ETHNIC FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4491

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VODUN-RADA RITE FOR ERZULIE
recorded in Haiti by Verna Gillis

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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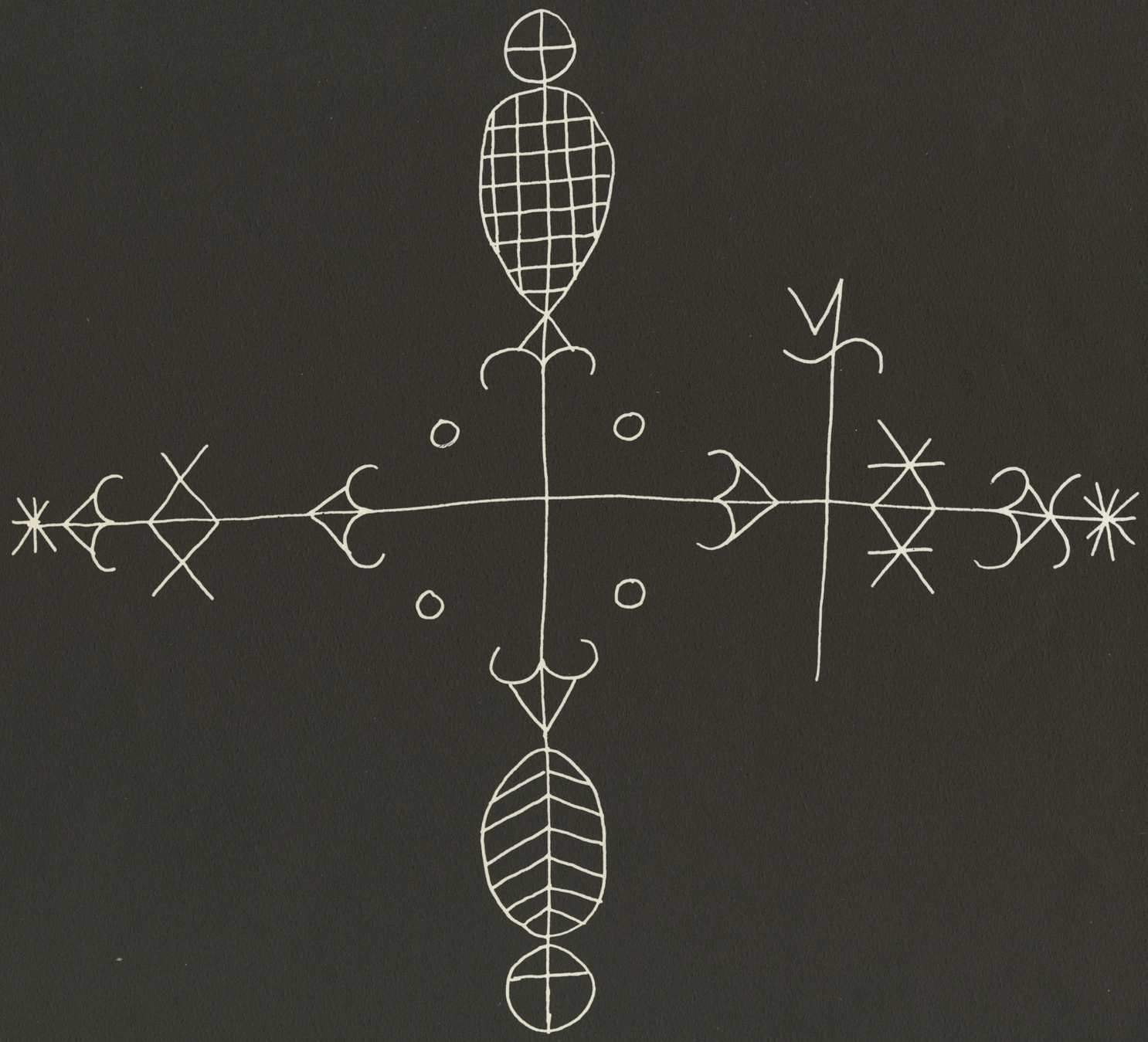

ETHNIC FOLKWAYS Album No. FE 4491
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ETHNIC FOLKWAYS

The Republic of Haiti is situated on one-third of an island lying between Cuba and Puerto Rico in the West Indies, and covers an area of only 10,000 square miles.

