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Drapo Vodou: Sacred Standards of Haitian Vodou

By ANNE M. PLATOFF*

Introduction

The field of vexillology is, by nature, a multidisciplinary one. It is difficult to understand the significance of an individual flag or group of flags without examining the context within which those objects were created and are used. This paper will present a case study of a multidisciplinary investigation of one type of flags. Haitian Vodou flags (drapo Vodou) are little known to vexillologists, but have been studied by scholars in the fields of art, anthropology, African-American studies, and other disciplines. An investigation of prior scholarship from these areas demonstrates that this category of flags is not only significantly different than the flags usually examined by vexillologists, but they also have much to teach us about the study of flags as a multidisciplinary exercise.

There are several books that are focused on Vodou flags. Patrick Arthur Polk, a prolific researcher on the topic, has produced a colorful and informative book titled Haitian Vodou Flags (1999). In his book, Polk summarizes information compiled in the preparation of his Ph.D. dissertation and during his work on exhibits related to the arts of Haiti. He explains the historical background of the flags, the role of the flags in ceremonies, the colors and symbolism, and he also includes colorful photos of a variety of drapo Vodou. Nancy Josephson, an artist and student of Vodou, authored the book Spirits in Sequins: Vodou Flags of Haiti (2007). This beautifully illustrated volume explains the colors and symbolism used in the flags, and documents the work of a variety of Vodou flag artists. In addition, two Ph.D. dissertations were also extremely valuable to this research. A dissertation by Anna Hartmann Wexler, For the Flower of Ginen: The Artistry of Clotaire Bazile, A Haitian Vodou Flagmaker, and Polk’s 1999 dissertation, titled Fabric and Power: Vodou Flags, Collective Symbolism, and Rites of Authority in Haiti, offer two different perspectives on the topic. Wexler’s work is an anthropological study of the flag-making process and the importance of flags within the Vodou faith. Polk, on the other hand, takes a continued on page 3
**Editor’s Note / Note de la rédaction**

Flags participate, both physically and symbolically, in many emotionally charged human experiences. No doubt the rites most often associated with flags, at least in the popular conception, are patriotic in nature. While none deny the long intertwined history between flags and political identity, evident from the primeval battlefield to the contemporary array of national symbols at the United Nations in New York City, it can be easily forgotten that flags have not only arisen through a need to communicate sovereignty, allegiance, or aggression at a distance. They also act in more insular ceremonies, in experiences private and sacred.

Anne M. Platoff introduces one such powerful example of flag culture, largely unknown or at least undiscussed in the vexillological community, found in the sacred ceremonies of Haitian Vodou. Not only does Ms. Platoff provide a compelling historical and cultural sketch of these religious artifacts, of their design, function, signification, and religious power, she also presents a well-curated display of stunning visual examples, providing access to an aesthetic language of flag design and display that broadens our view of what flags can and should do.

Her excellent article reminds us that the study of flags is a study of people, of what we think, believe, and feel. By seeking to understand flags which would simply not be found in traditional vexillological literature, Platoff demonstrates vexillology at its best as an interdisciplinary endeavor. It is art and design, it is anthropology, it is religious ritual and performance. It touches every aspect of our desire to better understand ourselves and our fellows.

With great pleasure, the publication committee of NAVA presents Ms. Platoff’s compelling paper which was originally presented at the NAVA Annual Meeting in New Orleans, in its entirety as a double issue of FRQ.

*Kenneth J. Hartvigsen, Ph.D.*
Editor, FRQ
more historical and sociological approach. He traces the roots of flag usage in Vodou through the national flag culture of Haiti and the Haitian colonial experience, and then back to Africa where he examines the African and European traditions that influenced the flags. These two scholars and others have also presented and published papers that provide more analysis of the topic. In addition, it was also necessary to draw upon general works about Vodou, the arts of Vodou, and the symbolism used by Vodou practitioners in order to compile an introduction to drapo Vodou for vexillologists.\(^1\)

**What is (or isn’t) Vodou?**

One of the most important aspects of conducting and reporting on research is to try to view the topic from a position of neutrality. This is especially important when researching a topic such as Vodou. As a religion it is relatively unknown and quite misunderstood outside of Haiti (Ayiti). The popular stereotypes of voodoo dolls, zombies, and imagery from movies (such as the James Bond film, *Live and Let Die*) can make it difficult for an outsider to determine just what is, and what isn’t, Vodou. In this case, spelling is the key to finding appropriate resources for research. The spelling “Vodou” is typically used by practitioners of the religion, by anthropologists, and by others who study the people and culture of Haiti. For the purposes of this study, it is Haitian Vodou that is most relevant to the field of vexillology because of the use of flags in religious services. It is also important to distinguish Haitian Vodou from the folk practices called “voodoo” and “hoodoo” in the United States. While there are some commonalities, these other traditions should not be considered to be representative of Vodou as it is practiced in Haiti.\(^2\)

The Haitian Consulate in the United States has a page on their website which attempts to explain the religion of Vodou to non-Haitians. On this page, it states that “a Creolized form of Vodou is the primary culture and religion of the more than 8 million people of Haiti and the Haitian diaspora.” The roots of this religion can be traced back to the Ibo and Kongo peoples of Central Africa, the Yoruba of Nigeria, and other cultures from Western Africa, but there are also elements inspired by the Taíno Indians who were native to the Caribbean island of Hispaniola where Haiti is located (Hispaniola was known in colonial times as Saint-Domingue or Santo Domingo). African elements of Vodou were carried to the Americas by the hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans who were brought to the island during the colonial period. Anthropologists who study the culture and religion of Haiti have been able to trace elements of Vodou back to their African roots through linguistic analysis and the study of cross-cultural similarities.\(^3\)

Professor Claudine Michel is one of a number of scholars of Haitian origin who have worked to bring a better understanding of Vodou to the uninitiated. She summarizes the basic essence of the faith in this way:

Vodou is a comprehensive belief system and aesthetics which provide coherence within both the visible and invisible worlds. It implies connections with cosmic energies; it harmonizes the sacred and the profane, the material and the spiritual, and the world of the living with that of the ancestors and the Lwa. Vodou shares a common denominator and universal ethical principles with other world religions—a strong sense of justice and service, respect for elders, beneficence, forbearance, and humanism. The Vodou worldview constitutes the basis of the moral system which regulates behavior, social interactions and communal duties among Haitians. …

Vodou is a very practical religion which is primarily about sustaining life in the community. Its influences range from individual spiritual healing to survival of the group and communal sustenance. Grounded in the family and the community, it functions as systems of traditional medicine, justice, art, music, education and cooperative economics. Vodou is not only a belief system and worldview, but also a mode of survival and existence. Thus, for Haitians and for other foreign nationals who are members of Vodou families, Vodou is present in all aspects of life and regulates our presence within the larger cosmos.

Keeping this basic description of how Haitians view Vodou in mind, it is also important to understand how this belief system relates to other world religions. Michel reminds her readers that this relationship was not always amiable, as there have been numerous periods during Haitian history when those who practiced Vodou were forced to hide their activities as a result of official persecution. It was not until 1987 that a new constitution officially guaranteed freedom of religion, and 2003 when a presidential decree recognized Vodou officially as one of the nation’s religions.

