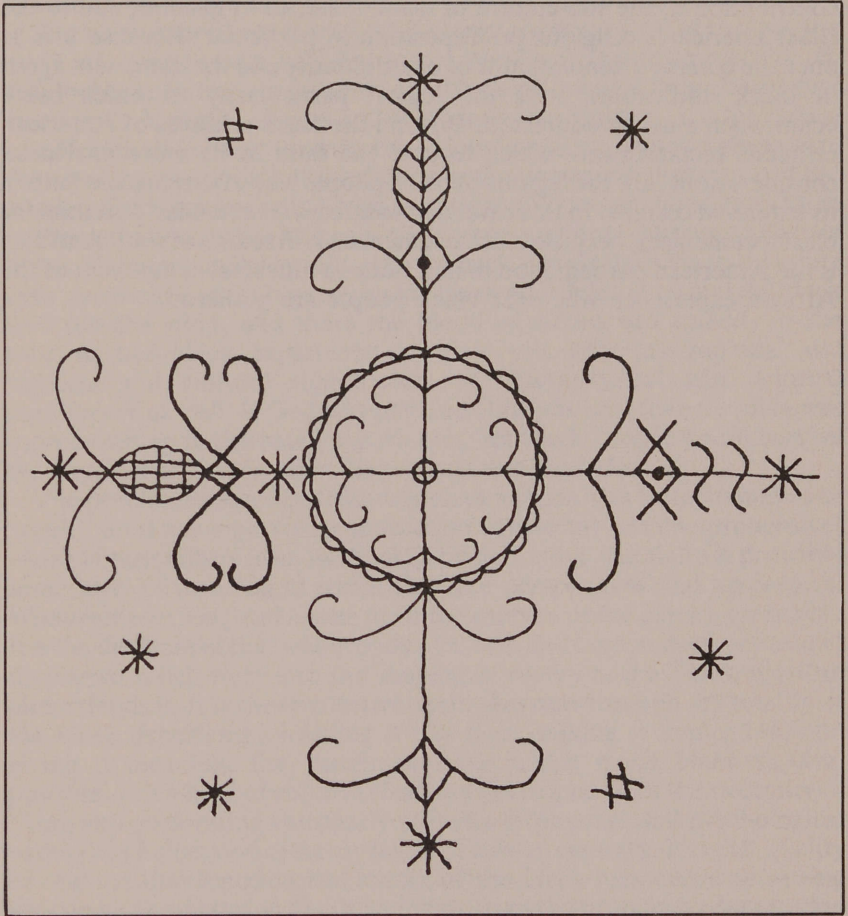


By Karen McCarthy Brown*

The Center and the Edges: God and Person in Haitian Society



The *vèvè*¹ of the Vodou god Simbi
with its *pwé*

¹ The *vèvè* are intricate, abstract drawings done in cornmeal on the beaten earth floor of the Vodou temple. There is one for each of the major deities and they are called "doorways to Gîné," Gîné being the mythical home of the gods as well as the Haitian Creole word for Africa. When animal sacrifices are made to the gods, they are placed on the *vèvè*, as are all sorts of food offerings. The drawings are transitory, disappearing under the dancing feet of the worshippers in the course of a ceremony.

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Religion is the most complete and condensed communication that a culture makes about itself. Among the media used in this communication process—myth, creed, philosophy, dance, the visual arts, to name only a few—the latter, in some ways, seem best suited to bear the necessary strain of being at once inclusive and simple. Certain forms of religious art, mandalas and sandpaintings for instance, are well-known for this quality. They are microcosms, pictures of the outer *and* the inner cosmos, the universe and the self. In other words they are total pictures; they say it all; they lack nothing. Yet, these same images are simple, direct, unmixed and whole. The *vèvè* of Haitian Vodou, cornmeal drawings done on the beaten-earth floor of the Vodou temple to call the various gods of this New World religion, should be added to the list.

In this paper I plan to explore the *vèvè* primarily as self-images, to draw from them, by means of a type of structural analysis, something of the Haitian idea of self. It should be noted that, immediate impressions to the contrary, this is more a sociological than psychological enterprise since the interest is in the shared image of self or personhood operative in Haitian social institutions—temple, family, job, and so forth. It will be shown that for the Vodou worshipper, each person is at the core of her or his being, a multiplicity of beings, a polymorphous entity, and that it is only at the periphery of life, in areas less important to that person, that he or she adopts clearly definable, and consistent roles or modes of being. This analysis stands on its own terms and has value in itself as insight into Haitian culture and religion, yet it has the added advantage of providing a striking comparison for the Western, and particularly American, self-image. In this culture when we set out to look for the true self, the core of our beings, we expect to find a single, indivisible, immutable, hard-rock of a self—the ‘real me.’ Perhaps the most important quality ascribed to this self is consistency, a view diametrically opposed to the Haitian view. It need hardly be pointed out that in both cultures the image of self is crucial in areas of life ranging from family relations to international relations.

