

on African origins: creolization and *connaissance* in Haitian Vodou

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What is African in the African diaspora? In this article, I return to the problematic question of African origins in the black Americas, arguing that despite the distortions of baseline genealogies and associated myths of tribal purity, West African cultural frameworks—when critically reformulated—illuminate New World dynamics of creolization. Focusing on the Petwo paradox in Haitian Vodou, which opposes Creole powers of money and magic to the venerated, if enervated, authority of Ginen (Africa), I address a fairly narrow debate regarding the division of Petwo and Rada deities and their imputed Creole versus African origins. Against the ideology of Haitian Vodou, and its misleading influence on various scholars, a Yoruba–Dahomean cultural hermeneutic reveals the African origins and revisionary principles of the Petwo and Rada opposition, as it emerged before the Haitian revolution and realigned with class relations under François Duvalier. [African diaspora, creolization, secrecy, hermeneutics, race and class, Vodou]

The genealogy of morals in African diaspora research encounters the politics of race at nearly every turn. Implicated in racial ideologies, nationalist movements, and academic battles since its formal emergence in the 1930s, the field of Afro-American studies was politically charged from the start.¹ In the United States, Carter G. Woodson (1936) and W. E. B. Du Bois (1939) produced the first programmatic studies of African cultural contributions to the Americas, enlisting the recovery of this history against Jim Crow and the color bar. Following their lead, Melville J. Herskovits recast Afro-American research in the more clinical language of social science, posing African acculturation in the New World as a central anthropological problem while exposing the myth of an absent “Negro past” as a symptom of racist denial (Herskovits 1958, 1966). Parallel developments in the Caribbean took different forms as African cultural practices were uneasily domesticated into inclusive idioms of national culture, sanitized as folklore in the work of Fernando Ortiz (1916), Jean Price-Mars (1928), and Gilberto Freyre (1956), legitimated by ideologies of *mestizaje* (mestizo identity) and *créolité* (Creole identity), and animated by the more militant movements of *noirisme* (blackness) and *négritude* (black cultural nationalism). Despite their different contexts, moments, and commitments to empirical research, the scholars of this first generation of Afro-Americanists shared a basic notion of African origins that, uprooted and fragmented by the Middle Passage and plantation slavery, could be recovered and in some sense traced back to the motherland.

It is not my aim to recount the history and politics of this scholarship in any detail—a history that includes French luminaries like Pierre Verger (1980) and Roger Bastide (1971, 1978), *négritude* poets like Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor, and

their intellectual followers, as well as the rise of black studies in the 1960s—but rather to return to the problematic notion of origins that continues to haunt African diaspora research and motivate its debates. Unless critically deconstructed, the idea of African origins is decidedly out of favor. On methodological grounds alone, criteria for establishing African provenance have remained controversial since the Herskovits-Frazier debate, demanding strict functional correspondences that can never realistically be found (Smith 1957), involving essentialized tribal designations that should be abandoned (Mintz and Price 1992), or invoking a play of tropes within a historically situated discursive field that can never be transcended (Scott 1991, 1997). According to these methodological strictures, African cultural practices may well exist in the Americas, but cannot be known with any specificity. They lie beyond the limits of anthropological reason.

In this article, I return to the locus classicus of origins in African diaspora research to defend the taboo position that they illuminate the dynamics of creolization. I am not arguing for a return to the first-generation notion of origins, but for a critical reappraisal. African origins are indeed ideologically motivated, rhetorically structured, and historically situated within genealogical narratives and discursive fields. Historically, they have evoked essentialized tribal and ethnic designations that are today untenable. But when appropriately theorized and located, they continue to illuminate African diaspora research. To show how such an invocation of origins can work, I address a fairly narrow debate among scholars specializing in studies of Haitian *Vodou* (popular religion, healing, and sorcery). The debate concerns the category of *Petwo* (petro) deities or spirits, their Creole status within the *Vodou* pantheon, and in what sense they have come to oppose “African” gods. My analysis deepens an earlier argument about syncretism in the African diaspora (Apter 1991) by extending it to the complexities of a specific case. First, I will briefly review the revisionary logic of Yoruba deep knowledge, locating its power and indeterminacy within the dialectics of kingship in Yorubaland. Second, I will apply this deep-knowledge paradigm to the division between *Petwo* and *Rada* deities within Haitian *Vodou* to see how the Yoruba model informs the genesis and structure of this important opposition. From the standpoint of deep Yoruba ritual strategies, the radically revisionary *Petwo* powers—which one might expect to be associated with African origins—are paradoxically associated by Haitians with Creole deities. In the third section, I account for this paradoxical association of the most powerful with the least African mystical agencies and resolve the *Petwo* paradox. Against the ideology of Haitian *Vodou* and its misleading influence on various scholars, a Yoruba–Dahomean cultural hermeneutic reveals the West African origins and revisionary principles of the *Petwo* and *Rada* opposition itself, as it emerged before the Haitian revolution and realigned with class relations under François Duvalier.

deep knowledge

My revisionary approach to New World syncretism developed out of my previous research on Yoruba ritual and politics in Nigeria.² Two general questions motivated my initial Yoruba project. The first concerned the extraordinary variation in orisha cult organization and hierarchy throughout Yorubaland—including relations between deities, rival pantheons, and their corresponding sociopolitical bases. As the extensive Yoruba literature attests, the orisha are associated with historic kingdoms that have local, regional, and Pan-Yoruba deities only partially rooted in lineages.³ The deities themselves are similarly mercurial, defying conventional classifications into ancestors, culture heroes, or so-called nature spirits by variably combining the

attributes of each (Barber 1981; Horton 1983). Through a comparison of three Ekiti Yoruba Kingdoms—two loosely federated as “village clusters” and one highly centralized as a former military autocracy—I sought the political factors that controlled such variations. Complementing this “structural” attention to cult organization and context, I focused on festival cycles and performances in order to account for the power of ritual practices. The festivals of the orisha were clearly associated with kingship, through ritual investment and mimetic appropriation, but given the risky thresholds and danger zones that were navigated, and the collective anxiety that such passages generated, more than mechanical legitimation was involved.

Reduced to essentials, my research revealed that political segmentation, not lineage organization as such, governed the variable bases of orisha cults, which generally conformed to three levels: that of the kingdom (*ilú*) with its royal cult; the ward or quarter (*àdúgbò*), each governed by a civil chief forming a dominant segment within the town; and the lineage (*idilé*), each governed by an elder (*bàálé*) from within the quarter, comprising the lowest level of political segmentation (Figure 1). Such a sketch provides an ideal type of a political logic that is more complex on the ground, because political organization also includes subquarters, age-sets, and lineage segments, as well as subordinate towns and hamlets. It is this underlying political logic that accounts for orisha cult variation and change. Briefly stated, the relative status of an orisha within a kingdom corresponds to its political location within this scheme; Ogun as a lineage orisha in one town would be a minor force compared with Ogun associated with the kingship in a neighboring kingdom. More significantly, as the social histories of the orisha cults reveal, minor orisha can rise up with political factions that in some cases effect dynastic coups, pushing the exiled ruling line and its associated orisha to the sociopolitical margins. Royal cults are inclusive, and so can absorb civil and lineage deities within their ritual fields, incorporating them into the rooms and altars of the town shrines. Town shrines thus house clusters of deities.⁴ Only the lineage orisha of particular compounds (*agbo ilé*) maintain a discrete relation between deity and shrine.

Political Level

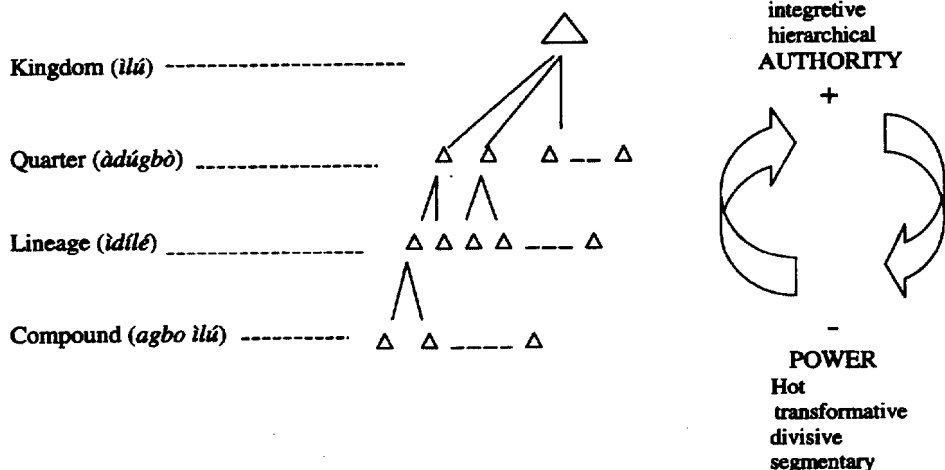


Figure 1. Power and Authority in Yoruba Government.

Expressed in more dynamic terms, the political organization of Yoruba kingdoms highlights competitive fields of power and authority that pit chiefs against each other in promoting their respective jurisdictions or unite them against the king, whose power can be checked only by collective veto. Power competition operates within the transformative limits of fission, through which a royal prince or ambitious chief breaks away to establish an independent kingdom, and deposition, through which the excesses of the *oba* (king) can be constitutionally checked. Within these limits, power transforms authority structures by usurping the kingship, revising dynastic genealogies, reranking hierarchies of civil chiefs and quarters, dividing kingdoms, and violating the sociopolitical order with variable degrees of impunity. Power thus unleashed is dangerous and labile, promising unlimited agency to the ambitious and challenging those in control. Power *sui generis* is transgressive and transformative, exceeding boundaries, subverting structures, even turning hierarchies upside down; it must be harnessed and domesticated, contained by authority structures and channeled for the collective good. Power must be cooled, centered, and properly oriented. Here lies the work of the *orisha*, whose rituals negotiate the margins of power and authority to mediate competition and regenerate the kingdom.