As noted on the Consulate website, “A common saying is that Haiti is 80% Roman Catholic and 100% Vodou.” There are many people in Haiti who would say that they are both a Catholic and a *Vodouisant* or *sèvitè* (one who serves the spirits). There are many elements of Catholicism that have been incorporated into the religion. For example, *Vodouisants* believe in one supreme God. This deity is considered to be the same God recognized by the Roman Catholic Church, but is often referred to as Bondye (likely derived from the
French language term Bon Dieu, meaning “Good Lord”). As Claudine Michel explains, “Vodou adepts perceive themselves as good Christians and see no conflict with practicing both Catholicism and serving the spirits; the same saints who ornament Catholic churches watch over Vodou altars. Catholicism becomes an extension of the quest for protection from the saints/spirits and the omnipotent God, Bondye.” The ancestral spirits that are served by Vodou practitioners are called Lwa (or Loa) and are considered to be subservient to Bondye, in a relationship that is analogous to that between Christian Saints and God. It is through the intercession of the Lwa that worshipers are able to communicate with Bondye. Most of these spirits have their roots in the indigenous religions of Africa, but there are others who are from the New World. In Haitian Vodou many of the Lwa have become associated with specific Saints through a process which some scholars called “syncretism.” Many anthropologists have postulated that this was originally done so that the slaves could hide their religious practices from their Christian masters, but over time specific Saints and Lwa have come to be understood as just different representations of the same spirit in the eyes of Haitians. In addition, there are Catholic saints who have become known as Lwa in their own right without being syncretized to an ancestral spirit from Africa.5

Often the Lwa are described as “numbering in the thousands” or “uncountable”, but there are a relatively small number that are honored with flags in ceremonies. Very briefly, these Lwa (as identified in Polk’s Vodou flag book) are: Agwe, Ayizan, Azaka (Zaka), Bawon Samdi, Bosou, Danbala Wèdo, Ayida Wèdo, Ezili Dantò, Ezili Freda, Gran

Table 1. List of Lwa Commonly Associated With Flags, Their Roles, and Associated Colors, Symbols, and Saints

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lwa Name*</th>
<th>Nation / Family</th>
<th>Areas of Influence / Realm / Details</th>
<th>Colors**</th>
<th>Symbols***</th>
<th>Catholic Saints</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agwe</td>
<td>Rada</td>
<td>king of the ocean, sea captain; husband of Lasirèn</td>
<td>white, blue</td>
<td>boats, paddles, small metal fishes</td>
<td>St. Ulrich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayizan</td>
<td>Rada</td>
<td>patron of the priesthood, mother of the initiates; associated with initiation</td>
<td>white, silver</td>
<td>palm leaves</td>
<td>St. Claire, St. Rose, St. Martha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azaka (Zaka)</td>
<td>Rada</td>
<td>protector of agriculture and harvests</td>
<td>blue, red</td>
<td>Pakèt Kongo</td>
<td>St. Isidore, St. André</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bawon Samdi (The Baron)</td>
<td>Gède</td>
<td>Lwa of death; guardian of the cemetery; his realm is the earth. Bawon Samdi is the father of all the Gède.</td>
<td>black, purple, white</td>
<td>skull, black cross, farm implements</td>
<td>St. Andrew, St. Expedit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosou (Bossou)</td>
<td>Rada / Petwo</td>
<td>associated with lightning, fertility, and protection from harm</td>
<td>red, black, white</td>
<td>Bull's head, horns</td>
<td>St. Vincent de Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danbala Wèdo</td>
<td>Rada</td>
<td>spirit of happiness &amp; wealth; supreme snake spirit; also associated with wisdom and fertility; husband of Ayida Wèdo; with her, he represents birth and creation</td>
<td>white, light green</td>
<td>Snakes and eggs; Pakèt Kongo</td>
<td>St. Patrick, Moses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayida Wèdo</td>
<td>Rada</td>
<td>spirit of happiness &amp; wealth; mistress of the skies; also associated with wisdom and fertility; her realm is water; wife of Danbala Wèdo; with him, she represents birth and creation</td>
<td>blue, white</td>
<td>Rainbow; white Pakèt Kongo</td>
<td>Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezili Dantò</td>
<td>Petwo</td>
<td>spirit of motherhood, protection, &amp; wisdom; her realm is the water; often depicted as a black Madonna with child and known for her maternal instincts</td>
<td>blue, red, black</td>
<td>Pierced heart &amp; Knives, Blue Pakèt Kongo</td>
<td>Black Madonna of Częstochowa (the Mater Salvatoris), Our Lady of Mount Carmel, St. Barbara Africana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lwa</strong> Name*</td>
<td><strong>Nation / Family</strong></td>
<td><strong>Areas of Influence / Realm / Details</strong></td>
<td><strong>Colors</strong>**</td>
<td><strong>Symbols</strong>**</td>
<td><strong>Catholic Saints</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezili Freda (Erzulie Freda)</td>
<td>Rada</td>
<td>spirit of love, sensuality, and beauty; the epitome of feminine beauty; her realm is water</td>
<td>pink &amp; white, pale blue &amp; white, (gold)</td>
<td>checkered heart, mirror, pink <em>pakèt kongo</em> [white lamp with a blue bulb]</td>
<td>Virgin Mary, Mater Dolorosa del Monte Calvario (Our Lady of Mount Calvary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gran Bwa (Grand Bois)</td>
<td>Petwo</td>
<td>spirit of healing &amp; forests; associated with herbal remedies</td>
<td>green, brown</td>
<td>wood &amp; roots</td>
<td>St. Sebastian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lasirèn (Lasiren, La Sirene, Lasireen, La Sirenn)</td>
<td>Rada</td>
<td>queen of the ocean; patroness of music; “mermaid;” wife of Agwe</td>
<td>blue-green, [light blue]</td>
<td>mirrors, combs, trumpets, shells</td>
<td>Nuestra Senora de la Caridad; Mary, Stella Maris (Star of the Sea); St. Martha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legba (Papa Legba)</td>
<td>Rada / Petwo</td>
<td>spirit of rituals, guardian of the crossroads; keeper of the gates between the spiritual and physical worlds; sometimes shown as an old man in rags. Legba’s alter ego who guards the crossroads at night is Kafou (Kalfou or Kalfu).</td>
<td>red &amp; white</td>
<td>crosses, keys, walking stick, crutches</td>
<td>St. Peter, St. Lazarus, &amp; St. Anthony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loko (Papa Loko)</td>
<td>Rada</td>
<td>patron of the priesthood; <em>Lwa</em> of healing; guardian of the <em>ounfò</em></td>
<td>white &amp; red (white, golden yellow, &amp; light green)</td>
<td>red rooster</td>
<td>St. Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marasa (Marassa)</td>
<td>Rada</td>
<td>sacred twins (always shown together); protectors of children and fertility; associated with medicine; sometimes shown as the triplets Marasa Twa</td>
<td>pale blue &amp; pink</td>
<td>palm leaves</td>
<td>St. Paul &amp; St. Philippe; St. Cosmas &amp; St. Damian; St. Claire &amp; St. Nicholas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ogou (Ogoun)</td>
<td>Rada / Petwo</td>
<td><em>Lwa</em> of iron &amp; blacksmithing, triumph, authority, pioneering, &amp; power; often shown as a military general; the ultimate masculine spirit who is the master of iron and lord of battle. Ogou or Ogoun is also used to refer to an entire family of <em>Lwa</em>.</td>
<td>red</td>
<td>machete, sword driven into the earth, red scarf and/or flags, red <em>pakèt kongo</em></td>
<td>St. James Major*** &amp; St. Jerome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simbi</td>
<td>Petwo</td>
<td>patron of the rains and river currents; master of all magicians; deliverer of powerful medicines; associated with the watery realms of the ancestors</td>
<td>white, green</td>
<td>snakes in a field of crosses, a well or spring</td>
<td>The Magi, Moses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The spellings of *Lwa* names can vary. There are differences between the way the names are spelled in French and the way they are spelled in Haitian Creole (Kreyòl Ayisyen).

** Colors and symbols in brackets were only found in one source.

*** Other names for St. James Major are St. James the Greater, St. James the Great, St. Jacques, Sen Jak, or James, Son of Zebedee (one of the Apostles, and the brother of St. John the Apostle)
Bwa, Lasirèn, Legba, Loko, Marasa, Ogou, and Simbi. Each has their own realm of influence, symbols, favorite colors, and other preferences. Many of these elements are incorporated into flag designs so that those familiar with the Lwa can readily distinguish which Lwa is represented by a particular dраО pa Vodou.6

There are several different ways to classify and group the Lwa—by characteristics that they share in common or by their nation (or family). Three categories that are commonly used to classify the characteristics of the Lwa are the fuet (Luwa who are cool or soothing by nature), the cho (those with hot and abrasive personalities), and those Lwa who bridge these two extremes. The nations into which Lwa are grouped are called nanchon. These nations are usually associated with a particular culture of origin in Africa. Examples of nations include Rada, Nago, Djouba, Petwo (also written Petro), Kongo, Ibo, and Gède. The Rada are a group of cool, benevolent spirits, who are invoked for healing and spiritual protection. Luwa of the Nago nanchon are associated with power, and embody the qualities of leadership and power. The Djouba are the Lwa connected to farming and cultivation. A group of “hot” spirits is the Petwo, who are often malevolent and have harsh and abrasive personalities. This group is said to have originated in Haiti within the harsh conditions of slavery. The Kongo are a gracious group of Lwa who are known to enjoy song and dance. Another group of Lwa, the Ibo, are difficult to satisfy. They are known for their pride and arrogance. Finally, there are the Gède—spirits associated with eroticism and death. This last group of Lwa are also known as tricksters. For vexillological research, these groupings are most relevant because Luwa in the same categories will often share their preferences for certain colors or will be represented by some common symbols. Sometimes one flag will be made to honor more than one Lwa from the same group.8