This is not primarily a theoretical paper, although a number of such issues that it raises are surely important ones. Therefore before going on to the analysis itself a few comments are necessary. Most of the *vèvè*, like many mandalas are totally abstract. There is no recognizable object in the drawings. Yet this abstraction is of a very special sort. The abstract quality of the *vèvè* is not like that of number, for instance. ‘One’ can indicate one person, one idea or one carrot, but in itself ‘one’ is not necessarily involved with any of these. The abstractness is of a different sort in religious art. It is as if numbers and mandalas reached the same point of abstraction by going different ways around the circle. Number is abstract because nothing of the particular situations in which it occurs clings to it after the fact; religious images are abstract because *every* situation in which they have arisen or could arise is ‘contained’ in them. Number transcends reality; the religious abstraction condenses and retains it. That is why such images (think of Tantric paintings) evoke experiential associations, and lists of numbers do not.

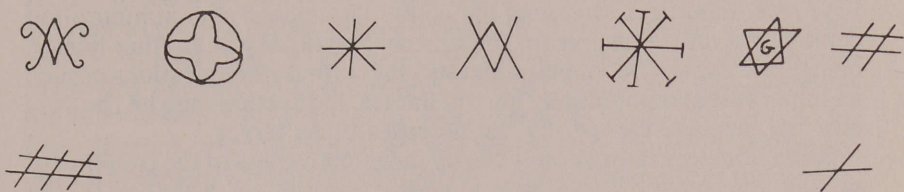
This paper begins with the observation that this is so about abstract religious art and offers as possible explanation the hypothesis, derived from structuralism, that it is so because the abstract image somehow mirrors the structure of the human mind. The argument is that the *vèvè* are literally diagrams (that is not quite the right word) of Haitian culture, or if you prefer, of the Haitian mind. And furthermore, that they are 'diagrams', so basic, so close to the root of the structuring or meaning-creating process of the human mind in general that, without losing their peculiarly Haitian quality, they approach the universal. (I think it is no accident that *vèvè* and mandalas are visually similar.) Yet it should be stressed that the culture-specific nature of the drawings is never transcended completely. The Haitian engaged with the *vèvè* in the process of meaning creation may begin on a level that is virtually universal in human experience—up is associated with the sky, down with the earth—but he or she will soon be making associations that are peculiar to the Haitian experience, e.g. up is associated with a fiery, uncompromising group of gods known as the Petro gods, down with the more manageable and benevolent gods of Africa, those called Rada. I do not wish to defend this theory with lengthy theoretical discussion, but rather to support the hypothesis by an analysis of one aspect of the *vèvè* themselves.

This paper is concerned with one visual relationship, that between the center and the edges of the *vèvè*. The analysis consists of an exploration of the semantic space of that opposition. The *vèvè* are plugged into paradigmatic networks that extend across the full range of communication systems within the culture—words, movements, music, language, dress, food, manners and so forth. This is only a small part of a much more extensive analysis of the *vèvè* that I have done elsewhere.

Whenever the *vèvè* are drawn in a Vodou ceremony, the first line is, almost without exception, one that is set at a right angle to the base of the center pole of the Vodou temple known as the *poteau-mitan*, and extends outward from that pole to the feet of the priest doing the drawing. The only other observable constant in the process of the drawing of the *vèvè* is the series of final movements. After everything else is complete in the drawing *pwè* or points are added around the outer edges of the design. (See the drawing on p. 1.) The diachronic emphasis given to these two motifs—the one is always first, the other always last—combines with several other ritual, theological and architectural situations in which transformations of these two terms are set in opposition to one another.

The Pwè

Our discussion begins from the edges, the *pwè*. *Pwè* may be simple dots; or four, six, or more frequently eight-armed stars; or Masonic signs; or crosses made in small mounds of cornmeal where the design is described in negative rather than positive space; or parallel and intersecting lines, like elaborated tick-tack-toe games. More rarely the *pwè* are figurative elements that have an iconographic relationship to the particular god in whose *vèvè* they appear.



The major types of *pwê*

The *pwê* are said to indicate the nature and degree of the power of the gods, or *loa* as the Haitians call them, for whom the *vèvè* are being drawn. Unlike other elements in the *vèvè* which remain fairly constant from one temple to another, the *pwê* added to a particular god's symbol tend to vary considerably from one priest to the next. Undoubtedly this is evidence of theological differences among the priests.