This characterization is itself a hybrid, merging the political frameworks of M. G. Smith (1956, 1975:29) and P. C. Lloyd (1968) with Yoruba models and representations of government to illuminate the dominant idioms and challenges of Yoruba ritual. As a mechanism of conversion, Yoruba ritual domesticates power, bringing it from the bush into the center of the town where the king is recrowned (Apter 1992: 97–116). In *orisha* festivals owned by chiefs, ritual empowerment deploys icons of kingship to signal the potential king that lies within every person, and who—when conditions are right—can rise up and take control. Ritual is risky because if its mechanisms fail or fall to rivals, unexpected transformations of authority can take place. Its outcomes are uncertain. It provides a space of mediation and maneuvering in which submerged factions can seize control. If in formal terms such a concept of power is transgressive, transformative, and pitted against the rule-governed hierarchies of administrative authority, then in Yoruba terms it is hot, polluted, and dangerous, a pure potency that must be purified, cooled, and contained.

Thus sketched, the power of Yoruba ritual should be understood concretely, as transformative collective action. To be sure, ritual empowerment is generally reproductive, restoring the body politic to the status quo ante, but it is not always so. It is the ruptures, rebellions, and reconfigurations of these historic exceptions that illuminate the levels of *realpolitik* at play. In the most basic Yoruba ritual terms, transformative power versus reproductive authority are manifest in two basic categories or families of *orisha*, corresponding to “cool” and “hot.” The cool “*orisha funfun*” (white deities) such as Yemoja, Oshun, Olokun, and Obatala, associated with water, cool rhythms, fertility, and integration, are opposed to the hot, or warrior, deities like Shango and Ogun, whose staccato rhythms and explosive choreographies invoke legendary associations with lightening, fire, war, demolition, differentiation, death, and even immolation. As I have argued (Apter 1992:154–156), any *orisha* can serve in both capacities, as hot and cool, reproductive and transformative. It is not the deity as such but the categorical opposition of their agentive attributes that is most important for my purposes in this article. To deepen understanding of the power of ritual as mobilized by hot and cool deities alike, I approach a closely guarded realm of secrecy safeguarding the *imọ jinlẹ* (deep knowledge) of the cults.

Two aspects of secrets are especially relevant. The first concerns their subversive character as icons and indices of sociopolitical revolt. The dominant symbol of the

royal Yemoja festival in Ayede, for example, is the calabash (*igbá Yemoja*) of concentrated ritual potency (*àṣẹ*) that is carried—balanced on the *Yèyéolókun*'s (high priestess, lit. grandmother of *olókun*) head—from the bush to the palace, where it empowers the king's person and revitalizes the body politic. Like any dominant symbol, it embraces a span of meanings ranging from explicit normative community blessings ("it brings children and wealth, keeps the king healthy") to implicit, forbidden themes of division and bloodshed, and it is this latter pole that is powerful and deep. Yemoja's fructifying calabash represents the womb of motherhood, the head of good destiny, the crown of the king, the integrity of the town, even the cosmological closure of sky and earth. But its surfaces are decorated with signs of a deadlier power within, indicated by red parrot feathers—signs of ritual negation. Evoking the witchcraft of the priestesses and their mechanism for deposing the king, red parrot feathers on the calabash simultaneously assert a broken womb, miscarried delivery, bad destiny, a headless (and crownless) king, as well as political fission and a cosmos out of control. Such negative themes are rarely voiced in public, but they nonetheless constitute a repertoire of potential interpretations that under certain conditions can be invoked so as to mobilize opposition against the status quo. The deep knowledge of royal ritual actually involves the king's sacrifice and rebirth, whereby his icons of personal power and royal authority are literally taken apart and reassembled by authorized priests and priestesses, culminating in the crowning moment of Yemoja's calabash. In the case of nonroyal festivals, the orisha's calabash serves as a potential crown to remind the king that his chiefs can always rise up and take over. Such themes are enhanced by the various genres of ritual speech, which invoke repressed histories and veiled warnings of former kings and warriors who can prevail again (Apter 1992:117–148, 1998). The dominant visual and verbal tropes that express these themes include those of inversion (e.g., in the image of a capsized canoe), reversal (e.g., from right to left), and mimetic appropriation (e.g., of European crowns). The latter symbolic function is particularly relevant to bringing outside icons of power within local fields of ritual command, absorbing symbols of foreign value and authority through metaphoric and metonymic associations (see Note 30).

But if this aspect of deep knowledge invokes fission, usurpation, and militant dismemberment, it does so through mechanisms of formal opposition to received historical and genealogical charters. The deeper one goes, in a sense, the less fixed and determinate the character of the secret, and the more formal the mechanisms of reversal and inversion. Ultimately, the secret behind the secret is that deep knowledge has no content at all but derives its power from context-specific opposition to the authoritative discourses that it implicitly challenges.⁵ Like Griaule's discussion of Dogon esoterica, a salient distinction between exoteric (*paroles de face*) and esoteric (*la parole claire*) knowledge is here at play (see also Griaule and Dieterlen 1991:55), but unlike Griaule (1965:x), I maintain that the deep dogma has no fixed content into which all ritual elders are eventually initiated.⁶ If the ideology of deep knowledge asserts a fixed corpus of secrets, then this should not be taken at face value, but as a screen that allows its pragmatic functions to masquerade as sanctified wisdom and learning. As such, deep knowledge is powerful because it is revisionary, sustaining possibilities of political transformation through the revaluation and reversal of established orders. In the sociocultural contexts of historic Yoruba kingdoms, the political lines of contestation and division are formed around segmentary opposition and hierarchical inclusion. To be sure, the considerable impact of colonial administration, commercialized agriculture, Islam, Christianity, national politics, and so forth on such local ritual fields has been negotiated by the orisha cults, which have rearticulated

with emerging elites and patterns of stratification. As I have argued, it is precisely the revisionary principles of deep knowledge that have enabled the orisha cults to extend their interpretive horizons and embrace colonialism, class formation, and the post-colonial state while simultaneously bringing the outside in. But as a generative template or structuring structure, the revisionary model of Yoruba hermeneutics and its associated hot and cool valences are grounded in the dialectics of kingship as sketched above. Applied to local pantheons, even the coolest orisha can become hot or dangerous, with hidden deadly powers that are protected by secrecy and activated by its praises (*oriki*).

Extending these principles to the logic of syncretism, I argued that the reinterpretation of Catholic saints as African gods in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Santería, and Brazilian Candomblé—a process that Herskovits characterizes in psychological terms—was recast by the model of Yoruba deep knowledge as a mode of political revaluation and revision (Apter 1991). Less a screen for maintaining African traditions than a form of collective appropriation, the saints were Africanized by New World blacks as double agents in their religious sanctuaries and societies. If the public identity of a saint was European Catholic, then its secret, deeper, and more powerful African manifestation could be invoked and manipulated by initiates. The very spatial organization of altars seems to support this vision, with chromolithographs of popular saints displayed on top and above, and icons—including fundamentals—of African deities hidden below or locked within cabinets.⁷ Historically, there is no question that African deities and their ritual arenas are associated with major revolts and resistance movements, including the Haitian revolution. Boukman's legendary Vodou ceremony of Bois Caiman, which triggered the revolution's call to arms, is the most celebrated exemplification of the power of the gods.⁸ Palmares, the most famous of the Brazilian *quilombos* (maroon communities) of escaped slaves, and the Cuban slave revolt known as *La Escalera*, commemorating the ladders to which the vanquished slaves were tied and tortured, are among the significant variations on this political theme. Thus proposed as a hypothesis, the deep-knowledge model could explain how New World syncretism mobilized resistance and opposition. To be sure, given the radically different sociopolitical contexts of plantation societies and the peasantries that followed, the structural bases of political action were more about race and class than kings and chiefs, but it was precisely the hermeneutical mapping of deep-knowledge claims within these oppressive contexts that provided possibilities of collective empowerment.

With this hypothesis up front, I turn to Haiti, and the Petwo paradox.

the Petwo paradox

It is practically a catechism of Haitian Vodou that its extraordinary range of deities and powers, including mainly *lwa* (*loa* [gods and goddesses]) but also spiritual agents like zombies, *pwen* (points or manufactured deities) and *djab* (spirit devils), fall into two general divisions—Rada and Petwo. In official publications and popular accounts, the Rada deities, associated with the pure unadulterated tradition from Ginen (Guinea or Africa), generally trace back to the town of Arada (Allada) in the historic Dahomean empire; Rada rituals involve cool drum rhythms, choreographies, and spiritual demeanors appropriate to revered authority. The Petwo deities, by contrast, are hot and transgressive, riding their mounts (possessed devotees) during ritual performances with the explosive fury and self-abandonment of faster tempos and accented off-beats. According to Métraux:

The word *petro* inescapably conjures up visions of implacable force, of roughness and even ferocity—qualities which are not a priori associations of the word *rada*. Epithets such as “unyielding” “bitter” and even “salty” are applied to the *petro* while the *rada* are “gentle”. The *petro loa* are, moreover, specialists in magic. All charms come under their control. . . . Everything which has to do with *petro* is shadowed with doubt and inspires fear. [1972:88]

Implicit in this contrast between Rada and Petwo divisions is the latter’s dubious association with money and magic, linking the more immediate efficacy of its lwa with moral compromise and even wickedness. Unlike the righteous Rada deities, the Petwo operate like invisible loan sharks, breaking moral, social, and even physical boundaries to confer quick results at high—and literally binding—rates of return. As Hurston explains:

Before we go into a description of the outdoor altar to Petro, let me give you some idea of the differences between a Rada god and a Petro divinity. As has been said before, Damballa and his suite are high and pure. They do only good things for people, but they are slow and lacking in power. The Petro gods on the other hand are terrible and wicked, but they are more powerful and quick. They can be made to do good things, however, as well as evil. They give big doses of medicine and effect quick cures. So these Petro gods are resorted to by a vast number of people who wish to gain something but fear them at the same time. The Rada spirits demand nothing more than chickens and pigeons, and there are no consequences or hereafter to what they do for you, while the Petros demand hogs, goats, sheep, cows, dogs, and in some instances they have been known to take dead bodies from the tombs. The Petros work for you only if you make a promise to service them . . . the promise *must* be kept or the spirits begin to take revenge. [1990:164–167]

It is clear from these and other classic comparisons (e.g., Bastien 1966:42–43) that despite their purity, authority, and Dahomean ancestry, the Rada deities are less effective and ritually potent than the more powerful, if somewhat polluted, Petwo spirits who work outside official channels.⁹ Indeed, the power of the Petwo deity innovates and transforms, requiring the blood of the four-legged sacrifice to mobilize personal and collective agency. Quoting a leader of a Bizongo society, one of the extreme institutional branches of Petwo sorcery, Beauvoir-Dominique shows how the arts of self-transformation into ordinary animals and predators of the night enable nothing less than the transformation of the world. In a remarkable ratification of the politics of revision, the *houngan* (priest) relates concrete intervention to the ritual power of transmutation:

Bizongo is to prove that man can learn to change. That’s what Bizongo means; learn to change. We’re in the world, and *we can transform the world*. In the world; just as people watching us can see our members metamorphose, become pigs, chickens, donkeys, any kind of animal . . . so we change. And that is what is called Bizongo—changes, *that’s what it’s all about, changing form*. [Beauvoir-Dominique 1995:166, emphasis added]

The political implications of Petwo transformations are clearly evident in Vodou history and practice. The celebrated sacrifice in Bois Caiman that triggered the Haitian revolution in nationalist accounts was specifically a Petwo ceremony, so identified by the killing of a pig. The use of whips, firearms, and stylized fragments of military insurgency in its ceremonies has long associated the power and iconography of its services with the Haitian revolution, a connection conveyed by the “langage” (ritual language, possessed speech) of officiating *houngan* in invocations of Jean Petro and other revolutionary leaders of the first black republic, such as Christophe, Dessalines,

Petion, Rigaud, and Toussaint Louverture (Mars 1953:222). Indeed, the revolutionary power of the Petwo division works as a form of condensed historical memory, which includes the experiences of the slave's social death and transfiguration within plantation society (Dayan 1998). In this capacity, Vodou with its Petwo powers exemplifies Taussig's explorations of history as sorcery (Taussig 1987:366–92). But I am less concerned with repressed histories and forms of historical consciousness for now—this issue will return in another article—than with the explicitly Creole status attributed by Haitians to the Petwo spirits themselves. This attribution, and its association with sorcery and magic, initially challenges the deep-knowledge paradigm.

If the Creole genealogy of the Petwo spirits remains an unsolved mystery in Vodou historiography, its founding ancestor is generally identified with the semi-mythic figure of Don Pedro—a popular sorcerer in colonial Saint Dominique. In a passage from Moreau de Saint-Méry (1797), an innovative dance associated with violent possession and insurrection marks the birth of the Petwo nation:

In 1768 a Negro of Petit-Goave, a Spaniard by birth, abused the credulity of the Negroes with superstitious tricks and gave them the idea of a dance, similar to the Voodoo dance, but more hectic in its movements. To give them extra filip they added well crushed gunpowder to the rum which they drank while dancing. Sometimes this dance, called the *Danse à Don Pèdre* or *The Don Pedro*, inflicted fatal casualties on the Negroes; and sometimes the very spectators, electrified by the convulsive movements, shared the madness of the dancers, and drove them on, with their chanting and hurrying rhythm to a crisis which, to a certain extent, they shared. The *Don Pedro* was forbidden under threat of direst penalty—sometimes without avail. [Moreau de Saint-Méry 1797; see also Courlander 1973:129; Métraux 1972:39]

If or exactly how the Petwo deities derived from the Don Pedro dance is less important than the status this early account has acquired as a veritable myth of origins.¹⁰ Elevated to the deity Jean Petro after his death, Don Pedro was both “a Negro of Petit-Goave” and “a Spaniard by birth.” His quintessentially Creole identity—most likely a fugitive Dominican slave who escaped into Haiti (Larose 1977:111)—establishes a non-African patriline for the new category of hot and raging deities that he inaugurated, exhibiting the “violence and delirium that threw off the shackles of slavery” (Davis 1988:274). Homegrown in Haiti rather than inherited from Africa, the Petwo line has been characterized as a hybrid of Creole and Kongo attributes and powers in marked contrast to the Rada division of Ginen (Courlander 1973:328–31).

It should be clear from this summary sketch that Petwo and Rada resemble the hot and cool valences of Yoruba pantheons and the dialectics of power and authority that they mediate. Unlike the conservative Rada, who preserve the secrets from Africa, Petwo are innovators, deploying money and magic to change human and social forms (Derby 1994). Born in the spirit of the Haitian revolution and enlisted in its struggle, the Petwo are transgressive and subversive, “riding their horses” (i.e., possessing their devotees) brutally and without warning, darting “de ci de là, agité, convulsif, rageur” (from here to there, agitated, convulsive, raging) (Mars 1953:222). In their extreme form of Bizongo, or “Petwo Sauvage” (Savage Petwo), their opposition to Rada assumes the symbolism of evil: “Bizongo is in some sense the opposite of Rada. If the latter represents the benign aspect of the faith, Bizongo symbolizes unforgiveness. Rada stands for light and the normal affairs of humanity; Bizongo occurs by night, in the darkness that is the province of the djab, the devil” (Davis 1988:274). Hurston's characterization of Rada as “high and pure,” yet “lacking in power” (1990:164), reveals in full form the distinction between power and authority. As hierarchy, orthodoxy, and rule-governed code, the Rada carry the authority of Africa to

their *hounfor* (temple) and devotees, enshrining the reproduction of the status quo. Outside of such authority structures and defying limitation, the Petwo manifest pure power and efficacy, uncontrolled, dangerous, devious, and above all, transformative. Like the hot and deep dimensions of the Yoruba orisha, their invocation empowers but also kills. Their force can be controlled but at considerable risk of uncertain outcomes.

Against the moral high ground and orthodox tradition of the Rada division, the Petwo gods or spirits pit magic and sorcery. Using medicines and charms such as *paket kongo* and *wangole* (fetishes that concentrate the non-Dahomean secrets of Kongo and Angola in their materials and nomenclatures), the Petwo tread the nefarious shadowlands of points and zombies. Within the strictures of Ginen, they are outsiders and lack legitimacy. The knowledge, or *connaissance*, of their practitioners is false by the standards of Ginen tradition.

Here lies the paradox. If the transformative agency of Petwo lwa occupy the sanctified space of deep knowledge in the Yoruba paradigm, then why is the knowledge associated with their powers normatively devalued as sorcery and magic? If the cultural hermeneutic of deep knowledge was indeed transplanted from West Africa to the Creole Caribbean, then why are Haitian ideas of *connaissance* linked to the authority of Ginen rather than the power of Petwo?

That Haitians do in fact possess notions of cult secrecy, and that these are expressed in idioms of depth, is brought out clearly in the concept of *connaissance*. As Métraux explains:

Voodoo adepts use the word "knowledge" (*connaissance*) to describe what we would define as "supernatural insight and the power which is derived therefrom." It is in degrees of "knowledge" that various *hungan* (priests) and *mambo* (priestesses) differ from each other. [1972:63–64]

The acquisition of this knowledge, however, occurs in two potentially contradictory ways. The first is through graded induction and initiation. Much like any technical training, the devotee ascends the ranks from novice to priest, serving successively as *hunsi* (initiate), *hungenikon* (choirmaster), *la-place* (master of ceremonies), and *confiance* (trusted adept) over the course of several years, culminating in *la prise des yeux* (the gripping of the eyes), the highest stage of initiation conferring clairvoyance (Métraux 1972:68).¹¹ The supreme knowledge of a *houngan* or *mambo* represents the true tradition from Ginen, carried to the Americas by the first African slaves. Weakened over time, however, by the death of great priests and their reluctance to divulge all of their secrets fully, *connaissance* becomes understood as a diminished reflection of an originary power and presence (Larose 1977:87–89). To counteract this entropic trend and recover what was otherwise lost, a second method of instruction through direct spiritual intervention supplements and in some cases overrides the first, whereby the initiate receives knowledge directly from the lwa. Although priests relying exclusively on such claims of supernatural patronage invite suspicion or disdain, their inspired learning, when combined with formal initiation and training, marks the deepest form of recollected knowledge.¹² Here is where images of the deep figure prominently. Because the lwa themselves live in riverbeds and the depths of the sea, alternatively defined as the realm of Ginen beneath the waters, priests and priestesses go there to enhance their power through further instruction. Métraux describes testimonies in which "*hungan* and *mambo* with great 'knowledge' go and visit [the lwa] in their watery homes and stay with them for long periods," returning with "new powers and sometimes . . . shells—the concrete proof of their exploit" (1972:92). Madame

Tisma, a mambo from Marbial, claimed to have "spent three years at the bottom of a river where she had received instruction from water spirits" (Métraux 1972:63).