Another very important aspect of Vodou that distinguishes it from many other religions is how it is organized. The doctrine of Vodou rituals is not centrally directed and, as a result, there is a great deal of variation in practice between different Vodou societies (called sosyetes). These societies are typically devoted to serving a specific group of Lwa. Before moving on to an explanation of how ceremonies are conducted and what role the flags play in the ceremonies, a few more terms need to be defined. The temple where a group of Vodouisants gather to worship is called an oumfò (honfour, honfour, or humfo). Within the oumfò will be a main sanctuary area called the peristil (perestil, perestyle, or perystil). In this part of the temple there will be a central pole called the poto mitan (poteau-mitan), which is believed to be the conduit through which the Lwa arrive in the temple. This is the focal point of the efforts to summon the Lwa at the beginning of the ceremony (seremoni). Rituals are led by either a male priest called an oungan (houngan) or by a female priest who is known as a manbo (mambo). Initiates to the faith—the members of the Vodou society—are called oumsi (hunsi).9

Vodou ceremonies are far too complex to completely explain within the context of this paper. In general the rituals focus on facilitating communication between the congregation and the spirit world. Through colorful and energetic ceremonies, Vodouisants attract the attention of the Lwa, summon them, and then entice them to cross through the gates between the spiritual and material worlds. When a Lwa is in attendance it will take possession of the priest. This is often described in terms of a divine horseman mounting a chwal (horse). Claudine Michel explains it this way:

*During Vodou ceremonies, the Lwa possess or ‘mount’ the devotees, communicating with the living and answering questions. They deal with human and spiritual conflicts, antagonisms, oppositions, and disharmony which are the source of moral ills and societal imbalance. With imbalance, energy does not flow; things are tied or blocked, thus defying Vodou’s dynamic, fluid and ever-evolving ethos. The Vodou Lwa intervene in human affairs as they guide, chastise or praise, consistently assisting with healing, opening channels and facilitating the continuous flow of energy.*

As with any religion, there are a number of ritual objects that are associated with the practice of Vodou. These include every-day objects required by specific Lwa, and also decorative objects that serve different purposes. For example, ornamented bottles (both filled and empty) are set on altars as offerings to the spirits. They are typically decorated with symbols and images, and ornamented with sequins or other colorful coverings. Dolls are sometimes used on altars, but not in the malevolent stereotypical fashion we see on TV and in movies—they are not stuck with pins to magically harm others. Instead, they are used to honor specific Lwa or to serve as messengers to the spirits. Another ornamental object found in Vodou temples are pakèt kongo. These are cloth packets which contain herbs and other materials. These packets are usually themed in the colors of specific Lwa, and are decorated in different fashions. They are used for healing and protection. One additional category of ceremonial item that holds the attention of both collectors and scholars are the draço Vodou—the sacred standards of Haitian Vodou.10

**Vodou Flags in Ceremonies**

For vexillologists, the most interesting aspect of Vodou ceremonies is the incorporation of flags as ceremonial objects. There are other religions in which flags are used—for example, in Tibetan Buddhism strings of flags inscribed with prayers are strung up so that the wind will distribute blessings into the
environment. In Haitian Vodou the flags are actually ritual objects which have been sanctified to transform them into sacred standards imbued with spiritual power. Called *drapo* sèvis, the flags play an important role in the ceremonies and function as invitations and signals to attract the *lwa*. Most Vodou societies keep at least two flags devoted to the spirits they serve. When not in use, the flags are furled and leaned against an altar so that they can recharge their spiritual energy.11

In his 1959 study of Vodou, Alfred Métraux described how the flags are used in Vodou ceremonies. He also detailed how the movements of the *laplas* and *kò-drapo* maneuver around the *peristil*:

The flags are kept in the sanctuary, along with other objects used in worship. They are brought out at the beginning of a ceremony or when a ‘great *loa*’ [*Lwa*] possesses one of the faithful. Also, important visitors are entitled to the honour of walking beneath two crossed flags. When the moment comes to fetch these flags, the flag party, which consists of two *hunsi* [*ouns]*, goes into the sanctuary escorted by the *la-place* [*laplas*] waving his sword. They come out backwards and then literally charge into the *peristyle* [*peristil*] behind their guide who is now whirling his sword. The choir of *hunsi* [*ouns*] intones a hymn to Sogbo, protector of flags. The trio manoeuvres and from the four cardinal points salutes the *poteau mitan* [*poto mitan*], the drums, the dignitaries of the society and finally any distinguished guests, each according to his rank. The *la-place* [*laplas*] and the standard-bearers prostrate themselves in turn before them. These show their respect by kissing the guard of the sabre, the staff of the flag, and make the *la-place* [*laplas*] and the standard-bearers pirouette. The return of the standards is accomplished in a remarkable rite: the two *hunsi* [*ouns*], still proceeded by the *la-place* [*laplas*] pointing his sabre before him, run around the *poteau mitan* [*poto mitan*], often making quick changes of direction. This musical-ride goes on till the *la-place* [*laplas*] leads them off towards the sanctuary door through which, having first recoiled from it three times, they pass at the double.12

Patrick Polk also observed a ceremony and detailed how the flags are used in the ceremonies:

When called for during rituals, *drapo* are retrieved from one of the oungan’s shrine rooms by the Vodou society’s (sosyete) swordmaster (*laplas*) and two or three female initiates who serve as the flag-bearers (*kò-drapo*) for the sosyete. The members of the colour guard carefully unfurl the *drapo* and then charge back into the main chamber (*peristil*) of the *ounfò*, where they perform intricate manoeuvres with great pomp and circumstance. Sabre in hand, the *laplas* marches between the flags and directs the lively movements of the *kò-drapo*, thus creating one of the most dazzling spectacles in Vodou. Turning and wheeling with synchronized precision, they first salute the drums, the *poto mitan*, and the four corners of the peristil.

They then salute all the dignitaries of sosyete, who salute them in return. Once the flags have been introduced and leading members of the congregation properly recognized, the *laplas* and *kò-drapo* return the flags to the shrine from whence they came.13

Another account, from Susan Elizabeth Tselos, summarizes the role of the flags from the point at which they enter the *peristil* to the point in the ceremony where the *lwa* has taken possession of the *oungan*. The entry of the flags occurs in mid-ceremony amid “a cacophony of singing, hand-clapping, and drumming…”

...As they come from the altar room, the two *hounsis* [*ouns*] are wrapped in the breathtakingly beautiful *drapo*. They enter the ceremonial area with the drapo standards clutched in their right hands.

The arrival of the *drapo* into the *peristyle* [*peristil*] (temple) is an essential mediation between the worlds of spirits and mortals. The brilliant, shimmering beauty of the drapo reinforces the symbols created in the *veve*, and their arrival indicates that an appearance by the desired *lwa* is imminent.

The trio proceeds to the four cardinal points at the edges of the *peristyle* [*peristil*]. The La Place [*laplas*] follows them, pitcher of water in one hand, candles in the other. Here they perform more ritual salutations which are concluded by kneeling and kissing the ground three times.

The trio charges back to the *poteau mitan* [*poto mitan*], and circles it in a mock battle of flag waving and sword flashing. The salutations are repeated, and they quickly move on to the drums, and then approach the guests. As they do so, they join the tips of the flag standards and present them to the dignitaries in a sign of respect. The dignitaries return the respect by kissing the guard of the machete and the staff of the drapo.

After this mutual recognition, the trio retreats and circles the *poteau mitan* [*poto mitan*] once again with numerous changes in direction. Finally, the two *hounsis* [*ouns*] lower the drapo, roll them loosely around the standards and lean them against the *poteau mitan* [*poto mitan*] for the duration of the ceremony.