Pwê is one of the most fascinating and complex words in Haitian Creole. In addition to the elements of the *vèvè* that go by that name, there is a charm or power object that is called a *pwê*. Sometimes an actual bundle of things, more often invisible, *pwê* have both negative and positive functions. They can protect against human malevolence or natural disaster and they can insure the productivity of fields or the fertility of a woman.² There are several other situations peculiar to Vodou in which the word is used. A person can be initiated "on the point (*pwê*)" of a particular god, or become a priest "on the point". The latter is thought to be a lesser sort of priesthood than the priesthood *assôgwé*, a term referring to the *asson* or rattle with which a priest directs the Vodou ceremony. In addition it is possible to call a god "on the point" of one of the pantheons. The *loa* Simbi for instance appears in both the major pantheons of Vodou gods, Rada and Petro.³ The personality of the god is determined by the "point" on which he is summoned. Maya Deren calls the *pwê* a "line of force or point of contact with the loa world."⁴ This quite perceptive definition seems to fit all of the above uses of the term, yet it is not broad enough to include the term in its secular context.

² Harold Courlander, *The Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People*. (Berkeley: Univer. of California Press, 1960), pp. 98-99.

³ Rada and Petro are the two major pantheons of gods in Haitian Vodou. The Petro pantheon, for the most part, is composed of gods that have arisen in the New World. The Rada gods, by contrast, are African in origin. In earlier days there were several other major groups of gods with names deriving from different areas in Africa. However, in recent times and especially in and around the cities of Haiti, the families of gods have narrowed to two: Rada and Petro.

⁴ Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Voodoo Gods of Haiti* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Delta, 1970), p. 335.

On singing or sending the point

In Haiti, the means by which anger or hurt in interpersonal relations gets communicated is most often the *châaté pwê*, singing the point, or the *voyé pwê*, sending or throwing the point. This means of communication exhibits not only a respect for the privacy and dignity of another human being, but also a wisdom that suggests that, with communications of such an important and potentially hurtful nature, indirection may be the only way the message can get by the defenses of its target.

Some homely examples may clarify the effectiveness of the tradition of singing the point. There was a young *mambo* or priestess in the Port-au-Prince region whom I will call Suzanne, who had as her lover the son of another *mambo*, a woman who had long been her friend. The young man for one reason or another became inattentive to Suzanne, so that she, feeling there was no future in the relationship, became involved with another man. The mother of the first young man was highly offended by what she interpreted as Suzanne's infidelity and their friendship suffered because of it. Suzanne, wishing to communicate to her friend that she was exaggerating a situation that need not be taken so seriously, took the occasion of a Vodou ceremony which they both were attending to sing the following song.

M'a krié
 O kâ'm pèdi màmâ mwê m'a rélé!
 M'a rélé
 O kâ'm pèdi màmâ mwê krié!
 Kâ'm pèdi yo gasô mwê jwèn lòt O!
 Kâ'm pèdi yo gasô mwê jwèn lòt O!
 M'a rèlè
 O kâ'm pèdi màmâ mwê m'a krié!

I will cry
 Oh when I lose my mother I will shout!
 I will shout
 Oh when I lose mother I cry!
 When I lose a young man I find another, Oh!
 When I lose a young man I find another, Oh!
 I will shout
 Oh, when I lose my mother I will cry.

The songs that are used to 'sing the point' are invariably popular songs, ones that everyone knows. They are not made up on the spot, *ad hoc*. The name of the offender is never mentioned. What is more, *châaté pwê* are usually Vodou songs. Because they are well-known religious songs, one need not make an occasion to sing them; yet, because the antennae of the Haitians are finely tuned to such indirect communication, they rarely fail to communicate their message.

In Vodou ceremonies the gods themselves often 'sing the point.' As a hypothetical example, a god could arrive in the head of a worshipper and sing the same song that Suzanne sang to her friend. But, let us suppose, that in this case the god was offended by a particular young woman present at the service who was spending too much time pursuing her lovelife and was neglecting her duties to the god. The *point*, that lovers are transcendent while 'parents', divine or human, are irreplaceable, would

remain the same, even though the context would change the message.

Singing the point need not always take place in religious settings. One of the most illuminating stories of this technique being used in ordinary social intercourse came from a good friend, who told me the story of his attempt to court a certain young woman in Port-au-Prince. Her family, like his, was destitute. Since the mother saw no possibility of the daughter improving her economic status through this liaison, she disapproved of the relationship. She did not, of course, tell the young man that to his face. Instead, one day while he was visiting her daughter she busied herself preparing a meal, out of sight but not out of earshot of the couple, and all the while she was working she sang a song, the refrain of which was "*dé még pa fri*," two lean (pieces of meat) cannot fry.⁵

A means of communication similar to singing the point is sending the point, *voyé pwê*. In essence, it is the same thing, but without music. If a person is offended by his neighbor who, for example, never reciprocates his gestures of hospitality, he may well choose to give vent to his displeasure by standing in his courtyard and delivering a sermon on manners, mentioning no names, and addressing no one in particular, but of course fully aware that his neighbor is sitting just on the other side of the wall. Of if the offense is particularly grave and the need for communication immediate, a person may, in towering rage, simply turn his back on the offender and air his opinions as if talking to himself, again mentioning no names. This is to *voyé pwê*, to send the point.

