corpora of Vodou songs through time. Songs are created, retained, transformed, and forgotten. Revelation cannot be frozen in a book, because it "is a continual process" in Vodou (see Laguerre

1980: 22). Each community has its own tradition of songs that members acquire; the songs form a profound religious and cultural heritage that traverses the ages and refreshes the present. Vodou songs accompany organized ritual, dance, drumming, and interactions between people and the lwa who ride the *chwal* (horses or vessels of the lwa; Laguerre 1980: 22). Scholars provide some insight into the meaning of Vodou songs and their words; at the same time, they have various interpretations because they speak to people in different ways.

The primary goal of this volume is to introduce readers of English and Haitian Creole to the language, mythology, philosophy, origins, and culture of Vodou through source songs. The provision of all texts bilingually in Haitian Creole and English gives readers a tool to study the Haitian Creole source language in addition to the English target language. Remarkably, the most important materials about Vodou, the sacred songs of the religion, largely have been unavailable in English. The publication of Vodou songs in Haitian Creole and English is crucial for understanding the Vodouist's perspective. We are motivated by the notion that people who are studied should be able to express themselves, since they are their own experts (Brown 1991: 14). There are several excellent English-language scholarly accounts of aspects of Vodou religion and culture, whereas few publications have focused on editing Vodou songs and contextualizing them lexicographically.[7] Alfred Métraux (1958: 16) pointed this out when he said Vodou was still awaiting a good folklorist who would take the trouble to fix the rich oral traditions of the religion. Harold Courlander (1939–1940), Jacques Roumain (1943), Milo Marcelin (1950a, 1950b), Milo Rigaud (1953), Michel Laguerre (1980), Max Beauvoir (2008a, 2008b), and Dyeri Jil and Ivwoz Jil (2009), among others, are very much the "Homeric folklorists" for whom Métraux called. Several of these important collections are out of print or include no English, however. This volume includes a diverse range of sources to stitch together a representative collection of Vodou sacred literature. The bilingual heart of this book aims to be a gate between Haitian Creole and English-speaking communities and a foundation for the growth of more scholarly and exegetical work on Vodou songs.

As a Haitian Creolist and a student of religion, my point of view is that the sacred songs of Haitian Vodou are exceptional religious, linguistic, historical, and cultural treasures that deserve preservation, translation, and interpretation. Source texts are the starting points for the study of religion and culture. One cannot understand Judaism or Islam if the Hebrew Scriptures or the Qur'an are left unexamined. Similarly, one cannot grasp Rastafari if one does not study reggae music lyrics. Over millennia, Vodou religion has maintained itself via *oral* traditions. Since the 1940s, however, significant efforts have been dedicated to collecting Haitian Creole materials, but few of those pioneering works have been made available in English translation.[8] Many other important

Vodou source texts remained in manuscript form in personal collections or in sound recordings in library collections. This book makes available a diverse range of hard-to-find or unpublished sources to provide a springboard for advancing research on Vodou.

The songs collected here belong to profound traditions. They include invocations, acclamations, poetry, prayers, *langaj* (West African language fragments), formulas, terms, and proverbs; as a whole, they provide a panoramic view of Vodou religion and Haitian history. Scholars working on sacred texts employ various exegetical methods to elucidate their meanings. This book employs explanations and interpretations that focus on the origins, history, culture, audience, genre, and linguistic dimensions of the sources. Exegesis is the practice, procedure, and method employed to understand a text (Porter and Clarke 2002: 6). Exegesis aims to "read out," as opposed to "read into," a text's meaning (Porter and Clarke 2002: 5). Exegetes are concerned with discovering the meaning that authors intend for their audience and are concerned not with "truth" but, rather, with scientific fact (Kümmel 1972: 111; Porter and Clarke 2002: 7). Exegesis is interpretation and understanding that come from the "subjective context" of a text (Cohen 2001: 239). This means that exegesis compares a text with its *own* cultural traditions and those that are relevant to it.[9] In that way, Haitian Vodou is best compared with African Vodou and the religious traditions of the African diaspora.