Within the frenzy of the *drapo* presentation, the *lwa* arrives and takes possession of the *oungan’s* body. By this time the *veve*, which was so carefully drawn on the ground of the *peristyle* [*peristil*] is obliterated by the feet of the dancing iniciates. The spirit has arrived, the salutations have been a success.14
a protective manner. A number of observers emphasize the ceremonial “charging” of the laplas and kò-drapo as if they were performing a rite of mock combat. The most important role of the drapo Vodou in the ceremony is that they serve as a signal to the Lwa, inviting them to take possession of the oungan and interact with the congregation.\(^{15}\)

Polk explains that a typical Vodou society will possess at least two drapo Vodou, but sometimes there will be additional flags used in the temple. The banners are key ritual items for many Vodou ceremonies including the rites of initiation, invocation of the Luca, and that of pilgrimage. In his conversations with various Vodou priests, Polk asked which Luca should have flags. The most important, from the perspective of flag use, are Ogou and Danbala. Other Luca which will typically have their own service flags are Ezili Freda, Gede, Loko, and Ayizan. In keeping with the philosophy of balanse (balancing spiritual forces), the flags used in a ceremony should represent Luca of opposite characteristics—thus the “hot” Luca, Ogou, is paired with the “cool” Luca, Danbala. This concept of balance means that the most common flag ceremony is the sèvis drapo de—a ritual in which 2 flags are used. While the Ogou-Danbala pairing is probably the most common, sometimes Ogou’s banner is paired with that of other “cool” Luca such as Ezili Freda or Agwe. It should be noted that Ogou enjoys a special status for Haitians which makes his drapo especially important in Haitian Vodou. As Polk explains, “Ogou is the Luca most closely associated with the Haitian revolution and struggle for independence. Therefore, he is generally viewed as the spiritual leader of the nation and a principle symbol of freedom and the military power which assured it.”\(^{16}\)

While the 2-flag ceremony is the most common, there are also times when congregations will use 3 flags in their rituals (known as sèvis drapo twa). When a third flag is used, it will often be that of a Gede Luca such as Bawon Samdi. The Gede family are seen as mediating forces, so they help to achieve balance between the “hot” and “cold” Luca. Another instance when a third flag might be used is for ceremonies dedicated to Ezili Freda (sèvis Ezil). In these ceremonies, her drapo will be presented with those of Ogou and Danbala. Drapo Vodou are often the most expensive ritual items used by a Vodou society. Perhaps for this reason it has become quite common to have one flag that not only represents Danbala, but also serves as the drapo for other like-minded Luca. Polk cites combined banners for Danbala and Ezili Freda, and others that serve three Luca (Danbala, Ezili Freda, and Agwe) as examples of this type of design. These combined flags will have a mix of symbolism so that a drapo for Ezili Freda might include not just her symbols, but also the snakes that everyone will recognize as representing Danbala. And, likewise, a flag for Danbala may also have the outline of a heart that would bring Ezili Freda to mind. Before moving into a more detailed description of these design elements, it is first necessary to examine the role of flags, both in Haitian culture and in the religion of Vodou. This background will offer some interesting clues to the overall meaning of drapo Vodou in the symbolism of Vodou.\(^{17}\)

**Flags in the Culture of Haiti and Vodou**

As with many religious topics, there is an origin story that explains the source of the first flags. Since it is important to examine religious issues from the point of view of believers this story should not just be discounted as “myth” or “folklore,” but rather should be included in the overall discussion of the origins of drapo Vodou. In her work with Vodou flag maker Clotaire Bazeil, Anna Wexler recorded the following story of how the Luca came to use flags:

“Everything I’m going to tell you, it’s a history. You must go to the beginning to get to the flags... Manbo Ayizan is the great queen of Vodou—she was the first to present Vodou. All the Luca lived with her but they were not yet enlightened. They didn’t know who they were, what they were supposed to do. It was long, long ago. They all lived in Manbo Ayizan’s house because she was the most powerful, the mother of all the oungan who was responsible for watching over everyone in the initiation chamber and knew all the rules for serving the spirits. She initiated people, she treated people, she had what was needed to crush leaves, to take care of people. Then Papa Loko who is responsible for the aisan began to revolt. Papa Danbala, he also left Manbo Ayizan’s house and stayed in a palm tree where he turned into a snake. Agwe Tawoyo turned into a fish, he commands the sea. Ezili Freda was in the same group. She came to live in the sea, she is a woman who loves jewelry, perfume. Kouzen himself when he lived in Manbo Ayizan’s house he used to clean tables; Zaka he used to work in the fields. He left, too, he tends his own crops now, he works the fields. Each Luca who revolted became responsible for something, symbolized something. They filed out of Manbo Ayizan’s house one by one. Then Papa Sobo said, “Good, I am going to make a flag. He took a piece of wood, he put a little cloth on it, he said, “Good, there is going to be a flag for signaling all the Luca.” Now he’s the one responsible for the flag, the master of the flag. He made one white flag, one red flag... peace, victory... There was a young man who also lived with Manbo Ayizan. Sobo left with the young man and then told him, “You are the laplas of the house now.” He left with the young person, the laplas, and then Papa Sobo took the flag, each took their place. He left with Bade too, his younger brother, they all left together with the flag. The flag came to be called Sobo and Bade.\(^{18}\)

Anthropologists often collect stories like this, as they represent how people explain things within their own cultural context. Flag origin stories, of course, are not unique to Haiti.
Other countries have stories that tie their national flag to a supernatural occurrence, a famous battle, or a particular flag maker. In Haiti there is a dramatic story about how revolutionary leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines removed the white stripe from a French flag to form the red and blue Haitian bicolor. This story has Vodou roots as it is often said that the event happened under a repoza (a tree which houses a spirit) near an ounfò. In addition, there are two interpretations of the red and blue colors in the Haitian flag. One version indicates that blue represents the Black population of Haiti, while red stands for the Mulattos. The other explains the colors within a Vodou context. According to this explanation, the colors are “based on the African derived color code for the two Lwa of Haitian Vodou that were seen as essential to the successful waging of the war against the Napoleonic armies of France. The blue would stand for the deity Ezili Dantò, the all-suffering mother of the Haitian pantheon; the red for the Dahomean and Yoruban deity of war and metallurgy, Ogou Feray.” It has also been suggested that Dessalines was possessed by Ogou when he created the national flag. All of these aspects help to explain the bonds between the Haitian people, their national religion, and their flag.19

Figure 1. Painting portraying the creation of the Haitian flag during the revolution. To the left of the tree, Jean-Jacques Dessalines uses his sword to remove the white stripe from a French tricolor. Notice that he wears a red uniform coat—the color preferred by Ogou. At right, Catherine Flon sews the remaining stripes together to create the new Haitian bicolor. (Artist: Madsen Mompremier, Source: Fowler Museum at UCLA, Photograph by Don Cole, FMCH X95.22.5)
Both Polk and Wexler have delved into not just the spiritual origin of Vodou flags, but also into the historical circumstances that have influenced the role that flags now play in Haitian life and in the practice of Vodou in that country. These circumstances are related to the history of the European colonization of Africa, the perception of European power by various African cultures, and the enslavement of Africans and subsequent transplantation and mixing of their cultures in the New World. A bit of this story will be relayed here, but for more detail the reader is encouraged to refer to the work that has already been done in this area.20

There are a number of vexillological threads that all converged to form the unique flag culture of Haiti and Haitian Vodou. Most scholars have focused on the influence of European colonizers who eventually gained control of many regions in Africa. These Europeans brought with them military flags and rituals, many of which seem to have influenced drapo Vodou. For example, the generally square proportions, flag dimensions, and fringed edges of traditional drapo sèvis are very similar to ceremonial banners that would have been used by French troops in their colonies. Polk has also pointed out that French military banners were traditionally blessed before they were presented to the regiments, and that they were stored in churches when not in use—practices that seem to have been transferred directly to the protocol associated with Vodou flags. When tracing the cultural transfer of flags from a military context to their adoption as important ritual objects, it is necessary to consider the symbolic meaning of flags at the point when the transfer occurred. These standards and the ceremonies associated with them were used as physical reminders to the colonized people of the might of the colonial authorities. In essence they became talismans of power in the eyes of some indigenous Africans.21