Among the earliest inhabitants of Haiti were the Ciboney Indians (c. 451 A.D.), and the Arawak Indians (7th and 8th centuries). In the 15th century, Carib Indians from South America began to populate the island.

"Haiti" was the aboriginal word for "mountainous land." In 1492, when the Spanish conquistadores happened upon the island, they called it Espanola, later anglicized to Hispaniola.

The Haitian part of the island (the remaining two-thirds of which is now the Dominican Republic) was ceded by Spain to France in the Treaty of Ryswick of 1697, and renamed Saint Dominque. With the growth of the sugar, coffee and tobacco trades, the French colony prospered in the 17th century. Finding the native Indians unsuited to the difficult labor of the plantations, the French imported and exploited vast numbers of slaves: the transplanted black African population grew from 2,000 in 1697, to an estimated 117,400 in 1739. By the end of the century, approximately 480,000 slaves worked the farms of the European colonialists. A number of tribes were represented, principally from the "slave coast" nations of Dahomey, Nigeria, and Togo, but also many from the Congo region.

In 1791 the slaves revolted. By 1804, their revolution succeeded in establishing an independent republic in Haiti - the second independent republic in the world (the first was the United States of America), and the first black one. One factor in the success of the revolution was the mountainous terrain of Haiti, which, although difficult to cultivate, facilitated the congregating of rebel bands of slaves. A second major factor was the development of a unifying religious and social structure among the black immigrants - a syncretic religion, blending elements of diverse African beliefs and named with a Dahomean word, "vodun," or "voodoo," meaning "spirit."

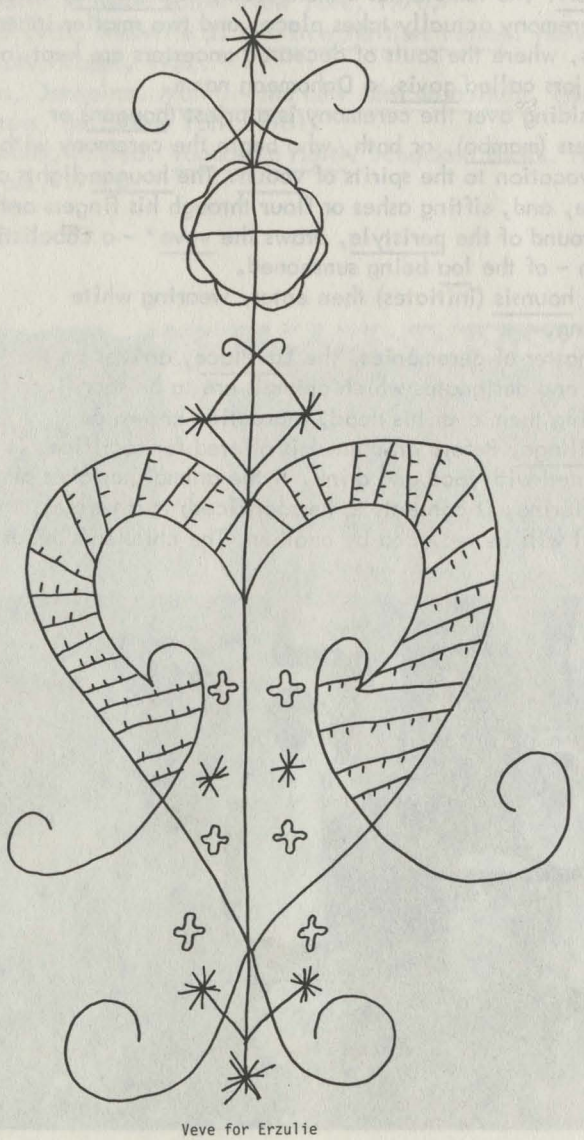
Elements of Christianity were incorporated into vodun as it developed in the New World under the domination of European customs and culture. The Catholic saints, therefore, are identified in Haiti with African deities whose personalities are similar.