The Haitian use of nicknames, which are called *nô dé pwe* or point names, is another example of the same type of indirect communication which nevertheless has a clear and direct message. A *mambo* or priestess with whom I worked was known as Sansami, Without-friends; in taking the name she communicated something of the lonely power of the Vodou priestess. On the other end of the spectrum there was the man who named his dog Konfianse, Confidant. With more irony than charity, he told the world that the only one a person could trust was his dog. The *nô dé pwê* is extremely common in Haitian society and, it seems, particularly in the Vodou world. In the quasi-Christian baptism ceremony that comes at the end of Vodou initiation rites, the initiate is given a sacred *nô de pwê*. *The pwê as word or name*

It now appears why Maya Deren's definition of the pwê as a "line of force or point of contact with the loa world" is inadequate to explain the total concept of pwê in the Haitian Creole speaking world. Her definition does not account for 'singing the point' or 'sending the point' or for 'point names', situations that establish points of contact between persons as well as between persons and gods. An alternative to Deren's definition emerges in a broader and more general definition of the pwê as a word or name. In the first instance, this understanding of pwê includes the notion of the creativity of the word. In the second instance, it includes the notion that a given or first name is both an indirect, and a condensed and contentful statement about the character of the person who bears it. In

⁵ In Haitian Creole, as in French, the verb 'to fry' has slang sexual connotations.

Western culture this attitude toward naming is vestigial at best, but most of us know that Peter means rock and there surely must be something of the old attitude toward names in the minds of parents who name a daughter Faith or Hope.

In all situations the *pwê* are involved in the process of focusing and articulating that is called naming. In the *pwê* as charm, the powers of the gods are brought to bear on a single point, for a specific purpose or set of purposes. The spirit evoked in the *pwê* is named as protector-from-lightning or bringer-of-fertility. In the use of the term in such expressions as 'calling on the point' or 'being initiated on the point' of a particular god or group of gods, the purpose is to articulate the specific relationship of the god or the worshipper to a total field of existential possibilities. When the god Simbi is called 'on the point of Petro,' he is named as a Petro god. When a *mambo* is initiated 'on the point of Guede,' she is naming her guardian *loa* and the Guede within herself as well. A priest or priestess 'on the point' is one who knows the 'words' or 'names'. Such a priestess can invoke the gods, but she cannot control them. She does not have the power—the *asson*. Furthermore when a Haitian 'sings the point,' or 'sends the point,' a name is being given to a particular person or situation. For instance, that person may be named Ungrateful, or Worthless. In all cases the *pwê* are specific, contentful articulations. They are judgments on, or labels for, persons or situations. They are names.

This understanding of the meaning of the term *pwê* was reinforced by a conversation I had with a Vodou priest. I asked him to explain to me the complex and interesting wall decoration of his temple. He had magnificent realistic portraits of the gods, that is of the Catholic saints who had been conflated with the Vodou *loa*, painted on the walls of his temple and the walls of his many and elaborate altar rooms. Surrounding the images and filling the total wall space were a series of multicolored dots, and other abstract design motifs. These he said are "*mô â lâgâj*," words in the sacred language; they are the "names of the *loa*," "they are *pwê*." These visual names or words were the same elements that I had identified as *pwê* in the *vèvè*.

All naming is at once a gain and a loss. What is a gain in articulation is also a loss in fullness of vision. In this respect, the act of naming can be compared to a certain photographic process. In a photograph of a crowd of people, one face can be brought out from the crowd and rendered in exquisite detail. The price that is paid for the fine articulation of a single face, however, is that all other faces become background, a uniform blur. Similarly, to name is to raise to the level of the articulate one characteristic or personality trait from the total field of existential possibilities, and so to send all others into the blur of background. To *voyé pwê*, to send the point to a negligent neighbor is to name him as the antisocial one; it is to focus on and articulate his failing, but to do so also limits him. It diminishes his possibilities for being in other ways. To put *pwê* around the edges of a *vèvè* is to name a god; to define and label his power, its degree and its nature. The *pwê* narrow down and focus the

multitude of possibilities in the divine world. But to call one *loa* by name is at the same time *not to call* all of the others.

The definition of *pwê* as a name, a given name, includes Deren's definition because one *must* name the *loa* in order to establish contact with the divine world. Naming or calling the gods is the process of bringing one element from the total field of divine potentiality to the point of articulation in a coherent personality. The *loa* come to men and women and possess them, as single identifiable and so nameable, personalities.