Some African peoples incorporated flags and flag usage into their own cultures to reassert their own sense of power and control. Such flag usage has been documented among the Fon people of Danhomé (now Benin), the Fante people of Ghana, the Ibibio of southeast Nigeria, and others. These cultures did not just adopt European flags. Instead, they created their own unique Africanized interpretations of flags and banners. Patrick Polk notes that, “By the 1600s a wide range of flags were in use throughout the coastal regions and figured prominently in the military rituals of major African states. Ceremonial flag traditions flourished during the colonial occupation of Africa and many have continued into the postcolonial era. The flags serve as a fundamental means of expressing relationships of power and authority and, as such, are integral components within the recognition and maintenance of political, social, and spiritual leadership.” Other scholars have been quick to point out that the introduction of flags to these various regions of Africa may possibly predate the era of European colonization. Islamic peoples are known to have been active in trade with these regions of Africa as early as 900 C.E., and they possibly could have brought their banners with them. European and Islamic flag usage became Africanized and their traditions intermingled with the variety of cultural beliefs and practices of the peoples of Africa. Once enslaved and forcibly mixed with each other, the Africans blended their traditions together to form the unique culture of Haiti. Just as the Lwa and Saints became syncretized, it can also be said that flags and flag culture were as well. And, just as the peoples of Africa asserted their own power through the use of flags, the people of Haiti developed their own traditions regarding flags.22

Flag Making and Design

Vodou flags (especially drapo sèvis) are traditionally handmade under the direction of a Vodou priest. Anna Wexler has worked to document the flag-making process. For her Ph.D. dissertation, she worked with an oungan named Clotaire Bazile, who is known for both his work with service flags and flags for the art market. Wexler interviewed Bazile and assisted him in the creation of a flag. A typical drapo Vodou used in services measures about 40 x 40 inches (91.4 x 91.4 cm). Of course, there are variations from flag maker to flag maker. To begin making a flag a piece of fine cloth, such as satin, is stretched across and secured to a wooden frame along with a stiffer backing fabric. The oungan then outlines the design for the flag onto the fabric. Bazile explains that “When I draw a flag, it’s the spirits who direct me. They tell me to do it.” He also described how the Lwa direct the design process. “It is the Lwa who guide me to change the work; for example, a Lwa says, ‘You shouldn’t use that design today—don’t use the squares divided into eight triangles (for the border)—just do it that way—divide them into two triangles, cut it like that, choose two colors’—it’s another type of design.”23

This type of Lwa-directed creation results in one of the most unique aspects of Vodou flags, from the point of view of a vexillologist—each drapo Vodou is a one-of-a-kind creation and has its own unique design. There is no one prescribed way to make a flag for a particular Lwa. However, to be an effective symbol there has to be some sort of standardization. Elements of symbolism are the key to understanding which Lwa is connected to which drapo. Designs can incorporate such diverse elements as a vèvè (a ritual drawing), the image of a saint or Lwa, and/or one or more of the Lwa’s symbols. For example, a drapo for Ogou may simply depict his vèvè—a sword framed by two banners. Often flags for Ogou/Sen Jak
have an image of St. James Major (patron saint of Spain) as the central emblem. According to tradition, this saint miraculously appeared to fight with the Christian army at the Battle of Clavijo—a legendary battle related to the expulsion of the Muslims from Spain. On Vodou flags he is frequently shown in this role as a “Moor-slayer”. Sometimes the imagery is achieved by incorporating an actual chromolithograph (a colorful paper image) of the Saint into the flag. In other cases, the flag emblem is an embroidered outline traced from a chromolithograph. The images are then embellished with sequins and/or beads to complete the decoration of the flag. And then there are the basic symbols of Ogou which also might be used on the flags—a machete, a sword driven into the earth, a red scarf, and flags. Finally, there is a color palette associated with each Lwa and group of Lwa. In the case of Ogou and his family of Lwa the color of choice is red, so that this will be the dominant color on his flags. In addition, it is not uncommon for the name of the Lwa to be incorporated into the design, written either in Haitian Creole (Kreyòl Ayisyen) or in French.24

As previously mentioned, vèvè are a common design element on drapo Vodou. The vèvè that are created at the beginning of a Vodou ceremony are outlines “traced” onto the ounfò floor by the oungan. These drawings are produced using corn meal, flour, or other powdered materials. In the process the priest deftly manipulates the material through his fingers to create straight lines, curves, and details as required by ritual. The purpose of the vèvè is to serve as an initial invitation to the Lwa and each is meant for a specific one. Karen McCarthy Brown, in her dissertation, describes the importance of the vèvè in the ceremony: “the execution of one of these drawings in the ritual context is a direct summons to a particular god [Lwa] to ascend from the watery world of Gînê, the home of the gods beneath the earth and possess one of his worshippers so that they all can talk with him, tell him their problems, procure his advice and blessing.” However, since the drawings are made of powder they are only temporary beacons. As the ceremony progresses the images on the floor are obliterated by the dancing feet of the congregation. Museum curator Delores Yonker notes that “designs on the flags lift these ground drawings into the air and energize them with moving, reflective surfaces and dynamic zig-zag and pinwheel borders.”25

Some drawings of a vèvè for a particular Lwa will be very elaborate, while others will seem to be just the basic elements. How a design is traced is passed down from one oungan to another priest that he is training. The design is dictated by the Lwa, rather than being open to the artistic whims of the priest. This is very similar to the way that icons as said to be painted in Orthodox Christianity—they are divinely directed rather than being open to artistic interpretation. As a result
of the decentralization of Vodou and how the knowledge is shared, it is possible to find vèvè for the same Lwa that look slightly different. However, there will be basic elements for each Lwa that should be included in their symbols. Agwe will always have a boat, the vèvè for Bawon Samdi will always have a cross from a cemetery, and a sword with banners will always represent Ogou. Imagery in vèvè combine symbolic elements from Africa and Europe, as well as some derived from Native American traditions and Free Masonry. According to Karen McCarthy Brown, a Voudou priest will typically know how to make 25-35 different vèvè. When drawn onto the floor of the peristil the completed designs will be nearly 3-feet square in size. While each oungan has their own style of creating vèvè, Brown suggests that there are certain constants—the center axis (if there is one in the vèvè) is drawn first, moving from the poto mitan outward towards the priest’s feet. The last elements added are the puè, which Brown describes as “figurative elements that have an iconographic relationship to the particular Lwa in whose [vèvè] they appear.” As he works his way around the poto mitan the oungan will create a vèvè for several different Lwa involved in the ceremony. 

Understanding all the symbolism of a vèvè requires knowledge of the Lwa for whom it is a beacon. In her dissertation, Brown describes how Ayizan “uses the power that comes from below (the power of purity) against the knowledge that comes from above (the knowledge of how to harness and use the powers of the gods for destructive purposes).” She then explains that this dualism is visible in Ayizan’s vèvè—“The V that is open to the forces below thrusts up to the top of the drawing; that which is open to the forces above is grounded firmly at the bottom.” In contrast to the somewhat abstract design of the vèvè for Ayizan, others draw upon more concrete imagery. For example, the vèvè for Gran Bwa portrays the Lwa himself, along with materials from his realm of influence. Brown notes that “the vèvè tells us that Gran Bois (Bwa) has to do with forests and leaves and that he is masculine, and so forth.” These are just two examples of the rich use of symbolism in the ritual drawings of Vodou that are sometimes found on the flags. Common vèvè-based imagery found on drapo Vodou include Agwe’s boat, Bawon Samdi’s cross, Ezili Freda’s checkered heart pierced with a dagger, the flags and sword of Ogou, the crossroads for Kafou, and the palm tree and snakes that represent Danbala and Ayida Wèdo.  