The spirits of vodun are known as loa, and they people the world of vodun devotees (hounsis) in great numbers. Many originated in Africa, but many also came into being in the New World. Different companies of loa may be identified, among which are the large family of Rada loa - mostly from Africa - and an equally numerous group of New World loa known as Petro spirits. The Rada loa usually have benevolent natures, and therefore their favor is sought after and is a sign of good luck. The Petro loa, on the other hand, count among their number several aggressively violent personalities.

Among the principal loas of the Rada family, Damballah and Ayida Weydo represent the creation of the universe. Damballah was the ancient Dahomean rain god; Ayida, his wife in Haiti, is the rainbow. They are characterized by a pair of snakes signifying fertility. Both gods are associated with the color white, and chickens are sacrificed to them. Damballah at times is identified with St. Patrick because of the latter's identification with serpents.

Erzulie Freda Dahomey, goddess of love, represents man's capacity to dream. Her sign is a heart sometimes pierced with a sword. She is identified with Mary, our Lady of Sorrows.

Legba opens the barrier between the material and spiritual worlds. His Catholic equivalent is St. Peter.



Veve for Erzulie

Guede Nihbo, also known as Baron Samedi, personifies death and the graveyard. He dresses in black, smokes a cigar and wears dark glasses. One of the most dreaded loa, Guede, a sexual prankster, is also a rich source of amusement.

The loa originally were put on earth to assist the Great Master (supreme being) by helping men in their daily lives. As with the saints of the Catholic Church, the loa are supposed to have lived on earth at one time; thus they have all the attributes of man, both good and bad. They are worshipped in elaborate ceremonies that may be held on any day or night of the week, according to the devotee's need for spiritual assistance.

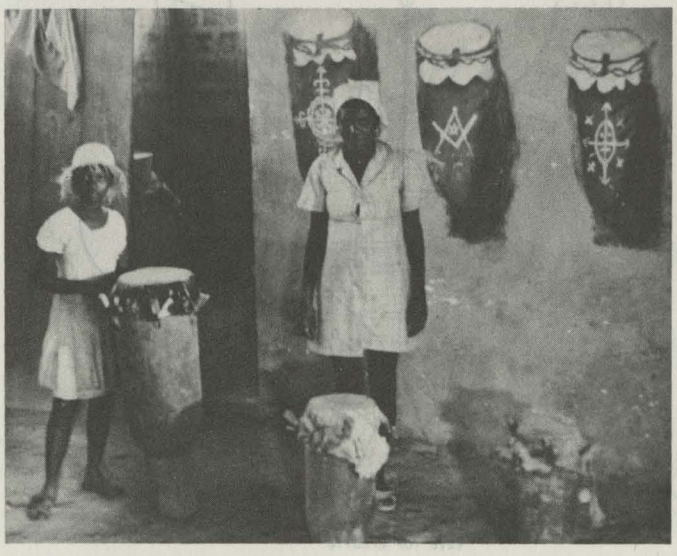
The goal of a vodun ceremony is to honor a loa, or loas, and to summon them for purposes of communication. To these ends a variety of traditionally prescribed ritual activities are performed, including prayers, feasting, music, dance, and animal sacrifices - usually of chickens, pigs, and sheep. The high point of the ceremony is the apiritual "possession" of a number of devotees by loa. When this occurs the devotee is said to be the cheval (horse) of the loa by whom he has been "mounted." He becomes the voice of the loa, communicating advice, warnings, and desires to the community.

The ceremony takes place in a temple known as a hounfort. The temple has a main room, or peristyle, where the ceremony actually takes place, and two smaller inner spaces, where the souls of deceased ancestors are kept in small jars called govis, a Dahomean name.

Presiding over the ceremony is a priest (hougan) or priestess (mambo), or both, who begin the ceremony with an invocation to the spirits of vodun. The hougan lights a candle, and, sifting ashes or flour through his fingers onto the ground of the peristyle, draws the veve* - a cabalistic design - of the loa being summoned.