This specificity exists in tension with the protean and apparently infinitely expandable character of the divine world in Vodou. Many scholars have tried to compile lists of the Vodou gods. It always proves an impossibility and not only because there are so many of them, but also because the list changes so drastically from one area of Haiti to another and even from one family to another. Just as the face in the photograph emerges from a sea of other indistinct faces, so the individual personalities of the gods emerge from a field containing an infinite number of other god-possibilities. The family of Vodou gods can, theoretically at least, be added to *ad infinitum*. This is possible because any notion of a god has viability in Vodou as long as there is someone around to name it, that is to recognize in that god the possibility of being that way.

There is a mirroring effect between the realm of the gods and the human realm. Each person works out his or her own existential possibilities through the personalities of the gods. And, the same thing applies to whole peoples. Thus, when the African was introduced to the slave world of Haiti, the Petro pantheon, which in one sense is an exploration of the personalities of the slave masters, manifested itself. To give a less lofty example, when the automobile entered Haiti, Entretoute, preoccupied with the maintenance of his "Dynaflow," became a god.⁶ Similarly, the day-to-day struggle of the urban Haitian with bureaucracy has led to the recognition of a god called Inspecteur. He inspects everything, people and premises.

The Principle of the Poteau-Mitan

If the *pwê* drawn around the edges of the *vèvè* describe the particular and unique character of the gods, then the central axis of the *vèvè* describes their collective or shared being. If the *pwê* are the given names, then the center line is the family or sur-name, which all gods and, as we will see, all persons share. The center of the *vèvè* is the place of collective identity, the place where god and person exist in unity.

The first line of a *vèvè* is drawn on the ground, radiating out from the base of the *poteau-mitan*. It actually looks like a shadow cast by the sacred center pole, the pole which the gods are said to ascend from the watery depths of their home, Gîné. Thus, by means of visual mirroring, the

⁶ See Deren, p. 111, for a discussion of this god.

principle of the possibility of communication between gods and human beings that is represented by the *poteau-mitan*, is transformed, from a vertical articulation in the actual pole, to a horizontal articulation in the sacred symbol of the god drawn on the beaten earth floor of the temple. In the process of a ceremony the *vévé* come to take over the function of the *poteau-mitan*, translating the general possibility of communication between person and god into the call to a specific *loa*.

The poteau-Damballah

The *poteau-mitan* is sometimes referred to by Vodouisants as the *poteau-Legba* or the *poteau-Damballah*. Legba, as the messenger between the gods and the living, the guardian of gates and crossroads and the one who is called upon at the beginning of every service to open the barrier so that people can communicate with the gods, is himself an embodiment of the possibility of divine-human communication and so is fittingly associated with the *poteau-mitan*. It will require a bit more digging to uncover the reasons behind Damballah's association with the sacred pole.

In Dahomey, the African cultural home of much of Vodou, "Dambada Hwedo represents those ancestors who lived so long ago that not even their names are known."⁷ As such this god has a key role to play in the ancestral cult. The ancestral cult is central to life in Dahomey, and the most important of the cult requirements is that of 'establishing' the lineage dead. The souls of all the dead of any particular lineage must be brought back from the land of the dead and given a home. The rituals involved in enshrining the souls of the dead and establishing the cult house are both lengthy and financially draining; however, the Dahomean has a fierce need to preserve the integrity of his lineage. So, in spite of the large numbers of the dead, great care is taken that *each* be separately enshrined. Separate rituals paralleling those for the remembered dead and equal to them in expenditure and complexity are performed for Dambada Hwedo. Dambada Hwedo is "the personification of the powerful unknown dead,"⁸ and as such he functions to insure that *no* souls will be lost to the lineage.

Part of the concern of the Dahomean for his forgotten or unknown ancestors stems from the socially disrupting force of slavery. The African is well aware that branches of his or her family tree proliferate in a world foreign to him or to her and that they therefore have ancestors they cannot know. This concern is reflected in a Dahomean chant pronounced as blood pours over the altars of the unknown dead. "Oh ancestors, do all in your power that princes and nobles who today rule never be sent away from here to Ame'ika. . . ."⁹

⁷Melville Herskovits, *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom*, 2 vols. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1967), I: 207.

⁸*Ibid.*, I: 195, *italics mine*.

⁹*Ibid.*, II: 64.

In the New World, Damballah Wedo, the transformation of the Dahomean Dambada Hwedo, serves the same function in completing or holding together the family. A song frequently sung to him in Vodou services calls on him to "gather the family." The importance of this 'god' in Africa is considerable, but he has become *more* important in Haiti. His increase in stature can be attributed to the fact that for the disenfranchised black of Haiti, many more of the ancestors fall into the category of the unknown dead, and among them are the most venerable and the most ancient ones.