In addition to the vèvè, another common element on Voudou flags are images of the Luca. On some flags the image will be a popular depiction of the Luca. For example, flags for Bawon Samdi often show this Luca wearing a hat and standing near a cemetery cross. Drapo for Lasirèn depict her in her popular form as a mermaid. Most flags for Bosou show him in the form of a bull. Flags for Gran Bwa typically show the Luca as the half-man half-tree figure from his vèvè. It is also quite common to find flags for the Marasa that feature the sacred twins or three children. In the aforementioned cases the image is usually just drawn onto the flag and decorated with beads or sequins. Another type of drapo Vodou with images of the Luca are those where the image depicted on the flag is of the Saint with whom the Luca is syncretized. Often these flags incorporate an image from a chromolithograph—a multicolor printed picture of a Catholic saint. The chromolithographs which are sometimes used on flags became readily available in Haiti starting in the mid-19th century. They are now quite common in the practice of Vodou and are found on alters and elsewhere in the ounfò, including on drapo Vodou. Some flag makers incorporate the image of the Luca/Saint by tracing the image from the chromolithograph onto the flag and then outlining it with sequins and beads. Often, though, an actual chromolithograph is incorporated into the flag itself. The face is usually covered over with a protective clear plastic film and then the rest of the image is embellished with sequins. Flags with chromolithograph-inspired images are most common for Ogou in his form as St. James Major, Danbala in his form as St. Patrick or Moses, and Ezili Freda in her form as the Madonna. 

Early flag makers relied on the use of brightly colored fabrics such as satins, brocades, taffetas, and velvet to bring color to their flags. On these early flags beads and sequins were applied mainly to the outlines of the vèvè and other symbols. In addition, sequins were sometimes applied sparingly to the field to make the flag reflective and more eye-catching. As one Vodou practitioner explained, “The spirits like shiny surfaces.” This style of sequin distribution across the field is known as simen grenn (scattered seeds). It is more typical of how drapo sèvis were made in the past and is often referred to as “old style” or “traditional” by flag makers who still use it. Eventually when sequins became more readily available in Haiti they were used more and more on the flags. In most workshops (called atilye) the oungan draws out the basic design of the flag and then the
Figures 6-7. Above: Vèvè-inspired flags for Gran Bwa (top) and Ezili Freda (bottom). (Photos by the author, flags courtesy of Claudine Michel).

Figures 8-10. Above: Flags with Lwa images for Gran Bwa (top left), Lasirèn (top right), and Bosou (bottom). The flag for Bosou was damaged in the 2010 earthquake. (Photos by the author, flags courtesy of Claudine Michel)

Figure 11. Right: Flag for Ezili Freda incorporating a chromolithograph of the Mater Dolorosa. Only the head and one hand of the original image can be seen on the flag. The remainder has been covered with sequins and beads. (Artist: Yves Telemak, Source: Fowler Museum at UCLA, Photograph by Denis Nervig, FMCH X94.6.8)
work of filling in the details by sewing on the sequins one-by-one is completed by carefully-trained assistants. Bazile is very particular about how the sequins are placed—they must overlap each other, all going in the same direction. Other flag makers apply their decorations differently. Tina Girouard documented the traditional 5-step technique for securing sequins to the flags: “Needles guide the thread up through the cloth, through the sequin, through the glass bead which will hold it in place, then back down through the sequin to the cloth. A typical work requires from 18–20,000 sequins (usually 8 mm) to be sewn, a feat accomplished in about ten days.” On drapo made for the art market, the flag makers typically fill in the entire surface of the flag with sequins.29
Another design element found on drapo Vodou is the use of geometric shapes in contrasting colors. Sometimes the entire field of the flag will be done in a checker-board pattern or will have a design of alternating triangles behind the main emblem. On other drapo the geometric designs are found around the borders of the flag. It is difficult to accurately determine when different design elements were first incorporated into Vodou flags because the earliest flags that have survived the tropical climate of Haiti and the occasion “anti-Vodou” campaigns carried out by the government only date back to the 1930s. Some scholars suggest that the geometric patterns found in the flags are reminiscent of the lozenge (diamond) and fusilly (elongated diamond) designs associated with European military banners. Of course, there are also African cultures that produced their own geometrically-patterned cloth so these elements could have African, as well as European, roots. Susan Tselos suggests that the types of patterns associated with drapo Vodou today only became popular around the time of the 1960s when sequins became more readily available to the flag makers. Nowadays, the patterns are quite common and even expected by those who collect the flags as objets d’art. After all the sequins and beads have been applied, a colorful backing fabric is added to the reverse side of the flag, as well as a border. Most drapo sèvis are also fringed, a practice that was very likely adopted from the flag traditions of military regiments. Flags created for the art market are typically unfringed and rely on the sequins for their flash and color.30

The colors used in Vodou flags vary greatly. Dominant colors on a flag will usually draw upon the favorite colors of the Lwa for whom the flag was designed, as well as the colors of that Lwa’s family or group. For example, since Danbala prefers the color white and Ayida Wèdo prefers blue and white, a flag for these Lwa would use these as the principal colors. Likewise, a flag for Papa Legba would use red and white, the colors favored by that Lwa. Nancheon colors include white for the Rada, red for the Petro, and black and purple for the Ghede. Other colors will be liberally used by the flag maker, so that any given Vodou flag can be quite colorful.31

Figures 16-17. Two art flags for the Ghede which demonstrate the use of the nanchon colors—purple and black. (Photos by the author, flags courtesy of Claudine Michel)
Sacralization of the Flags

In her research Anna Wexler asked one flag maker about the process through which *drapo Vodou* are sanctified and therefore transformed from colorful flags into sacred objects. She reports that “According to flag maker Edgar Jean-Louis, unbaptized flags *pa gen nanm* (don’t have soul, energy), unlike consecrated *drapo* which can acquire *plis nanm* (more soul), *fòs* (force) and *kounaj* (courage) by participating in ceremonies.” Wexler notes that Jean-Louis interchangeably described the process of sanctification as both “baptism” and “kanzo”—a term used for the second level of Vodou initiation. Perhaps this is because, like initiates, the flags must be prepared for their roles in formal Vodou ceremonies.

In the version of this ceremony he described, a mixture of oil and fèy (leaves) are prepared in a pot. As a mixture burns and the flames leap up, the flag is passed through them. On the final day of the three day ritual, lasting from Friday until Sunday, a dance is held to celebrate and formally present the flag to the *Lwa* for whom it is intended.32

Wexler also reports another version of this transformative process described to her by flag makers Monique and Pollone Colin.

In their version, the flag is sequestered in the *djèvo* (initiation chamber) for up to eight days and made to *kouche* or lie down, like human candidates, on the sign of the *Lwa* to whom it is dedicated. There it rests on a special bed surrounded by a white curtain until ‘ou leve li’ (you get it up) and then ‘ou resevwa *drapo* a’ (you receive the flag) with a meal consisting of chicken killed for the occasion, rice, plantains, yams, spaghetti, and kola which is placed beside the flag for the *Lwa* within it to consume. After the meal, the flag is put to bed again and brought out of the *djèvo* the following day ready to assume its public ritual functions.33

To those who do not practice Vodou these accounts might sound very strange. Again, it is important to pause and adopt a neutral point of view. World cultures and religions abound with examples of ceremonies through which inanimate objects are blessed or sanctified to give them new meaning. Objects used in the rituals of many religions are blessed to transform them into sacred objects. For example, in Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, and other Christian faiths the rite of transubstantiation is believed to transform bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. Medallions can be blessed as a means to protect the wearer or provide spiritual support. Physical locations are also consecrated so that a place of worship or a cemetery is transformed into “holy ground.” All of these practices reinforce that these elements in Vodou are more rooted in mainstream religious practice than they initially appear to be. Again, much of the misunderstanding of Vodou as a religion is probably the result of the decades of negative stereotyping of the faith by non-believers.34

There are also examples of this sort of ritual transformation from secular life. For example, in the rituals associated with launching ships, they are christened by breaking a bottle of champagne over the bow and speaking the name of the ship aloud. This process ritualistically “baptizes” the vessel and prepares it for the transition from its “birthplace” in the shipyard to its new marine environment. Vexillologists should also be familiar with numerous types of flag rituals that are practiced in various cultures. For example, it is not uncommon for soldiers to carry small versions of their national flags as totems or good-luck charms. In Japanese culture it has been a wide-spread practice, especially during World War II, for friends and families to present soldiers with *hinomaru yosegaki*—signed “good luck” flags—before their deployment. These flags frequently carried stamped impressions from temple seals, adding a spiritual element to the cloth. Military rituals around the world also demonstrate the many ways in which flags are revered, honored, and used to salute higher authority. Flags are awarded combat ribbons, they are saluted, they are captured, they are kissed, they are dipped in deference to monarchs, they are retired through elaborate ceremonies, they are preserved as national relics, etc. Once the flag rituals of Vodou are considered within the broader context of these practices they do not seem so strange. It is not difficult to understand how Vodou practitioners can believe that the flags, once baptized and transformed into ritual objects, can have acquired spiritual power of their own.