The hounsis (initiates) then enter, wearing white clothing.

A master of ceremonies, the La-Place, arrives on the scene and designates which animals are to be sacrificed by swinging them over his head, a practice known as ventaillage. Before an animal is offered for sacrifice, it is presented with food and drink. If the animal partakes of the offering, it consents to be sacrificed; if it refuses, the animal will be replaced by another. The chicken's heads



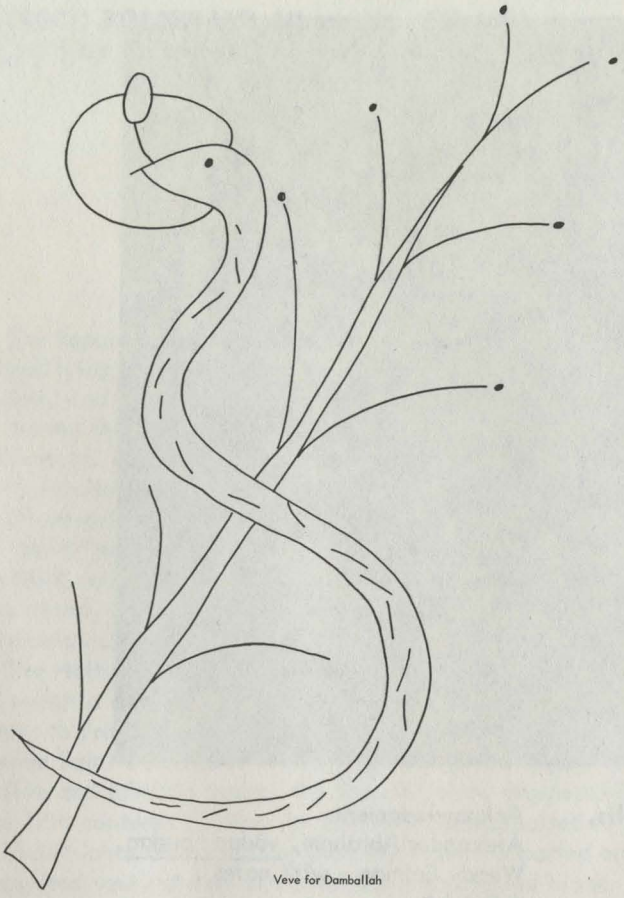
are severed by being bitten off at the neck; the blood is then consumed and the carcass thrown to the ground.

When the La-Place has completed his initial duties, the hougan takes clarin, a rum drink, into his mouth, blows out his cheeks, and sprays the clarin out on all sides. This is the rite of foula.

The first loa invoked is Legba, lord of the crossroads. The cross signified the earthly, human world connected to the tree of the gods. Only at these crossroads, where human and divine intersect, can communication with the gods take place. The ceremonial chant to Legba serves to separate and open up the barrier between men and gods. The yanvalu, a supplication dance, is performed as further incentive to the loa. Once Legba comes and mounts a dancer, other loa are free to join the ceremony.

Hounsis who are not mounted by loa are called Chretiens vivants, living Christians. They see to it that those who are ridden (chevauche) do not injure themselves.

When the dancers become possessed, the loa begin to speak. The person possessed may eat fire, walk on burning coals, or stab at his or her skin without drawing blood. I witnessed all of the above. The possessed person is "kept in line" and within the safe boundaries of the peristyle by the La-Place's whip and whistle. On one occasion, a possessed young woman who, although strong, was only of slight build, bodily lifted the hougan, a tall, well-built man, off the floor and spun him around several times.



Veve for Damballah

To recall a person to a normal state, the hougan or mambo places the palms of his or her hands on the forehead of the one possessed. Almost immediately, the contact or spell appears to be broken. The person's body goes limp, he or she is lowered gently to the ground and carried out of the hounfort to recover. Often those possessed return in a short time to continue their participation in the ceremony, which may extend from several hours to an all night affair.