Our work is inspired by works in linguistic, ethnographic, anthropological, and mythological research, which present the source language and the target language in a side-by-side format to give readers the opportunity to study and compare both languages. Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd's (1911) collection of Khoisan folklore from South Africa, Elsie Clews Parsons's (1933, 1936) volumes on Antillean Creole folklore, Robert Hall's (1953) collection of Haitian Creole-English bilingual texts, Nsuka Zi Kabwiku's (1986) materials on the Kongo, John Mason's (1992) collection of Cuban Yorùbá-English Santería songs, and Akínyẹmí Akíntúndé's (2004) work on Yorùbá royal poetry are just a few examples of what this book aspires to.

Chapter 2 offers historical songs from Serge Fuertès's *Wòl Vodou nan Bwa Kayiman* (1992) and Max Beauvoir's *Le grand recueil sacré ou répertoire des chansons du vodou haïtien* (2008). In Chapter 3, the songs found in Jacques Roumain's *Le sacrifice du tambour-Assôtô(r)* (1943) and two small collections (Jaegerhuber 1950; Price-Mars 1956) appear updated in the official spelling. In Chapter 4, the songs that were originally collected by Marcelin (1950a, 1950b) appear updated in the official spelling. Chapter 5 includes the previously unpublished transcriptions of a Vodou ceremony recorded by Laura Boulton in 1947.[10] Chapter 6 comes from the handwritten, unpublished manuscript of J.L., a Haitian immigrant who had only recently arrived in the United States when

I met him in 1996–1997. Assorted songs I collected in 1999, 2000, 2008, and 2009 on trips to Belle-Rivière, Haiti, are given in Chapter 7. Chapter 8 presents fifty songs that Courlander recorded and transcribed during his fieldwork in Haiti in 1939–1940. Appendix A provides a detailed inventory and analysis of Vodou terminology. Appendix B provides an outline of Haitian Creole grammar through illustrative sentences drawn from Vodou songs and texts.

Textualization and Vodou's View of Revelation

There are many questions about how the *textualization* of orally transmitted songs fits into larger interpretations of Vodou, which include the analysis of possession performances, ritual, drumming, dance, aesthetics, objects, architecture, and much else. One of the objectives of this chapter is to suggest ways in which readers can approach these songs, which are already once and often twice removed from their ritual context as written documents and, for many readers, as translations. Issues of context and interpretation are raised by the settling of these songs into written form. This chapter and Appendix A: Dictionary of Vodou Terms strive to provide explanations that help situate the texts in their original world.

There are important differences in the sacred literature of Vodou compared with other religions. While other religions are heavily organized around a *written* text, Vodou, until recently, has centered on songs that are sung and memorized and not written down. A complex process of translation exists between cultures in all ethnographic writing (Price 2002: 21). Books can freeze songs and traditions that otherwise exist in a flowing oral current that sustains communal worship. In the process of writing down Vodou texts, the religion enters a stage of codification, and books like this one run the risk of appearing to assemble a Vodou canon.

Vodou songs are revealed or inspired in the moment by the lwa themselves.[11] They belong to "sacred oral tradition" that is not *closed* but *open*. The tradition of Vodou cannot be boxed into a canon, because the lwa are living and forever revealing themselves to their followers. Revelation occurs at an individual, familial, or community level and is not universal or uniform. A Vodou community in northern Haiti may have significant differences in the relationships, songs, and traditions of a given lwa—in addition to a layer of commonalities—when compared with a community in southern Haiti. Vodou is not a centralized religion but one with local expressions.