As has been previously discussed, there are many aspects of the topic of *drapo Vodou* which are of interest to vexillologists. First, the history of flag usage in Europe, Africa, and Haiti has influenced the usage of flags in Haitian Vodou. Second, the designs of the banners present a special challenge to those who study flags. They are quite different than the other groups of flags with which we are familiar—there are no design specifications or standards which govern the creation of these flags. Each *drapo* is a unique work of art. This aspect of Vodou flags forces us to delve more into the underlying colors and symbolism for the *Lwa* in order to “read” the message sent by each flag. Finally, there is the sacred nature of the flags. Again, unlike most flags that we study *drapo Vodou* are considered to be more than just flags—they are sacred items which are believed to be imbued with spiritual power. Each of these aspects makes Vodou flags an area worthy of study by vexillologists.
Flags as Art

The story of drapo Vodou does not end with their ceremonial use, however. There is one final twist that makes this category of flags even more interesting. At some point they became recognized not just as ritual objects, but also as works of art. This transformation, like the syncretism of symbols that changed flags into sacred standards, was rooted in the experience of cross-cultural interaction. Interest in Vodou flags as art objects is a relatively new phenomenon which began in the 1950s and 1960s. At this time collectors of “primitive art” began to take an interest in the ceremonial objects used in Vodou ceremonies. On their trips to Haiti they would visit Vodou priests and arrange to acquire objects, even asking if they could buy the drapo used in the temples. Eventually, the

Figures 18-21. Four art flags for Lasirèn showing a variety of designs. She is a popular subject on drapo made for the art market. (Photos by the author, flags courtesy of Claudine Michel).
makers of drapo Vodou found that by making smaller and more artistic flags specifically for sale to art collectors, they could develop a source of income to fund their Vodou societies. Many Haitian flag makers have now added the title “artist” to their status as oungan. In addition, the flags have gained more status as art objects as museums have collected them and developed exhibits focusing on Haitian art in general, the arts of Vodou, and drapo Vodou specifically.36

Stylistically, art flags can be quite different from those produced for temple use. Makers of art flags usually omit the fringe, opting for a treatment around the edge of the flag that is more typical of the binding on a blanket. Since these flags are meant to be displayed as art and not secured to a staff, they also omit the ties at the hoist of the flag. While ceremonial flags are typically made in standard sizes, the size of art flags varies dramatically depending upon the flag maker and the customer for whom the flag is intended. Larger flags are more expensive, so they can take longer to sell. Smaller flags are easier to make, but bring in lower prices. For this reason, a flag maker might produce flags that range in size from 12 x 12 inches to 40 x 80 inches. It is also not unusual for flag artists to sign their work by incorporating either with their initials or their name into the design (usually at the bottom of the flag). In addition, art flags are not baptized so that they do not have the same sacred status as service flags.37

In the early days when Vodou flags were made for the art market, they were still made by an oungan and his assistants using traditional designs which echoed the look of drapo sevis. As the demand for drapo Vodou increased and oungan also gained the title of “artist,” they began to exercise more creativity when making flags. This stylistic experimentation increased as Haitian painters and other artists, who were not practicing Vodou priests, began to produce flags. Today, one can find a variety of flag designs for sale as art. Most flags still represent and “are made for” a particular Lwa, but the overall designs...
emphasize aesthetics and market demand. In other cases flag artists have strayed from the look of service flags completely so that their *drapo Vodou* are more like fabric posters or paintings. Themes on these flags can range from political slogans and images to more artistic portrayals of life in Haiti. Regardless of the designs, these flags share a common lineage based upon the traditional use of flags in Vodou ceremonies, the importance of flags in Haitian life, and the many influences that converged and evolved into the tradition of *drapo Vodou*. Sales of Vodou flags to art collectors, museums, and tourists also serve as a valuable source of income for Vodou societies to fund their congregations. Their importance is not just as folk art, but also as a way to keep this tradition alive and ensure that it will be passed down from generation to generation. In this way the people of Haiti have developed their own unique style of flags which is both highly symbolic and very colorful.  

### Conclusion

This discussion is just a brief introduction to Vodou flags intended to expose vexillologists to this rich and diverse category of flags. While written as a review article to highlight work that has already been conducted by anthropologists, folklorists, and art historians, it is also meant to challenge vexillologists to expand their studies of flags. On first glance a *drapo Vodou* produced for the art market may be seen as more of a fabric assemblage than a flag. But on closer examination of the cultural contexts from within this tradition arose, it becomes obvious that the people who make them intend them to be seen as flags. Once the vexillologist understands this context it becomes possible to see how they fit into the broader scope of world flag culture.

There are many areas in which vexillologists can expand upon and contribute to the body of knowledge about *drapo Vodou*. With our understanding and appreciation of the meanings behind colors and symbols, we can conduct detailed symbolic analyses of this body of flags. We could do this by comparing and contrasting a variety of flags for one specific *Lwa*, or by doing this for all the *Lwa* in a particular nation. What types of commonalities do we find and what do they tell us about this category of flags?

In addition, there are other African American religious traditions such as Santería where flags are used in ceremonial contexts. Perhaps a cross-cultural examination of flag use in both Vodou and Santería could produce more information about the similarities and differences between these religions. The possibilities for research are numerous and can result in new information about the roles of flags in human societies that will be not just of interest to vexillologists, but also to scholars of anthropology, political science, history, art history, religious studies, and other fields.

### Appendix: Glossary of Terms

**Ason:** A ceremonial rattle used in Vodou ceremonies. Also spelled asson.

**Atilye:** A workshop or studio where Vodou flags are made. Also used to describe those who assist the flag maker. Also spelled atelye.

**Ayisyen:** Haitian.

**Ayiti:** Haiti.

**Balanse:** To balance or create equilibrium among spiritual forces. This concept is often demonstrated by pairing the flags of “hot spirits” with those of “cool” spirits.

**Bondye:** God; Refers to the Supreme Being in Vodou, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Likely derived from the French *Bon Dieu*, meaning “Good Lord.”

**Cho:** Hot; Used to describe *Lwa* whose personalities are hot and abrasive.

**Chromolithograph:** A brightly-colored printed image of a Catholic saint. These are sometimes incorporated into a flag or used as models for portrayals of the *Lwa* on drapo.

**Chwal:** A horse; used to refer to servitor who serves as a host for the possession of a *Lwa*. For this reason, the *Lwa* are sometimes called “Divine Horsemen.”

**Djèvo:** A sanctuary or treatment room within an *ounfò* dedicated to a specific *Lwa* or group of *Lwa*. Also used as an initiation chamber. This is where *drapo Vodou* are kept when they are not being used for ceremonies.

**Drapo:** Flag. Also written *drapò*.

**Drapo sèvis:** A flag that is actually used in Vodou ceremonies (not applied to flags made for the art market only). Service flags typically have fringe around the edges and ties at the hoist.

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Figure 25. Art flag for Ezili Freda. (Photo by the author, flag in the collection of the author)
Drapo Vodou: Vodou flag. Refers to both flags used in Vodou services and to flags made for the art market. Often shortened to “drapo.”

Fwet: Cool; Used to describe Lwa who are cool or soothing by nature.

Giné: Refers to Africa or the underwater home where the Lwa and the dead reside. Often used synonymously with Ginèn.

Ginèn: West Africa. Often used synonymously with Ginè.

Kafou: An intersection or crossroads. Also spelled kalfoou.

Kanzo: The second level of Vodou initiation. Also used to describe the baptism or sanctification of flags.

Kô-drapo: The flag corps or color guard that carries a Vodou society’s flags during ceremonies. This group includes the laplas (swordmaster) and the pot drapo (flagbearers).

Kreyòl: Creole; The language of Haiti, derived from French.

Laplàs: The swordmaster who leads the kô-drapo during the presentation of Vodou flags. Also spelled La Place. The laplas is usually male.

Lwa: A spirit or deity of Vodou. Used in both the singular and plural. Also spelled Loa.