Figures of the deep predominate in Yoruba rituals and discourses of initiation, manifested in neophytes "seized" by spirits of the water, myths of revelation in *ibú* (the deep), and in such praise-names as Yemoja's *Omi*, *Aribúṣọlá* (Water, she-who-makes-the-deep-a-place-of-honor) (Apter 1992:129).¹³ But if Yoruba deep knowledge establishes a sanctified space of revision and refiguration, such interpretive strategies in Haiti appear pushed to the margins of sorcery and magic, of the dishonorable Petwo against the righteous Rada. Deep knowledge in this formulation is opposed by the powerful Petwo line. I can deepen the problem and prepare its solution by locating the Petwo paradox in its relevant social and political contexts: one rural and generational, based on the developmental cycles of the landed peasantry; the other urban and class based, focusing on the political machinations of François Duvalier. As I show, these contexts are not isolated but represent poles of a single, highly stratified sociopolitical system.

the dynamics of creolization

The complex and variegated character of Haitian land tenure notwithstanding (Murray 1977; Woodson 1990), Larose has argued that the key to the Guinea-Magic opposition lies in the *démembré* (lit., "dismembered") and *lakou* (family estate)—those cognatic descent groups that hold land collectively and establish "the basic cult units" of rural Vodou (1977:97). In a vivid account of a generational conflict between a Vodou priest and his aspiring son, Larose (1977:89–92) relates the dynamics of segmentation and fission to accusations of Satanism and sorcery against the authority of Ginen. Thomas, the recognized head of a *démembré* and, thus, houngan of its associated Vodou cult-house, is challenged by his son Leon, who barges into the inner sanctum, where he is not authorized to enter, in order to learn the secrets of "tying up the wanzins." In the heated exchange that follows, the father accuses his son of following the wrong path, wandering the land with the Sans Poils (hairless society) or Bizongo group, and worshipping demons and dark forces for personal gain. The son also was a *makout*—that is, he served in the regime's dreaded secret police. As far as the father was concerned, however, the son's knowledge was unfit for the true Vodou priesthood. The son, on his part, demanded that his father retire, and that he himself be appointed successor. Veiled threats of "testing" and poisoning lead to a cautionary tale, whereby Thomas relates how his own father had been similarly "sounded" by an unspecified relation—most likely his junior brother—who consequently died. As Larose succinctly summarizes the argument, "Leon confronting his father, is magic confronting Guinea" (1977:91).

If generational succession lies at the core of the conflict, the broader contexts of *démembré* and *lakou* illuminate its positive and negative valuations. Like any cognatic lineage organization (Fortes 1969:287), *démembré* select from multiple lines of descent and filiation to form corporate groups limited by residence "on the ground." To make matters more complicated, although corporately held land cannot be sold on the open market, family members can sell plots to each other. Inheritance furthermore appears to be per stirpes, such that children of the same father but different mothers receive land in equivalent blocks. If many *démembrés* united into the larger general estate of the *lakou*, the per stirpes subgroups within each *démembré* established lines of future segmentation and fission.¹⁴ As Larose explains:

The reluctance of the father to appoint a successor while he is still living, does not ease the finding of a solution. Quarrels over succession often lead the contenders to build up their own installation on another piece of land they may have bought elsewhere or in their own share of the inheritance. Each of the new establishments defines a new *démembré* for the children of its founder. [1977:98]

In the most basic structural terms, Ginen, with the authority of Africa and the ancestors, upholds the integrity and reproduction of the *démembré* (or where intact, *lakou*), whereas Petwo is associated with its segmentation and fission. As an underlying developmental cycle (Fortes 1971), the reproduction, breakup, and reconstitution of the landed *démembré* is thus mediated by the relative opposition between Ginen and Petwo.¹⁵ What is magic at one phase of the cycle will become Ginen at another. As Larose has noted, "Everyone is Guinea in his own way and everyone denigrates his neighbor for having added to and thus diluted the inheritance" (1977:86).

In addition to land and lineage as such, money and wage labor enter the picture to further illuminate the magic of Petwo. Women working in rural markets accumulate profits from trade that they use to purchase land from family members. The land thus acquired by a successful trader can hive off at her death to establish an autonomous *démembré* for her children.¹⁶ The same is true for land accumulated by the earnings of wage labor. A junior son with limited prospects of succession can leave the land, earn money, and return to purchase family land, eventually establishing his own *démembré*. What is initially purchased by money is gradually incorporated into the moral order of the ancestors. In the idioms of Vodou, the reincorporation of purchased land into hallowed lineage relations is like buying a point—a personal medicine—that over time becomes a respected *lwa*. In more frequent patterns of inheritance, the *lwa* of the *démembré* are inherited with its land, and forgotten *lwa* of former owners are known to reappear with recriminating demands and grievances.

I have ruthlessly simplified Larose's rich material in order to abstract the dynamic principles of rural Vodou onto which the Yoruba deep-knowledge paradigm can be mapped. Clearly, the power and authority relations of the Yoruba kingdom, with its associated hot and cool ritual idioms, are transposed, in some sense, to the Haitian *démembré*, where the micropolitics of succession and fission revise authoritative idioms of corporate solidarity. Here magic confronts Ginen not only as the impatient son confronts his unyielding father, but as segmentation and fission divide corporate groups. I do not mean to suggest, however, that such a peasant system operates in rural isolation, for relations of trade and wage labor enter the picture in crucial ways. It is highly significant that the Bizongo or Sans Poil as paradigmatically "Petwo Sauvage" are uprooted from the land, wandering satanically in transmogrified shapes and guises. Nor is Leon's association with the urban capital unusual. Does the magic and sorcery of the Sans Poil express the landless peasantry and urban poor, the commodification of their labor and the fetishism of its alienated forms?¹⁷ What I am suggesting is an articulation between the developmental cycle of the rural *démembré* and the polarization of class relations, an articulation that is further framed by the Ginen-Petwo divide. As the Petwo represent the coarse self-abandonment of the festive lower body in violence, sexuality, and laughter (Bakhtin 1984:303–67), the Rada acquire the refined tastes and habits of the elite. Taking on the racialized connotations of Haitian social class totally lacking in the funfun, or white, category of cool Yoruba orisha, the Rada nation of gods represents the *crème* of Vodou society. Hurston observed that devotees of Erzulie Frieda, the classy mulatta of luxurious love, "powder their faces with talcum" (1990:122). Larose notes that,

the "White spirits," often identified with the Rada "nation" . . . all share a common fondness for town and foreign goods; French perfumes, soft drinks, white bread and sugar, silver cutlery and porcelain plates. [1977:100]

Métraux casts the difference more boldly. Between the two classes of lwa, he maintains,

there is such a huge gulf that one is tempted to talk in terms of an aristocracy and a proletariat of gods. To the former would belong the *loa* of African origin venerated in all sanctuaries, and to the second the greater part of the "Creole" gods, called "Creole" because aboriginal and of recent "birth." [Métraux 1972:84]

Here is the curious opposition of creole revolutionaries against an African *ancien régime*!

And here, too, in this inverted revolutionary image, lies the solution to the Petwo paradox: As Vodou developed under plantation slavery, the revisionary and, indeed, revolutionary principles of deep knowledge were mapped onto polarized class relations, with the heterodox Petwo opposing the hegemonic Rada. I call this mapping "the lowness thesis." Unlike the Yoruba and Dahomean kingdoms where the structural bases of power competition were rooted in segmentary opposition between political factions, in Haiti such bases took on the vertical character of class relations. If, before the revolution, the colonial regime of French sugar and coffee planters established the cultural markers and distinctions of this brutally oppressive class, then after the revolution and the abolition of slavery, the new mulatto elite in many ways occupied its place, replicating its cultural codes and controlling the economy. These polarized relations of class division and conflict established the material conditions of social protest and power against the elite, as generated among landless peasants, exploited laborers, criminals, hustlers, and vagabonds—in effect, the Haitian underworld. As the Rada line of Ginen became high and hegemonic within Vodou, identified symbolically with the Haitian elite, the revisionary principles of deep knowledge were emically located within the low, non-Ginen, Petwo line, associated with the hybrid character and transgressive power of revolutionary Creoles.

Thus proposed, the lowness thesis grossly simplifies the complex history of Haitian class relations and racial ideologies, a history marked by the lasting rivalry between northern black and southern mulatto elites after the revolution (Nicholls 1985:24–28; Trouillot 1990:47–50, 109–36). It neither fixes the model of color stratification at the moment of revolution, nor in time as a static and unyielding framework, for as Haitian history fully demonstrates, major shifts in economic and political organization from the early schism between Christophe and Petion, through the U.S. occupation and the rise of noirisme, to the struggles of Aristide's Lavalas movement, mark swings and turns in the politics of color. What the lowness thesis does emphasize is that the segmentary character of political competition at the national level in Haiti extends its roots into the urban and rural underclass to galvanize political power and popular support. Nowhere is this racialized politics, and its dangerous dealings with the Petwo line, more clearly demonstrated than in the notorious career of François Duvalier.

fetishes of state

François Duvalier, or Papa Doc, was by no means the first Haitian head of state to inspire strong associations with Vodou. Many Haitians believe that Dessalines and Christophe were resurrected into lwa after their deaths, and the self-proclaimed Emperor Faustin Soulouque (1847–59) developed the first Vodou political machine, replete

with secret police and *zinglins* (paramilitary thugs) who carried out political massacres and campaigns of terror on his orders (Rotberg 1976:356). Antoine Simon, president from 1908–11, is reputed to have risen from peasant origins through the hidden powers of his daughter Celestina, a respected mambo and force within the palace, where secret ceremonies fueled the fears and anxieties of the aspiring court society. Assembled at palace functions, Simon's sycophants regarded the food and wine with the dread suspicion of unspeakable cannibalistic substitutions. As elite society mingled with forbidden powers of the deep, the palace itself became iconic of high and low. Thus, Hurston recounts how during President Simon's brief and controversial rule, "often it was said that a Voodoo ceremony was going on in the basement chambers while the state function was glittering its farcical way in the salon" (1990:96). Under François Duvalier, similar fears of a basement of blood circulated among peasants and cabinet ministers alike, who attributed clairvoyance, self-protection, and the powers of zombification to the man who modeled himself on Baron Samedi, a Vodou deity (Rotberg 1976:362–365).¹⁸