This collection is not a Vodou bible. While religions such as Islam and Judaism are organized around sacred written texts, Vodou is organized around oral traditions. Vodou is lived and practiced through music, dance, song, visual symbolism, ritual, liturgy, and possession. This is an early collection of

the fragments of Vodou religion because so little is known about the collective repertoire of Vodou songs. In an age in which Vodou risks becoming a dwindling minority religion, a work such as this helps preserve ancient historical traditions and enrich the study and practice of Vodou (Murrell 2010: 91). The sections that follow examine Vodou through the lens of song. While this chapter cannot provide an exhaustive study of the types and content of Vodou songs, it does try to explore some of their most salient meanings and functions to open the way to further research.

Vodou in Haiti

In the next paragraphs, my goal is to introduce basic notions about Vodou as they are reflected in songs.[12] Vodou religion reinforces group solidarity, provides physicians for the sick, and offers regular worship and recreation in the community (Laguerre 1980: 26). In Haitian Creole, the term *Vodou* broadly refers to the religion and its culture. In the Fon language of Benin, *vodun* refers to a "divinity of the Fon pantheon" and is equivalent to the word *lwa* in Haitian Creole (Höftmann 2003: 376).[13] As J.L.'s song 22 shows, most Haitians simply refer to this religion of young and old as *sèvi lwa* (serving the lwa):

Jan w wè m piti an, m sèvi gwo lwa.	You may see me as puny, but I serve great lwa.
Nan demanbre m lakou lakay	In my family's Vodou ceremony in the home yard
granmoun: granmoun, timoun, timoun.	of the elders: elders, children, children.

The two basic types of Vodou are public and domestic. Public Vodou involves an *ounfò* (temple) where ceremonies are held by an *oungan* (priest), *bòkò* (priest of divination), or *manbo* (priestess). If a priest or priestess is responsible for a fully functional temple, he or she will collaborate with ritual personnel, musicians, initiates, choir leaders, singers, patrons, and a loyal uninitiated following. Other Vodou priests focus on healing and do not have temple facilities but maintain a sacred space with an altar.

Domestic Vodou, which involves ceremonies that take place on ancestral family land, is considered the most important locus for the transmission of Vodou tradition (Laguerre 1980: 36). Domestic services take place on the *lakou* (agricultural compound) of the extended family (Fleurant 2006a: 60). In that context, traditions and songs are preserved through knowledgeable family members. J.L.'s song 14 points out how the *lakou* is the heart of Vodou transmission:

Se vre lakou a ban m rele lwa yo.	It's true the yard gave me the invocation of the lwa.
Lè m rele lwa yo, lwa yo tande mwen.	When I call the lwa, the lwa hear me.

Domestic rituals are carried out either by an oungan/bòkò or manbo in the family or one invited and remunerated for officiating. There are both household ceremonies and extended-family ceremonies (Laguerre 1980: 25). Only a small number of the servants of the lwa are actually members of a particular temple. Instead of being initiated, most Vodouists maintain family-based traditions on designated days annually or periodically (Murray 1984: 194). The song below shows how the hereditary dimension of Vodou traditions can emerge after the death of a family member:

Kòmanse m pral kòmanse.	I am certainly going to begin.
Depi manman m mouri,	Since my mother died,
m pral kòmanse vre!	I'm truly going to begin!
Kòmanse m pral kòmanse,	I am certainly going to begin
sèvis la kòmanse bèl o.	oh the service has begun beautifully.
(Beauvoir 2008b: 220)	

J.L.'s song 144 suggests the protective power of hereditary lwa:

Mwen gen yon bagay nan tèt mwen,	I have something in my head,
se lè m angaje.	it's when I'm in trouble.
Y a wè sa ki nan tèt mwen.	They will see what's in my head.
M pral wè sa ki nan tèt mwen.	I'm going to see what's in my head.
Men lè m angaje,	But when I'm in trouble,
lwa manman m yo dechennen.	my mother's lwa are unchained.

Vodou religion is rooted in the Haitian family, community, culture, history, and identity. The religion is part of everyday life through song, vocabulary, mythology, theology, philosophy, ritual, proverbs, stories, mentality, symbolism, and attire.[14] The Haitian Creole language and Haitian thinking are permeated with Vodou concepts, terminology, and wisdom.