Thus, Damballah's connection to the *poteau-mitan*, the passageway between the land of humans and the land of the gods (Gîné = Africa) could be explained by his position as the collective representation of the ancestors in Africa. The ancestors are mediators between gods and men in a variety of ways, two of which are central to our discussion here. First, the ancestors, the living dead, represent the link in the chain of being that connects gods and men. The Haitian, like the African, understands himself or herself as related to the gods in an essential and direct way. There is a single hierarchy of being extending from the newly-born, to persons living, to the ancestors, and finally to the gods. Theoretically at least, the life process is a movement up that chain of being from infancy to divinity. In actual fact, of course, most persons, although venerated after death by the immediate family, are not elevated as high as the status of gods; but it *can* happen. For instance, in some temples in Haiti, the revolutionary hero, Toussaint L' Ouverture is recognized as a god, and Don Petro, head of the Petro pantheon, is said to have lived like an ordinary man in the early days of Haiti's history. The theory then is that people differ from the gods in the degree of power they possess, but not in the kind of power, so if a person is powerful enough in life, and effective enough as an ancestral spirit, he or she can become a god. The second way in which the ancestors function as mediators between gods and persons is more direct. At death, the ancestors in Haiti, like those in Dahomey, are remembered and served through the ancestral cult. When conscientiously served, they are ready sources of help to people in the minutiae of daily life, in family problems that might be too partisan to bring to the gods' attention. Neglect of the family dead, failure to make offerings to them, to maintain their shrines or graves, can result in sickness, family troubles and general bad luck. The ancestors thus function as 'lower' gods, whose power and attention is limited to a particular extended family.

The Center and the Edges

The opposition that is set up in a visual way in the *vèvè* between the central axis and the *pwè* drawn around the edges is, in the realms of existential and theological language, an opposition between two different ways of being. The *pwè* evoke rigid forms of being, beings with a name—both gods and persons; while the center point, the *poteau-mitan*, talks about fluid polymorphous being.

*Architectural transformations of
the center and the edges*

The Vodou temple itself sets up, in three-dimensional space, the same opposition between the center and the edges as the *vèvè* do; it is a transformation of the structure of the *vèvè* into an architectural code. The center of every Vodou temple is the *poteau-mitan* and it is not only the physical center but also the ritual center or focal point for all ceremonial activity. Around the edges of the temple, the separate *djèvo* or altar rooms of the gods are found. These *djèvo* divide the gods up into categories, and as such give *names* to the gods: Rada, Petro, Nago (Ogouns), Guede and so forth. Depending on the wealth and space resources of the temple, the *djèvo* can become more and more numerous and the types of gods they are dedicated to more and more specific.

The same opposition that the temple architecture describes in terms of the divine world, can be found, although not in as obviously diagrammatic a way, in secular space. The *kay*, as the tiny Haitian house is called, is the center of life, it is the secular *poteau-mitan*, the place where family identity prevails over individual personality. The interior of a *kay* for instance gives few clues as to the number of persons living there or their particular positions in the family. No distinct spaces, no separate pieces of furniture, are set aside for individual members of the family. It is almost always one room only and it is used by all people within the family for all purposes. It is outside the home that the Haitian acquires and maintains individual identity. Particularity of being is developed in the job, in the market and so forth. I think it is not stretching the comparison too much to say that returning home is returning to the center, while moving away from the home is moving into the realm of individuality.

The *kay* is boundaryless space, where daily activities such as cooking, resting and visiting move easily in and out, from courtyard to house, to front yard to street. The temple, by contrast, is contained and containing space. Except at certain highly accented moments in the ritual, the Vodou *danse* and all ceremonial activities associated with it are contained within the space of the large central room known as the *peristyle*. The *vèvè* are at once cosmic images and self-images. When it is understood that the temple and the *kay* are architectural versions of the same thing, the reason for this difference between them is clarified. The *kay* is boundaryless space because, in itself, it is incomplete space, space without edges. If the *kay* is the center of family identity, then the edges where individual identities are created are outside the home, in the institutions of the society—job, market and so forth. The temple, by contrast, is a total and complete world in itself; it has both center and edges.

The dialectic between the center and the edges, between communal identity and autonomy, is fundamental to Haitian life. Yet, like their African forebears, the Haitians clearly understand their family identity to be the more central one. The well-being of the family, for example, is traditionally put ahead of the advancement of an individual member of that family. Clothing, furniture, tools and food belong to all within the

family who can make use of them. The physical intimacy of the *kay*, the sharing of daily life rhythms, the constant touching and caressing among family members, the sleeping shoulder to shoulder is expressive of a profound unity that prevails in the Haitian family. Furthermore, this notion that community or family is at the center of being also has important religious implications. The ancestral cult extends the family to include the recent dead, and Vodou, in a broader context, extends the family even further back in time to include the god-fathers.