To be sure, Duvalier's role in elevating Vodou to the respected status of a national doctrine was already established by his involvement with *noirisme* and the founding of *Les Griots*, its literary organ, together with Lorimer Denis, Carl Brouard, and Clement Magloire in 1938. There Duvalier called for the rehabilitation of Vodou, which he saw as the soul of the Haitian people and called "the supreme factor of Haitian unity" (Dayan 1998:126). But beneath such ideological representations of authentic tradition, and operating behind the scenes, was a growing network of loyalties and alliances between Bizongo societies, the dreaded secret police known as *tonton-makout*, and the civil militia or *Volontaires de la Sécurité Nationale* (VSN), which served as the official face of the security apparatus. As Trouillot (1990:190) explains, the system operated at many levels to intimidate critics and undermine organized opposition to Duvalier's dictatorship, but two aspects of this strategy pertain directly to my argument. The first is that by developing and extending this network within Port-au-Prince and throughout the countryside, Duvalier deepened his social base from the middle classes into the peasantry and lumpen (Trouillot 1990:153). Recruiting "new urban parasites" (Trouillot 1990:153) ranging from petty shopkeepers to "thugs and proven criminals" (Trouillot 1990:190), Duvalier appropriated those lower orders whose opposition to the elite could otherwise be mobilized against the state. The black peasantry and Haitian masses celebrated by *noirisme* were thus strategically recruited to bolster state domination. The second aspect of this strategy concerns the coercive patronage by which this recruitment was accomplished. Redistributing state funds from coffee taxes to the lower orders of clients who, in turn, became so-called barons of their villages and neighborhoods, Duvalier generated a system of "practical consent" based on popular figures and idioms (Trouillot 1990:191). As Trouillot explains: "It was the individual fidelity of these men and women that provided the famous *tonton-makout* (literally, 'Uncle with a basket,' so-named after a bogeyman in a folk tale) with its critical mass" (1990:154). In addition to the recruitment of major Vodou priests, Duvalier transformed ritual symbols on *makout* uniforms into national icons of terror and intimidation:

This uniform—blue denim shirt, pants, and hat, with a red kerchief—evoked the traditional costume of the Vodoun god Zaka (the peasant god of agriculture), the colors of the Haitian national flag before Duvalier, and the peasant armies of nineteenth century Haiti, crushed by the Marines during the U.S. occupation. And while the middle-class members of the secret police arrested and tortured opponents of the regime, the peasant-dressed members of the militia, peasants themselves or members of the urban

lower classes, marched to the sound of military music in the streets of the capital city, intimidating by their very presence the bourgeoisie and the middle classes. [Trouillot 1990:190]

Thus we see how the peasant sack typically carried by the Petwo deity Azaka doubled as a Vodou medicine pouch and material receptacle for Papa Doc's coercive patronage, tapping into the forbidden depths of sorcery and social class to oppress the masses, neutralize the opposition, and empower the state.

Beyond such symbolism and iconography, to what extent were the Bizongo societies materially involved with Papa Doc's political project? It is clear from Larose's material on structural conflict in the rural *démembré* that Leon, the aspiring son, opposed his father Thomas not only as a Bizongo sorcerer, but also as a tonton-makout, bringing the formidable threat of the secret police to bear on his domestic agenda. More generally, Duvalier's preference for the Bizongo societies, and their regional networks of hougans doubling as *chefs-de-sections* (rural section chiefs), are readily apparent in Davis's observations of Bizongo ritual and political organization.¹⁹ In his sensationalized search for the secrets of the Haitian zombie, Davis worked through Bizongo networks made available by his "principal informant—a man both deeply religious and deeply patriotic—who became the effective head of the Tonton Macoute for a full one-fifth of the country" (Davis 1988:270). As Davis explains, Duvalier was the first Haitian president to be personally involved in the appointment of each chef-de-section throughout Haiti, an interstitial position between the state and the peasantry that combined the formal administrative office with the shadow roles of hougan or Bizongo president and tonton-makout. That the chefs-de-sections were recruited from the peasantry further deepens the lowness thesis in that the power of deep knowledge expressed as segmentary opposition in the Yoruba context was transformed by the dialectics of Haitian class and color stratification into the revolutionary potential of the oppressed. Again, it cannot be overemphasized that Bizongo represented the wild side of Petwo in particular and Ginen at large, not as tradition upheld but as the hot iron that strikes. Elevated by François Duvalier into positions of inviolate power, the Bizongo presidents-cum-tonton-makouts were well versed in the official doctrines of the state. As one Bizongo leader proclaimed at a nocturnal séance:

Bizongo is the culture of the people, a culture attached to our past, just as letters and science have their place in the civilization of the elite. Just as all peoples and all races have a history, Bizongo has an image of the past, an image taken from an epoch that came before. It is an aspect of our national soul. [Davis 1988:266]

Such rote renderings of Papa Doc's noirisme were visually echoed by the preponderance of Haitian flags and presidential portraits decorating the Bizongo peristyle, which by 1984 celebrated the image of his son and successor, Baby Doc. But beneath the smiling face of the society, extending its nocturnal networks throughout the nation, was the nefarious hand of a shadow government that converted the revolutionary potential of the dispossessed into the dirty work of the regime.

François Duvalier's appropriation of the Bizongo societies to consolidate control illustrates that the power they wielded posed enough of a threat from below to be neutralized and redirected from above. By incorporating Petwo powers into his political arsenal and thus deepening his social base, Duvalier co-opted effective opposition and channeled it against the growing tide of bourgeois rebellion. Socially, politically, and economically deep in terms of class relations and racial ideologies, however, it remains to be shown how such sorcery and magic were culturally deep in terms of the deep-knowledge paradigm itself. I have shown that the Petwo line corresponds to the

revisionary and revolutionary powers of deep knowledge through its invocations of revolutionary leaders, such as Boukman and Makandal, and the incendiary ceremony at Bois Caiman; its association with fire, fission, transgression, and subversion; and, as a science of transformation, by its capacity to change the world. Riding their "horses" in violent possessions, the Petwo deities demand freedom from social, political, even bodily boundaries, opposing the authoritative order as upheld by Rada. To fully resolve the Petwo paradox according to a West African derived hermeneutical model, however, I must specify those strategies of revision and revaluation that characterize deep knowledge in more formal terms, as opposed to Rada and within Ginen at large.

revisions and reversals

If, from the official Rada perspective, the Petwo cults and Bizongo societies adulterate the true tradition with money and magic, such matters appear differently to insiders. Like the orisha cults in Yorubaland that serve alternative pantheons and hierarchies within the inner sanctums of their shrines, what is shallow and heterodox from the outside is deep and orthodox from within. As Larose points out, each society sees itself as the guardian of the true way, whatever its relative denomination, and the Petwo cults are no exception. For their followers and practitioners, the efficacy of such sorcery and magic offers tangible evidence of true Ginen. Moreover, available evidence of their deep-knowledge forms suggests that the most magical and creolized line of deities shares much with West African secret societies. Davis records that—just like the Poro secret society in West Africa—"central to Bizongo signs and signals of recognition is a notion of opposites," such that in a variety of ritual greetings, entrances and exits, "heaven becomes earth, the mouth becomes the anus, front is back, up is down, the eyes are ears, the knee is the elbow, the hand is the foot and the foot the hand" (Davis 1988:253). Although the Yoruba Ogboni Society deploys similar codes, such reversals and inversions of the normal are typical of most societies with secret passwords and languages and do not by themselves establish West African provenance. Many reversals play on Masonic symbols and even handshakes, suggesting an appropriation of European or Creole signs of secret power and value through secondary coding. But in relation to the Rada line that Petro opposes, such strategies of refiguration and appropriation are paradigmatically deep.²⁰

Among the Petwo lwa, for example, are found manifestations of Rada deities that have been transformed into hot and dangerous counterparts, indicated by various forms of "relexification." Thus the exalted Dambala Wedo [Ouida], often identified as the leader of the Rada gods, appears as Damballah-flangbo among the Petwo, where he has a "bad reputation" (Métraux 1972:89) along with other appropriated counterparts such as Ogu-yansan, Ezili-mapyang, Ezile-Dantor, and all other root names modified by the "Ge-rouge" cognomen of the notorious Secte Rouge.²¹ Not all Petwo deities mark Rada names with Petwo tags. Others appear to derive from Kongo, as well as Creole sources, giving rise to the rather literal-minded debate over the Creole versus Congo character of the Petwo line. The problem is characterized by at least two dimensions of semantic contrast; one between Creole versus African names, the other between West African (Dahomean, Yoruba) versus Kongo names. Thus a Creole like Don Pedro became a lwa, as opposed to Ogun-Badagary who came directly from Ginen. But even within the so-called Creole category ambiguities abound, in that Petro deities like Ti-Jean Petro represent African spirits who, like the slaves from the old country, were baptized or "re-christened" with European names (Métraux 1972:88).