Syncretism and Stratification in Vodou and Catholicism in Haiti

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 86, like many Vodou songs, shows this dual alliance and an underlying quest for unity:

Twa Patè, o twa Ave Mariya, nou kwè nan	Three Paters, oh three Hail Marys, we believe in
Dye a ki ban nou lavi a, men gen Ginen.	the God who gave us life, but there is Ginen.
Nan Ginen, o genyen lwa, genyen lwa o,	In Ginen, oh there are lwa, oh there are lwa,
nan Ginen lafanmi o, an nou met tèt	Oh the family is in Ginen, let's put our heads
ansanm pou n ka sove peyi a.	together so we can save the country.

There are some who stay planted exclusively in one faith tradition. These individuals are mostly Catholics, but there are also Vodou purists. As a result of colonial legacies, the Catholic Church has been linked to prestige, wealth, the government, and the urban elite, while Vodou has been linked to rural communities, family, and the working classes. At the same time, individuals from diverse social classes converge in Catholicism and Vodou. Many view the two religions as inseparable. J.L.'s song 14 begins by thanking his parish priest for assistance but goes on to assert the importance of the lwa:

Pè Larak, m ap di w mèsi,	Father Larak, I'm thanking you,
se pa lajan w ban mwen.	it's not about the money you gave me.
M vin di w mèsi.	I came to thank you.
Se vre lakou a ban m rele lwa yo.	It's true the yard gave me the calling of the lwa.
Lè m rele lwa yo, lwa yo tande mwen.	When I call the lwa, the lwa hear me.
Lè m pal a lwa yo,	When I speak to the lwa,
yo regle zafè mwen.	they take care of my problems.

In Saint-Domingue, enslaved Vodou practitioners living in the crucible of the Catholic and capitalist French colonial society were compelled through violence to camouflage Vodou, but in the process they achieved the survival of the religion, the subversion of Catholicism, and, ultimately, the demise of French rule (Beauvoir-Dominique 1995: 156). While forced to convert, Africans in the colony already had a deep tradition of *assembling* religion from diverse traditions. Anthropological fieldwork in a Haitian village shows how this culture continues. Some 85 percent ($N = 421$) of Gerald Murray's participants identified themselves as Catholic (Murray 1984: 193). Of this group, fewer than 30 percent identified themselves as *Katolik fran* (pure Catholics), while the remaining 70 percent stated that their families serve the lwa.

Until very recently, the Catholic Church's entanglements with the Haitian state limited the freedom and status of Vodou, and it resulted in the domination of Haitians by Christian rites and symbols (Murray 1984: 222). It is for this reason that, rather than simple syncretism, Catholicism and Vodou are highly stratified, and each religion is domain-specific (Murray 1984: 223). While they borrow elements from each other, at their cores they are not syncretistic. Haitian servants of the lwa may have a relationship with Catholicism in public and with Vodou at home; however, each faith tradition has its specific domain, relevance, and unique interpretation of the divine. Vodou and Catholicism have different leadership, sacred spaces, traditions, rituals, theologies, philosophies, gender and sexual philosophies, worldviews, and historical, geographical, and ethnic origins, among other divergences.[15]

Basic Ethical and Philosophical Principles in Vodou

Vodou religion, unlike Christianity, Islam, or Judaism, is not a prescriptive religion with laws and commandments. Vodou presents the ethical life through "trends" and "thematic modalities" in narrative oral myths, in songs, and in the possession performances of the lwa. Basic goals in Vodou include maintaining harmony and promoting love, justice, goodness, patience, forgiveness, cooperation, respect for the elders, and the instruction of positive values in children (Michel 2006: 28). Vodou priests and priestesses should *not* harm others, because that will alienate them from God:

Yo peye m lajan pou m fè mal,	They pay me money to do evil,
M pa vle!	I don't want to!
Si m fè mal, Bondje va vire do ban mwen.	If I do evil, God is going to turn against me.
(Beauvoir 2008b: 436)	

Vodou is concerned with reducing suffering while strengthening survival instincts. J.L.'s song 52 shows sympathy for the poor and expresses an understanding of what poverty drives people to do:

M te panse m te pòv, m te pòv o,	I thought I was poor, oh I was poor,
lè m gade, mwen wè gen pi mal;	when I looked, I saw there were worse off;
m pran kouraj o.	oh I mustered my courage.
Pandan m t ap kabicha,	While I was napping,
sa k te pi mal la vòlè kwi a.	the one worse off stole my calabash bowl.
Gad se nan kwi a	Look, it's in the calabash bowl
li fè tout afè li nan lavi sa.	that he takes care of all his business in this life.
Pa janm di ou pi mal,	Never say you're the worst off,
genyen pi mal.	there are those who are even worse off.

Vodou ethics are contextual because special instructions vary according to the nature of the advising lwa and the receiving horse (Brown 2006: 10). J.L.'s song 104 expresses a personal crisis in which his poverty and drinking are related to his refusal to properly serve Ogou, lwa of war, defense, energy, force, iron, metallurgy, and the like:

Si ou wè m malere, pa kritike mwen.	If you see that I'm poor, don't criticize me.
Si ou wè m bwè kleren, pa fawouche mwen.	If you see that I'm drinking rum, don't harass me.
Se yon lwa Ogou	It's an Ogou lwa
k ap fè m pase mizè sa.	who is making me endure this misery.
Li vle m sèvi l, men m poko vle sèvi l.	He wants me to serve him, but I don't want to yet.

Vodou songs capture Haiti's socioeconomic situation and address the moral way to live in the context of hardship:

Gran nèg ap travay pou yo rich o.
Malere ap travay pou santiman . . .
Malere, m dakò m se malere.
M pito mande charite pase m vòlè.
(Beauvoir 2008b: 203)

Oh the powerful work to be rich.
The poor work for the sake of feelings . . .
Poor, I agree I'm poor.
I'd rather beg than steal.

The wisdom of prudence is a basic Vodouist outlook (Beauvoir 2008a). The Vodouist conforms to the will of the ancestors and the living family in the observation of customs. The next song suggests the dedication that Vodouists must show to hereditary lwa:

Lwa sa a se Lwa m,
M pa gen anyen pou m ba yo!
Lwa sa a se Lwa papa m,
M pral mande pou m ba yo!
Lwa sa a se Lwa manman m,
M pral mande pou m ba yo!
(Beauvoir 2008b: 257)

These Lwa are my Lwa,
I don't have anything to give them!
These Lwa are my father's Lwa,
I'm going to beg in order to give to them!
These Lwa are my mother's Lwa
I'm going to beg in order to give to them!

Vodou is non-apostolic because it does not seek converts. Vodouists manifest their faith through the "emotional participation" in the sacred, which they accomplish by serving as the vessels of the lwa. The rites of religion are carried out through ceremonies, rituals, music, song, dance, dreams, possession, and a daily comportment that is religious. The emphasis on respect for others keeps Vodouists from engaging in "inquisitions," pogroms, and acts of *dechoukaj* (uprooting) under the "false and cruel pretext that he or she received from God the mission of converting all nations" (Beauvoir 2008b: 70). For a Vodouist, killing people in the name of God reduces the Supreme Being to the status of a vulgar, non-universal idol. Haitians believe that a high price is exacted from those who gain something through illegitimate means, and this keeps the use of negative sorcery under control (Brown 2006: 22). Vodou justice is expressed in the practices of altruism, interdependence with nature, generosity, hospitality, and labor exchange such as the *konbit* (collective reciprocal farming). The *way* to live is a central concern of Vodou ethics, philosophy, and spirituality.