Hierarchy

However, to have community and not autonomy at the center of the self-image, does not mean that the community is made up of peers or equals. Within the Haitian context, whether the community we are talking about is the multiplicity of selves that lies at the core of persons, or the group of selves that makes up a social unit, or the larger family of which both men and gods are members, it is always a hierarchical ordered community, in which some have clear powers over others. Yet in Haiti, this is not a caste hierarchy but an age hierarchy. In a caste ordering of society, one can move only within the particular categories defined by the caste, but an age hierarchy is fluid, one moves up in power and authority in the process of moving through life. The hierarchical ordering of persons in Haiti is based on the equation of age with wisdom that the Haitian shares with the African cultures that gave birth to his own culture.

The most obvious way in which age serves to sort out the communal identity of family is through respect for the elders within the immediate social groupings. The mature man in Haiti may still go down on his knees to receive a beating from his father, biological or titular. The child, regardless of age, will hardly ever speak back or question the authority of his parents. When the parent speaks, the child listens. This most basic of authority structures extends by analogy to areas such as politics and the military. In these situations there is an equation made between the specialized wisdom and power of politics and the military and the generalized wisdom and power that comes with age. When the leader of the country is called 'papa', his honorary age is being recognized to a degree commensurate with his power over the people. Taking it further, the Vodou priest, who is also called 'father' or 'mother' by the 'children' whom he or she initiated, is recognized as a spiritual elder. Honorary age is conferred on the priest because of superior *kônésâs*, spiritual knowledge.

The relationship of the younger to the elder, the parent to the child, is the basic structuring metaphor of Haitian society. Once one masters the correct forms for parent behavior, and the correct forms for child behavior, all relationships are clarified and one knows how to act in all situations. The Haitian approaches the gods as he does the elders within his own society, with a clear recognition of their parenthood. For example, I was told a very revealing story about a certain well-known priestess in Port-au-Prince. It seems that she had, for one reason or another, angered her *mèt-tèt*, the *loa* with whom she works on most

intimate terms. Appearing at a ceremony, this god commanded her down on her knees and made her crawl the length of the room to his feet. This otherwise very proud woman submitted to the punishment without complaint. Age hierarchy—and especially when extended to the realm of the gods—insures that no person can be so proud or so powerful that a time will not come when she has to submit, like a child, to the authority of the parent.

This hierarchical ordering is mirrored in the realm of the gods. For instance, the ranking of the *loa* is one of the topics of endless debate among the priests of Vodou. Like any key theological question, there are various opinions as to which gods have power or precedence (for that is the form the debate usually takes) over the others. There is general agreement that Legba by virtue of his role as messenger must be the first called at any ceremony, but those gods that are called after him are called in the order of importance, and this is where the debate begins. Some gods achieve preeminence not because of the venerability of the roles they play, but because of their sheer power. Ogoun, for instance, is said to be feared by all the other *loa*. A story is told of one ceremony where Ogoun arrived when Simbi was present. Ogoun approached Simbi, held his index fingers in a cross, and said to the god, “*â ba, â ba,*” down, down. Simbi responded by falling to his knees. It is interesting that the person telling this story felt constrained to add that this was more of a prayer than a command that Ogoun made because, after all, all *loa* are equal in power. “All the *loa* have the same power.” There *is* a hierarchy, but at bottom, all of the *loa* have the same power.”

The gods are many and yet they are one; the group is composed of separate persons and yet it is one family. These two opposed yet equally necessary kinds of realizations describe the movement of thought about persons and the gods.

The *vèvè* is a self-image and it is an image of the cosmos, and at its center is the *poteau-mitan*, the symbol of the relatedness of the gods, of human beings, and of human beings and the gods. Yet there is tension at the center. The family is paradoxical. In one sense the defining of power within the family by age creates a situation that is fluid and open. Relationships among family members are clarified by the various labels given—father, mother, son, daughter. Unlike *pwè* names these are relational not essential titles. A single person can be *both* father and son, or *both* mother and daughter, although of course in relation to different persons. And this is precisely the problem. Even though each person can be both child and parent, the relationship that one has with one's own parents is unchanging, the father is always the father, and his authority is always greater than one's own. The age hierarchy only has fluidity when it is viewed across time. In the experiences of everyday life, power structures are absolute and unchanging. The power and authority of the military and the government, of the Vodou father and the biological father is not *experienced* as open-ended and potentially changing, but as absolute and unchangeable.

Thus it appears that existence at the center has problems similar to

existence at the edges. In discussing the *pwè* as word or name, it became clear that while the word can literally create existential possibilities it can also limit life situations by locking them into definitions. At the center, polytheistic in relation to the gods, polymorphous in relation to the person, a similar tension arises, that has to do with the relation of the parts within the whole.