The strategies of "relexification" have produced a bewildering variety of Haitian lwa, muddying the philological waters beyond possible genealogical reconstruction

(with proponents of the Dahomean, Kongo, and even Creole camps pushing their eponymous ancestors). I would argue that such attempts at reconstruction should be abandoned in favor of a fresh consideration of the strategies themselves, so as to view them in a different light. It is not the names of the deities, or even their attributes that provide the key to the origin of the Petwo line but the rhetorical devices of marking and "relexification" themselves, so clearly rooted in West African principles of hermeneutical revision and revaluation.

On a concrete level, the Petwo gods are a mixed group. They are indeed Creole, Kongo, and in some cases Dahomean (not to mention Ibo, Senegalese, etc.), merging together and breaking apart according to the dialectics of ritual empowerment and renewal. But such origins themselves are insignificant. What is significant, I would argue, are the more general principles by which they have coalesced into a powerful Petwo line *contra* the authority of Rada. This shift from elements to the broader ensemble solves a problem for those pushing the Kongo connection.

In his efforts to establish an unequivocally Kongo pedigree for the Petwo gods, de Heusch notes a glaring incongruity between their African ritual association with water and their connection with fire in parts of Haiti:

Although there is no doubt about the Kongo origin of *simbi*, *kita*, and *bumba*, their incorporation in voodoo raises a major problem. In central Africa, the aquatic aspect of these nature spirits is clearly marked whereas, in Haiti, they are associated with fire in the *petro* ritual. Among the Mpangu, the favorite abode of both the *simbi* and *nkita* is water . . . What is the explanation for almost all the Haitian *petro* loa and, in particular, the so-called Congo Savannah gods, being said to be hot and associated with fire? [1995:110]

De Heusch appeals to "the structural nature of syncretism" for the answer, providing what is essentially an ad hoc rule of binary contrast that effectively puts the cart before the horse. Because Petwo came to oppose Rada, and Rada were predominantly water deities, the water of Petwo was symbolically transformed into fire. He goes on to note an ambiguous or intermediary class of Nago Ogun deities that mediate between hot and cool in another ad hoc attempt to explain why even within the Rada line, some deities are hot, while some *petro* are friendly and cool (1995:113). These issues resolve without recourse to ad hoc rules and categories, however, by locating the Petwo gods more firmly within a Dahomean-Yoruba cosmological schema. The Yoruba material sketched above indicates how ritual valences of hot and cool mediated the dialectics of power and authority within historic kingdoms and took on the character of class relations in Haiti in the Petwo-Rada opposition. This does not imply, however, that all Rada are cool and all Petwo hot. Rather it implies that the terms of this opposition were already present in the Dahomean-Yoruba system, between categories of deities as distinguished by context. Just as the same Yoruba deities can be hot and cool with respect to authority relations, so the Haitian *lwa* can slide between camps, such that a Rada *lwa* in one *démembré*, town, or region serves the Petwo line in another. Within the corporate organization of every Vodou society or hounfor, I would argue, a relative hot and cool distinction will emerge along the lines of generational succession and structural fission as outlined on the *démembré*. With these formal properties appropriately distinguished, de Heusch's problem requires no external structural rules or assumptions.

Within the Ginen framework of Haitian Vodou, which evokes the Guinea coast of West Africa, devotees distinguish the cool, high Rada from the hot, low Petwo in an initial marked contrast between categories of gods. Within each category, the distinction is reproduced, such that Rada breaks into hot and cool, as does Petwo, extending

to whatever relevant subcategories the sociopolitical context supports. Cutting across this segmentary model is a diagonal slash, skewing the model by class to distinguish true Ginen from adulterated Petwo. In this diagonal opposition, Ginen is marked as a restricted or elite set of gods apart from the rest of the deities, which include Congo spirits, Creole ancestors, and those Rada gods marked with Petwo tags (Figure 2). Thus incorporated into a West African framework, the contradictions, incongruities, and ambiguities of Vodou begin to make sense. Ginen is at once the entire system, “a general concept that covers the full range of religious practices in Haiti” (Davis 1988:273; see also Beauvoir-Dominique 1995:167), and a marked subset distinguishing Rada from Petwo and other manifestations of magic, money, and sorcery (Larose 1977:85–86, 112) such as *pwen* (points), *zombies*, *djab* (devils), even *paket Kongo* (Thompson 1995).²² Within Rada and Petwo lines, cool and hot valences can further be found, giving rise not to de Heusch’s intermediary categories, but to fluid subdivisions.²³ In this general paradigm, Ginen is authoritative and cool; Petwo powerful and

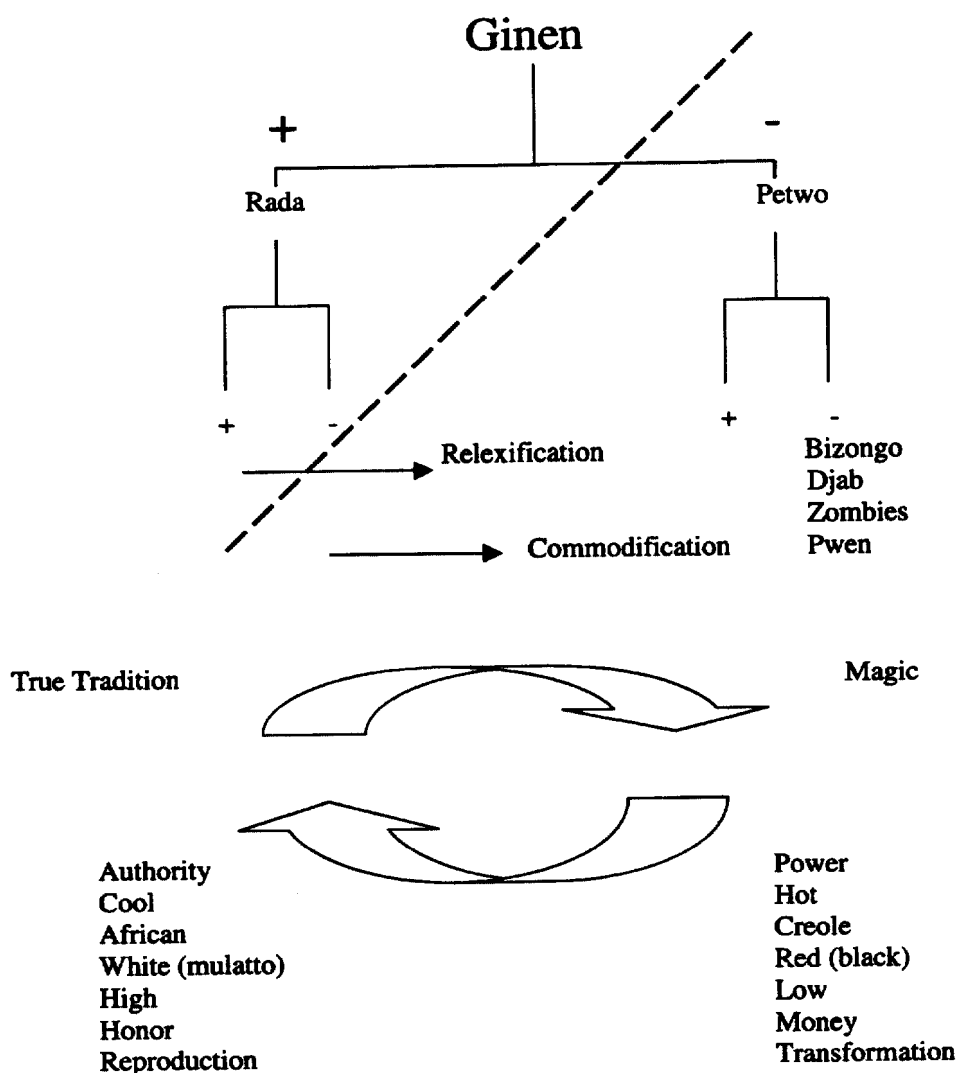


Figure 2. Power and Authority in Haitian Vodun.

hot. Petwo gods of Kongo origin thus shifted from water to fire not according to an abstract structural transformation as such, but because they were revalued—incorporated into a Dahomean–Yoruba scheme, whereby powerful opposition to authoritative hierarchy is ritually potent and hot.

Here is where deep knowledge illuminates an important process of creolization. It concerns the historical question of how the Rada line became hegemonic within Vodou in the first place, and how the Petwo line came to oppose it. The data on Vodou in colonial Saint Domingue are scarce and fragmentary. De Heusch cites evidence that the Kongo ritual enclaves were established by maroons who escaped from sugar plantations in the north and set up a base in Nansourkry, “the high place of the Kongo cult” (1995:116). Increasing imports of Congo slaves in the latter half of the 18th century would have enhanced the Kongo elements of the Petwo line. Thus positioned against Rada and bolstered by imports of Congolese slaves, Petwo remains a resolutely Kongo cultural complex for de Heusch. Like the Petwo powers of the ritual domain, he has taken on the struggle against Dahomean hegemony in Haitian Vodou, arguing, along with Thompson (1995), for greater appreciation of Central African contributions. What he cannot explain, however, is why Petwo became a residual category for all non-Rada families of gods, including Creole deities and those of other African nations such as Ibo, Zandor, Wangoles, Kanga, Bambara, even Siningal (i.e., Senegal, see Courlander 1973:331). To take such lumping into account in the making of a Creole religion and society requires a final if brief excursion into the slippery notion of the *nanchon* (nation). Underlying much of my discussion of Rada and Petwo families or lines, the nation holds a critical place in the dynamics of creolization in Haiti.