The language of vodun is Haitian Creole, which combines a vocabulary of French words with African grammatical structure and phoneticisms. Words and phrases of a secret, magical Dahomean language (langaille or langage), whose exact meaning is not known even in Africa, are included in invocation chants and songs.

Each loa is associated with a particular song and dance rhythm. All aspects of the music - singing, dancing, and drumming - are of equal, and major, importance to the phenomenon of possession. By concentrating on and surrendering to the specific rhythm of a loa, several dancers, responding to the same beat, may be mounted simultaneously by a single spirit.

Vodun songs are responsorial, with overlapping and alternating solo singer and chorus. The main instruments of the musical ensemble are drums and an iron idiophone called an ogan, which is beaten with a metal rod. The instruments play polyrhythmically, that is, with simultaneous independent rhythmic lines, resulting in a dynamic interplay of pitch and timbre accents. Contrasting conductor beats, based on groupings of equal time units in a ratio of 2:3 or 3:2, and affecting varying numbers of time units, characterize much of the instrumental music. The style is similar to that of African music in Haiti's ancestral lands.

The drums of the Rada rites are played in groups of three varying sizes: the manman, seconde and bula or petit. The smallest, the bula, provides an ostinato energy for the ensemble, while the seconde and manman exchange an improvised dialogue of rhythm. The cowhide heads of these drums are fastened with pegs driven into their bodies at an angle, and all are played with sticks. In contrast, the drums of the Petro and Congo rites have lace-fastened, goatskin heads, and are played in pairs with hands only.

The houngan or mambo carries a sacred rattle, the asson, made from a calabash gourd, both filled and covered with beads and the vertebrae of snakes. The rattling sound of the asson represents the hissing of the snake, Damballah. Thus it is the voice of the ancestral spirits of vodun. Ritual whistles and an occasional conch-shell trumpet (lambi) also may be heard. But it is the drums, whose heads originally (according to Dahomean legend) were fashioned from the external ear of Damballah, that provide the means of most direct communication with the ancient loa.

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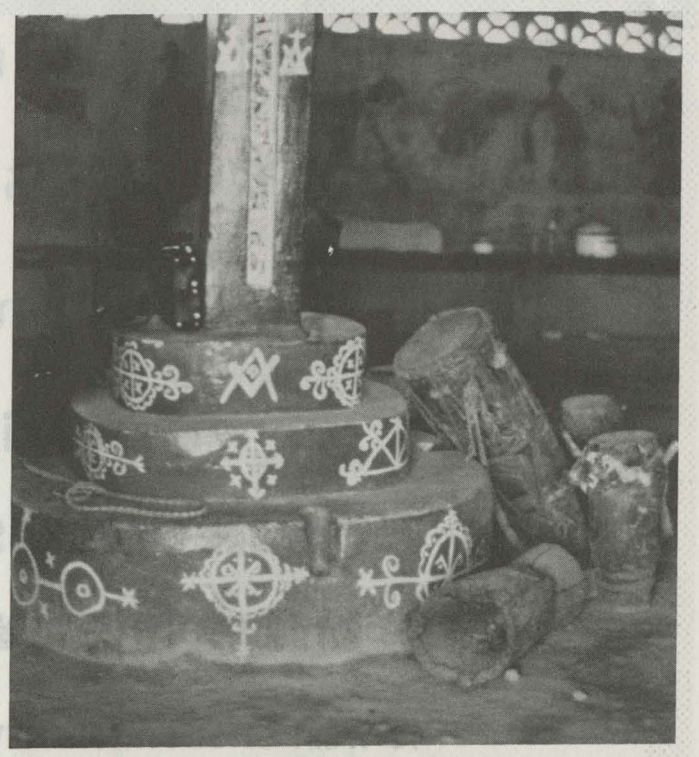

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Veve drawings and photographs by Bradford Graves -
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Notes by Verna Gillis.

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* * * * *

The music presented on this album represents segments
from a four hour service for Erzulie, a Rada loa.
Photographs and Drawings by Bradford Graves

For Additional Information About

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