Manbo: A Vodou priest (female). Also spelled mambo.

Nanchons: Nation or group of Lwa. Examples of nanchons include Rada, Nago, Djoba, Petwo (also written Petro), Kongo, Ibo, and Gède.

Ounfò: A Vodou temple. Also spelled honfour, hounfour, humfo, or hounfò.

Oungan: A Vodou priest (male). Also written houngan or gangan.

Ounsì: A Vodou initiate, a member of a Vodou congregation. Also spelled hounsì.

Pakèt: A packet or bundle. Also spelled paké.

Pakèt kongo: A spiritually-activated bundle.

Peristil: The main chamber in a Vodou temple where ceremonies are held. Also spelled perestil, peristyle, or perystil.

Petwo: The pantheon of “hot” Vodou spirits who are noted for their harsh and abrasive personalities and often malevolent behavior. Also spelled petro.

Pòt drapo: A term that specifically refers to the flagbearers in the kô-drapo. Members of the pòt drapo are typically female.

Poto mitan: The sacred center pole of the peristil (main ceremonial chamber). Most ceremonies occur near this pole and it is believed to be the conduit through which the Lwa ascend into the temple. Also spelled poteau mitan or poteau-mitan.

Pwè: A charm or power object. Also refers to figurative elements that have an iconicographic relationship to the particular Lwa in whose vèvè they appear.

Pwen: Star shapes in a vèvè and on a flag that are used as power points.

Rada: The pantheon of “cool” Vodou spirits who are generally associated with healing and spiritual protection. The Rada are considered to be good-natured and dependable. These spirits are said to originate in Ginèn (West Africa).

Reine drapo: A “flag queen” who is in charge of displaying the flags in the opening of a Vodou ceremony. Also spelled Renn Drapo.

Repozwa: A repository. Also used to describe the tree under which the Haitian flag was created, because it was believed to house a spirit. Also spelled reposwa.

Sen: A Saint or divinity; within the context of Haitian Vodou the Saints are frequently syncretized with a specific Lwa.

Seremoni: Ceremony in Vodou. Also called sévis.

Sèvi Lwa: Serving the Spirits; Another name for Vodou.

Sèvis: A Vodou ceremony or service. Also called a seremoni.

Sèvis drapo de: A ceremony in which two flags are used.

Sèvis drapo twa: A ceremony in which three flags are used.

Sèvité: A practitioner of Vodou; literally, one who serves the Lwa. Also spelled serviteur. Synonym of Vodouisant.

Simen grenn: “Scattered seeds,” refers to the more traditional technique of scattering sequins or beads across the field of a drapo Vodou, rather than covering the entire surface with sequins as is now typically done on art flags.

Sosyete: Society, used to describe the congregation of a Vodou temple.

Syncretism: The process through which Lwa became associated with specific Catholic Saints.

Vèvè: Ritual designs that invoke spirits; these designs are often used as central motifs on Vodou flags. Also written vèvé or veve.

Vodou: The traditional religion of Haiti. Variant spellings are Vodun, Vodoun, Vaudou, Voudoun, Vodu. The spelling Voodoo carries with it many negative connotations.

Vodouisant: A practitioner of Vodou. Also spelled vodouizan. Synonym of sèvité.

Note: Spelling of these terms and the use of accent marks vary from source to source. These differences are the result of some authors using the French spellings and others using variant spellings in Haitian Creole and English. For the purpose of consistency the author has chosen the spellings that seemed most common in recent sources and has used them throughout this paper. Where spellings or italicization in quotations do not match that used in this paper, that used in the original quote has been used. In some cases the author's preferred spellings have been added into the quotes using brackets in order to ease readability for those unfamiliar with Vodou terminology.

Some basic research into the religion of Vodou was an essential first step for this paper. Finding unbiased information can sometimes be difficult. One way to get started is to do some basic reading on the topic. The Wikipedia article on Vodou and a web page from the Haitian Consulate were used as a starting point. Next, I consulted more scholarly sources about the topic. Identifying those sources was a bit tricky, because they needed to be sources that were considered valid by scholars in the field of Haitian studies. Using the bibliographies of works I had found on Vodou flags, I was able to work back to their basic sources of information on Vodou.

Alternative spellings of Vodou include Vodun, Voudoun, Voudou, Vodoun, as well as the spelling commonly used in the United States—voodoo. These many spellings come from a variety of linguistic roots including different African languages, French, Haitian Creole, and southern American English. As Patrick Bellegarde-Smith and Claudine Michel noted in their introduction to a collection of essays on the religion by leading Haitian scholars, “thus far, in French or English, there is no correct way to spell the name of Haiti’s national religion.” Different spellings and pronunciations of the term are the result of the variety of world views which influenced its belief system. While the Haitian Language Academy seems to have settled back to their basic sources of information on Vodou.

For an excellent discussion of the evolution of American prejudices regarding Vodou, see Léanne Hurbon, “American Fantasy and Haitian Vodou,” in Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou: 181-197. This volume also contains a useful glossary of Lwa names and Vodou terminology (see pages 430-433).

Finally, I must confess that I chose to give this paper at the NAVA meeting in New Orleans precisely because of the tourist appeal of Voodoo in that city. There are real practitioners of Haitian Vodou in New Orleans, but there is also a hodgepodge of “Voodoo” culture in the city as well. For a quick run-down on the nature of New Orleans Voodoo and its tourist trappings, see the discussion in Ina J. Fandrich’s article, “Yorùbá Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo.” She discusses the nature of the Historic New Orleans Museum, the tourist trade in Voodoo, and then compares and contrasts Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Vodou. Ina J. Fandrich, “Yorùbá Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Vodou,” Journal of Black Studies 37 no. 5 (May 2007): 775-791.


6 Polk, Haitian Vodou Flags, 9-15.


12 Métraux, Voodoo in Haiti, 160-161.

13 Polk, Haitian Vodou Flags, 15-18.


16 Polk, Haitian Vodou Flags, 15-18; Telos, 62-64.

17 Polk, Haitian Vodou Flags, 15-18.

18 Wexler, “Yon Moso Twal Nan Bwa (A Piece of Cloth on Wood): The Drapo Vodou in Myths of Origin.”

Papa Sobo is of special interest to vexillologists, as he is considered to be the master of the flags. Sobo is associated with thunder and is related to the sky deity of the Fon people. Delores Yonker notes that the thunderous drumming that occurs in the peristil when the flags appear is an allusion to the thunder of Sobo. She notes that “Sobo in Haiti has assumed a military identity and is known for his valor in battle. As soon as the doors to the shrines are flung open he is invoked in song:

Papa Sobo who is in the houmfo,
He asks for the flags!

Delores Yonker, Sequinned Surfaces: Vodoun Flags from Haiti (Northridge, CA: Art Galleries of California State University, Northridge, 1991), [7].


Polk’s essay discusses the similarities in dimensions between drapo Vodou and the flags used by the French during the colonial period, noting that “the dimensions of French colonial standards, ranging from 50-65 cm in height and 50-67 cm in width, most likely provided the model for the measurements of drapo Vodou. In 1804, when Napoleon issued new flags, the dimensions for standards were set at 60 x 60 cm. After 1814, standards were reduced to 55 x 55 cm.” He also points out that “drapo Vodou bear a closer stylistic affinity to regimental colors, particularly those employed by Royalist and Napoleonic-era troops.” In addition, he points out that the background and border motifs seen on many traditional drapo are similar to those used on the regimental standards during the Napoleonic era. Another point of comparison is the staves used with ceremonial flags. Polk notes that the pointed finials clearly resemble the metal pikes used on military flag staves, and that the S-shaped crosspieces that are typically found between the finials and the flags “recall similar devices used for centuries on military flag-staves, pikes, swords, and bayonets.” In contrast, Delores Yonker points out that the S-shaped crossbar could have distinctly African origins. She notes that others have interpreted the S-shape as resembling a ritual pose found on figurines called the “Congo pose”—“left hand at rest or on the hip, right hand gesturing.” Dolores M. Yonker, “Invitations to the Spirits: the Vodun Flags of Haiti,” A Report from the San Francisco Crafts and Folk Art Museum (San Francisco: The Museum, 1985); Polk, “Sacred Banners and the Divine Cavalry Charge,” 337-338.