Historically, the notion of nation referred to categories of slaves in colonial Saint Domingue, combining European ideas about different African “races” with behavioral stereotypes, food preferences, and ports of embarkation. As in Cuba and Brazil, some nations—like the so-called true Congos—were cast as better house slaves while others, like Ibos, were seen as superior laborers in the field. The actual stereotypes associated with different nations varied within as well as throughout the plantation colonies, reflecting the prejudices of slave owners and traders in addition to segmented productive relations on the ground. As Larose (1977:101) points out, however, French planters generally avoided organizing work crews by ethnicity, preferring to mix and mingle different nations in a variation of divide and rule.²⁴ Owners evaluated slaves by their capacities to assimilate, and the salient distinction between house and field slaves developed less between imputed nations as such and more between Creoles and newly arrived Africans (*bossales*). Creolization among African slaves was thus central to the stratification of the slave community, associating higher status with greater degrees of cultural and racial assimilation. On the one hand, nations were ranked within the colonial ideology according to their supposedly innate capacities of work and assimilation. On the other hand, their social significance was structurally skewed by the division of labor between *bossales* and Creoles. Culturally, many of the status markers of the French plantocracy distinguishing European civilization from African barbarism were replicated within the exploited class, differentiating mulattos and black Creoles from the ill-fated survivors of the Middle Passage.

It is thus significant and initially perplexing to find, in Moreau de Saint-Méry's classic account of colonial Saint Domingue, that the dog-eating Radas (Aradas) were known for their bloody customs and ferocity, were deemed least capable of all Africans to learn French or Creole, and that their women were rarely employed as domestics due to their quarrelsome characters as ceaseless talkers (1797:31). Using the same

pernicious tokenism, Moreau de Saint-Méry writes that the banana-eating Congos (excepting the cannibal Mondongues) were sweet and gay, "loving song, dance and ornaments they make excellent domestics, while their intelligence, their facility in speaking a pure Creole . . . makes them preferred for house service" (1797:32). In this account, the Rada nation appears at the bottom of the colonial status hierarchy, closest to African barbarism and thus sent to work the fields, whereas the Congo nation, closer to Europeans, is portrayed as intelligent and attractive, speaking a pure Creole with a reassuring *joie-de-vivre*.²⁵ I call this characterization perplexing because within Vodou their positions were already reversed. The same text, published before the Haitian revolution, identifies the Aradas (of the Rada nation) as "the true practitioners of *Vaudoux* in the colony, maintaining its principles and rules," adding that "*Vaudoux* signifies a supernatural and all-powerful being, upon which all the events on the globe depend" (1797:46, my translations). There is much rich detail on the dances and services associated with Rada Vodou and its alternative forms. These details deserve close examination, but the relevant point for my general argument is that—if Moreau de Saint-Méry's depictions are in any way typical of colonial ideology—the Rada–Petwo distinction within Vodou was already a reversal of status relations on the ground, with the hegemonic Rada appropriating high cultural markers in contrast to the low valences of Congo and Creole deities of the nascent Petwo line. Within Vodou, the social and ritual nations, and the growing opposition between African and Creole that subsumed them, were reversed. This moment of radical revaluation put Africans on top and their Kongo–Creole brothers and sisters below. After this turning point, and the political revolution that followed, the nations—realigned with the *lakou* and *démembré*—would never be the same.

Thus through a characteristic reversal, the Nago and Rada nations inverted the social hierarchy of Africans and Creoles to become hegemonic within Vodou.²⁶ What was socially low became ritually high, endowed with the authority of Ginen and the weight of tradition. And what was socially high within the slave community became ritually low, embodying the power of sorcery and its dubious means. This ritual reversal, unacknowledged in the historiography of Haitian Vodou, is essential to the solution of the Petwo paradox because it explains how Rada became hegemonic in the first place, appropriating elite markers of social class within Vodou in contrast to the socially low icons and idioms of Petwo, and why the latter came to assimilate Kongo and Creole elements alike. Against the grain of Vodou ideology, the deep-knowledge paradigm reveals not the African Rada against the creolized Petwo, but the equal creolization of both categories of powers according to a deeper dialectic of ritual reversal and mediation.

conclusion

If the deep-knowledge paradigm derived from West Africa helps resolve the Petwo paradox, what does such an exercise prove? If I am not simply backtracking to Herskovits's African baseline, then what am I saying about African origins? And as Mudimbe (1990, 1994) might ask, "which idea of Africa" is guiding my investigation?

By deploying a Yoruba hermeneutical model, I am not implying that Haitian Vodou came from Yorubaland. This is decidedly not the point. I have used the ethnic label loosely, as inspired by my research in Nigeria, to represent a regionally coherent set of political forms and ritual practices underlying Dahomean and Yoruba variations. These variations are in some sense echoed by the Rada and Nago nations of Haitian Vodou even as these were transformed and distorted by colonial conditions and ideologies.²⁷ The idea is not to identify Fon or Yoruba elements or gods, but to

locate a general interpretive framework that informed the invention of Vodou in Haiti and its political advances and retreats. Clearly, the West African model I have in mind is as dynamic and variable as its Caribbean counterpart. By identifying the revisionary power of the deep-knowledge paradigm in relation to hierarchical authority structures, I have isolated the critical connection between West African and Haitian ritual distinctions of hot versus cool, low versus high, and political transformation versus authoritative reproduction.²⁸ Moreover, this connection is important for what it reveals—in this case the emergence of the Haitian Rada–Petwo divide in relation to class formation, color stratification, and the developmental cycle of the rural *démembre*.

Haitian Vodou is above all a creolized religion. My appeal to a West African hermeneutics of power in solving the Petwo paradox is not directed at recovering the African heritage as such, but in illuminating the dynamics of cultural invention in the Creole Caribbean. As Vodou appropriated European icons and idioms into Rada codes and choreographies, associating the authority of Africa with Haiti's privileged elites, Petwo became a structurally hot category for incorporating Kongo, Creole, and other African elements into a ritually low-oppositional phalanx. What the deep-knowledge framework reveals are the revisionary mechanisms by which this basic opposition took shape; how, for instance, Rada as against Congo and Creole slaves reversed status locations; how Kongolese water spirits were turned into fire; how Rada root lwa were revalued and given Petwo tags; how Petwo gods came to embody the spirit of a revolutionary class; and, thus, why Duvalier appropriated Bizongo networks to neutralize rebellion and deepen his social base. Nor is the Rada–Petwo opposition purely parochial. In Cuba, a similar divide between the orisha of Santería and the Kongo-based practices of Palo-Monte and Mayombé recapitulates the same tension between a pure tradition and a deeper, if more polluted, sorcery (Argyriadis 2000), as do the Yoruba gods of Candomblé against the Bantu spirits of Makumba in Brazil (Bastide 1978:285–303).

In each of these cases, African, Creole, and even Amerindian spirits populate an ideological field of stereotypes, and this field brings me back to the idea of Africa. What the Rada nation protects as genuinely Ginen against the powerful, if polluting, innovations of Petwo occludes the critical transatlantic connection underlying the opposition itself, misleading scholars into fruitless debates over what is Creole and what is Kongo. The ideology of Africa within Vodou is of course important for what it signifies about status and class, but unless scholars bring an underlying model to bear against such ideological claims, they are forced to accept or reject them on their own terms. I have deployed the deep-knowledge paradigm in just this sense, as a substrate—to borrow a concept from Creole linguistics—with which ritual ideologies of Africa can be compared.²⁹ Applied to Vodou, I have shown that the most creolized category of spirits is ritually the most deep, conforming to a Dahomean–Yoruba grammar of revision and empowerment that is otherwise invisible or considered unknowable.

The question “which idea of Africa?” can thus be answered in relation to a range of positions that frame the major debates. Scholars can, with Herskovits, identify specific elements in Haitian Vodou known to Fon and Yoruba pantheons, although my concern is more with their revisionary principles. In this sense, the notion of a cultural hermeneutic bears some relation to Herskovits's concept of cultural focus (Herskovits 1966:59), although more dynamic and dialectical than his posited core values. I also follow Bastide (1971, 1978) in emphasizing the “new social frameworks” in which African ritual systems were relocated, and how this in turn shaped their development. By highlighting a broad and flexible Dahomean–Yoruba complex, however, I share with Mintz and Price (1992) a more abstract notion of “cognitive orientations”

(1992:53) or dispositions transcending specific West African cultures but common to many, emerging as a communicative framework on the slave ships and giving shape to Creole cultural innovations in the politically charged encounters between Africans and New World Europeans. Crucial to their argument is a move away from African retention and a view toward creolization and cultural invention according to a general grammar of value systems. But I also can appreciate the displacement of Africa from terra firma into the "tropics of discourse" (White 1978). Moving further afield from the concept of origins, and effectively jettisoning it altogether, Scott (1991) assimilates all retrievable African pasts to the ideologies and discourses in which they are expressed. What is significant from this perspective are not knowable connections but the conditions under which they are asserted or denied. And finally, with Gilroy (1993), the very shape of the African diaspora has radically changed, no longer a vector out of Africa to the Americas, but a triangulated field of European, African, and Caribbean confrontations and exchanges bringing "the black Atlantic" into graduated focus and form.

If my own application of a West African interpretive paradigm to problems of syncretism and creolization in the New World falls somewhere between Bastide's sociology and the Mintz and Price encounter model, I do not offer it as the only approach. As the Petwo paradox illuminates the dynamics of creolization in Haiti, it also does so—following Scott—in relation to the ideologies of elites, of Vodou practitioners, and of *noirisme* alike as part of the picture on the ground. Recall how the Bizongo priest quoted by Davis incorporated *noiriste* rhetoric into his official *séance*. Or recall how the threat of the *tonton-makouts* confronted Ginen on the rural *démembre*. Ideological inventions of an authentic Africa, whether by nationalist elites or a rural peasantry, bear directly on the politics and practice of Vodou in its most traditional sites and guises. But they do this in relation to a critical substrate that continues to exist even when ideologically denied. Moreover, this substrate model is not committed to simple vectorial dispersion out of Africa. For when readers return, with Gilroy, from Haiti back to Africa, following those circuits of transatlantic trade that creolized the Guinea Coast for at least four centuries, they find the fetishism of the foreign extending well into the hinterland.³⁰

If the problem of African origins has been progressively displaced in studies of the African diaspora, it always returns. And when it does, as the Petwo paradox suggests, critical models from West Africa disclose the negative dialectics of New World inventions. The criteria of recognizing an indigenous Africa may remain under debate, but they do not remain under permanent erasure. Even Mudimbe concludes his critique of the genealogy of gnosis in Africanist discourse with the final judgment that "the space interrogated by the series of explorations in African indigenous systems of thought is not a void" (1988:200). In this article, it is the depth and span of such a nonempty space that I have explored, beneath and across the waters.

notes

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1. I use the term *Afro-American studies* inclusively, as an initial academic designation that later developed into rubrics such as Black Studies, Africana Studies, African American Studies, and African Diaspora Studies.

2. My extended fieldwork in Nigeria (1982–84) was generously funded by Fulbright-Hays and the Social Science Research Council, whose support I gratefully acknowledge.
3. See Bascom 1944 for the first sustained attempt to identify the extralineage bases of orisha cults.
4. Pemberton (1977:12–14) has noted multiple orisha represented on the altars of town shrines in Ila Orangun, such as Oshun, Osanyin, and Shopona under Obatala, but neglected the structural bases of such clusters. Barber describes the orisha as “at once fragmented and fused” (1981:736), but attributes this property to “the intense personal nature of the *òrìsà*-devotee relationship” as modeled on the politics of Big Manship. See also Apter 1995 and McKenzie 1997:477–487.
5. See Barber (1981:738–740) and Apter (1998) for discussions of Yoruba secrecy as a critical ritual resource, and Buckley (1976, 1985) for an extended discussion of secrecy within a dialectic of revelation and concealment in Yoruba medicine.
6. When applied to the Dogon case, this revisionary approach to deep knowledge vitiates Van Beek’s critique of Griaule (Van Beek 1991) because the content of the esoterica is contextually and historically specific.
7. The *fundamentos* or “fundamentals” of Cuban Santería, for example, refer to the blood, stones, and herbs of ritual sacrifice and investiture that embody the concentrated essence or vital power of the deity. See Bascom (1950).
8. One of the earliest written accounts of the Bois Caiman is Dalmas 1814:117, based on the testimony of Ignace, a slave from one of the burned plantations of Gallifet who was captured and tried before the court of Cap-Français (Laguerre 1989:61). Whether myth, history, or most likely some combination of both, the event was enshrined by Price-Mars (1928) and became something of a charter for *noirisme*. See also Fick 1990:92–94, 104–105.
9. Brown (1991:100–101) associates the Rada and Petwo distinction with “two archetypal social groups: family members and foreigners, insiders and outsiders, the oppressed and their oppressors,” an interesting position that works to a limited extent, because Petwo are outside official channels and are worshipped outside the family *hounfor* (temple), but cannot account for the revolutionary spirits among the Petwo. She further posits Ogou as a mediate *lwa*, a position I criticize while engaging de Heusch 1995:113.
10. According to John Goldsmith, the phonological shift from /d/ to /t/ in Romance and Bantu languages alike is a virtual impossibility (personal communication, November 6, 2000).
11. Dunham 1994:27 refers to this highest stage of initiation as “*prix-des-yeux*,” parallel to “*prix-de-cloche*” in Congo Vodou. She provides the gloss “‘prize-of-eyes’ or ‘price-of-eyes’; clairvoyance” (1994:279).
12. Métraux (1972:68) reports that priests who lack training and claim knowledge directly from the *lwa* are known as “*hungan-macoutte*,” a disparaging term that curiously resonates with the sorcery of those Bizongo priests who became *tonton-makouts* under François Duvalier (discussed below), suggesting the illegitimacy of power outside of authority.
13. For a video of two Orisha *iyagba* neophytes as they are released by water in Ayede-Ekiti, Nigeria, see Apter and Loew 1991.
14. The same principle of inheritance and associated forms of segmentation and fission are found in Yorubaland where individually acquired land devolves per stirpes, among children of co-wives (Lloyd 1962:296–300).
15. For an intensive analysis of such developmental cycles and the branches generated by segmentation, see Larose 1978.
16. Brown’s rich account of Vodou based on the priestess Mama Lola reveals “a matrilineal family tree” establishing a “parallel kinship structure buried beneath the official versions,” one that may well reflect the *de facto* importance of property-owning matri-segments (Brown 1991:16–17). See Schwab 1955 for a Yoruba parallel.
17. Laguerre (1989:45–47, 72, 79–81) locates the birth of secret societies such as Bizongo with the rise of colonial maroon communities and groups, some of which were nomadic, raising the interesting possibility that the sorcery of dispossession and landlessness was historically associated with nomadic maroons. He also argues that after the revolution peasants joined Bizongo societies to protect those lands initially allocated by Dessalines’s agrarian reform (1804–06).

from reappropriation by the black and mulatto elite, framing the authority of the lakou externally, in relation to an extractive class. If true, this latter argument complicates the opposition between Ginen and sorcery within the lakou by relating the tensions generated by its developmental cycle to the incursions of this extractive class. According to Laguerre, Bizongo "belongs to the family of strong spirits, born in time immemorial in Africa," thereby assuming the character of Ginen with respect to authority (1989:74), a view very much at odds with Larose (1977) but possibly explained by such externally protective functions.

18. Laguerre witnessed the return of François Duvalier after his death as "loa 22," dressed "in a dark suit and black hat, wearing heavy reading glasses and holding a pistol in his right hand" and so named to commemorate his lucky number 22 (1989:118).

19. Laguerre (1989:101–120) usefully distinguishes between the political support Duvalier gained from Vodou temple networks in his electoral victory and his use of Vodou secret societies (such as Bizongo) to extend his network of secret police and thus strengthen his authoritarian control.

20. Many scholars including Laguerre (1980; 1989:74) derive Bizongo from the spirit protector of Bissagot slaves.

21. As Hurston explains: "There is a long list of [Petwo] spirits who have the same names as the Rada gods except that the second name distinguishes them from the Rada. 'Ge-rouge' after a name places that god in the Petros or the Congos" (1990:167). Rada names not only function as root morphemes but refer to spirits that Haitians call "root *lwa*" (*lwa rasin*), thus underscoring their marked Petwo forms (Brown 1991:100).

22. In this respect, the relation of Ginen to Petwo follows Dumont's concept of hierarchy as "the encompassing of the contrary" (1980:240).

23. Criticizing de Heusch's ethnography, one of the anonymous reviewers of this article noted that Simbi spirits are often associated with water. I would take this association as evidence of a cool subdivision within the hot Petwo line.

24. See Bastide for a similar division of the nations in Brazil "for the purpose of fomenting interethnic rivalries and so preventing the development of class consciousness and a general revolt of the blacks against the whites" (1978:61).

25. Corroborative evidence of this status hierarchy within the slave community comes from Debien (1974:50), who cites similar passages from Degrandpré (1801:75) and Malenfant (1814). Larose claims, however, that "Radas were considered the most intelligent group: hard workers they were said to learn easily and be good domestics, which quite agrees with their present status as 'white' spirits" (1977:102). I would suggest that Larose is confusing their position in the slave community with their status in Vodou (see below).

26. Blier (1995a:20) prefers a psychological over a political approach to the power of secrecy, although many of her readings support the deep-knowledge paradigm.

27. In her superb ethnography, Rosenthal (1998) shows how the Ewe are centrally placed within this regional cultural field, with a form of Vodou (Gorovodu) associated with Banguelle slave spirits that are clearly related to the Haitian Petwo. Again, it is not the direct link I am looking for, but a translocal and transethnic regional framework. In this respect, it is more significant that Ewe, Fon, and Yoruba share the same complex of ritual schemas and deities that characterize the cultural history of the slave coast. See also Blier (1995b).

28. For an extension (or, perhaps, retraction) of this paradigm into the body, in terms of the hot and cool valences of circulating blood associated with vital disequilibrium and equilibrium, see Brodwin 1996:8–96, Buckley 1985, and Laguerre 1987. In the future, I will explore these associations within a cultural economy of the body.

29. Lefèbvre (1986, 1993) and Singler (1993) argue that Haitian Creole has a Fon grammatical substrate, a position opposed by Chaudenson (1990) in his "superstrate thesis." See Mufwene 1990, 1993 for a clarification of the debates. For a different structural model derived from Creolistics, see Drummond 1980. Drummond applies Bickerton's concept of an "intersystem" (Bickerton 1975) to capture the dynamic patterning of ethnic designations in Guyana. The relevance of creolistics to models of cultural creolization in the Caribbean is of great theoretical and comparative significance.

30. European imports from muskets and gin to cloth and coins have been incorporated into Yoruba ritual and royal regalia since at least the early 19th century, as the Landers' first visit to Old Oyo revealed. The Benin bronzes and carved elephant tusks are famous for incorporating Portuguese powers into the heads of kings, and at least one carved royal leopard is spotted with European cartridge shells. For accounts of gift giving and ceremonial exchange between European traders and explorers and African chiefs along the Niger Delta coast and up the Niger River, see Allen 1848, Baikie 1856, Jones 1963, Laird and Oldfield 1837, Lander and Lander 1832, and Mockler-Ferryman 1892. For creolized ritual forms and associations developed by freed slaves settling in Freetown, Sierra Leone, see Nunley 1987.

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