At some point such as this, if not a good deal earlier in the discussion, the reader will undoubtedly find himself or herself wondering if this is not all sophistry. What do these simple and graceful little drawings have to do with all of these ponderous words and theories? Well, that is simply the way it is. We academics have not chosen to communicate by drawing pictures for each other. Instead, we have opted for the realm of the *pwè*, of the word, and so we sacrifice fullness of expression for precision. At times this can be tedious. Yet, I am convinced this is not fabrication. These attitudes, acts, ideas, ways of being and so forth are there in the *vèvè*, or to be more precise, I should say they occur between the *vèvè* and the viewer. The Haitian afterall, actually inhabits the cosmos where the divine and human realms are connected by the *poteau-mitan*. He cannot see the center of the *vèvè* except from a position informed by that fact. We do not live in that cosmos and so we must approximate experience with words.

Possession

It is in possession, the experience of persons becoming gods, that these tensions found to exist both within the center and the edges as well as between the two are resolved. For one thing it is in possession that time is transcended. The gods, infinitely removed from people in time, and so in power and wisdom, become persons through possession. They come, take over the body of a worshipper and walk the earth with human beings for the condensed time of a ceremony. The god-fathers collapse time and return to become contemporaries of their own great-great-grandchildren. This is the way they are made present to people; this is the way the wisdom of the ages becomes available; this is the way the gods comfort, counsel and chastise their worshippers. Yet possession can also be seen as the means by which human beings transcend their temporal identities and explore their own multiple possibilities of beings. Within a single person there are many selves and one of the ways these manifest themselves is through the varied personalities of the gods. Edner, a young priest burdened with the responsibilities of taking over his father's large urban temple and confined by the expectations of a large Vodou family, becomes, in possession, the god Agaou, a relentless and reckless spirit of storm who charges about the temple thwacking his sword against the *poteau-mitan* with the loud resounding clang of thunder. And again, he becomes Ogoun Feraille turning his vengeful energies against himself, bellowing like an angry bull and charging around the dancing floor, pushing the blade of a sword into his diaphragm until the sword bends like a bow, and sends a tiny rivulet of blood down the front of his shirt. Again, he becomes mild-mannered Azaka, peasant god of naive charm, who

with bouncy leg-lifting hops moves among the people, coyly offering them food and then withdrawing it just as they try to bite. Or he is Guede, now the somber god of death giving advice to his worshippers; now the lord of tricks, the master of sexual innuendo. Or he is Erzulie Dantor, fierce-tempered and jealous, a goddess of love. The polytheism of Vodou is a mirror image of the polymorphism of the person.

Possession also provides a means of transcending the here-and-now facticity of some persons' power over others within the immediate group. Furthermore, this use of possession appears to be quite important to the balance of relationships within Haitian society. As was said earlier, the basic structuring metaphor of all relationships is that of parent and child. It is the role of the parent to advise and the role of the child to listen. Within the ordinary forms of social exchange there is no room for the child to give advice to the parent, or to criticize the parent's attitudes. Yet the terms of the relationship can be reversed when the child is god-possessed. An example: A woman entered a deep depression after the tragic death of her younger sister. She neglected her family and expressed dissatisfaction with everyone and everything. It was hardly the place of her children to take her to task for this behavior. Yet it was the place of the gods to do so. So one of her daughters became possessed by a Guede. Guede seated himself in a chair in the tiny *kay* and addressed solicitous remarks to the woman who was invited to sit at his feet. The god gave her quite pointed advice about 'getting ahold of herself.' The woman sat and listened with respectful attention, carefully answering the god's questions and thanking him for help and guidance. After Guede departed her mood seemed much improved.

Possession is the highest religious experience possible for the Haitian. In it he or she is able to transcend the limitations of his or her own being, to escape gender, family, age and all labels that would limit a person according to wealth, beauty, potency or intelligence. In possession, the inside becomes the outside, the self expands to include the divine, the divine enters into the self. Yet the experience is not destructive. The self does not explode in an effort to be everything at once. Each foray into the realm of the Other is made along a carefully mapped road that has been explored by others and now its landmarks are known; it is friendly space. In possession a person gives up one identity to take on another. The point is not that one way of being is better than another, but that one *can* change. In the moment of transition, real transcendence is achieved. Here there is a direct experience of both the multiple possibilities of being and the unity of it all.

The *vèvè* which holds the center and the edges together in a single visual unit, is, in the Vodou ceremony, the doorway through which the god enters to possess the worshipper. As images that contain and yet are not destroyed by opposition, the *vèvè* provide one of the most immediately available pictures of the wholeness that Vodou (like all religions) seek to uncover.

The image of the self in American society

In the Judeo-Christian West we have opted for unity over diversity in the godhead and in ourselves. The highest value is placed on consistency in human behavior and uniformity in the make-up of the community. In our communities we fear persons that deviate from the norm and in ourselves we fear states of consciousness or forms of behavior that are out of the ordinary. Children are taught to 'behave' in our society and often what this means is that they must not 'put on airs' or act as if they are something they are not. "Be yourself! Be genuine and authentic and the world is at your feet." We in the West have condemned ourselves to consistency. Any man who goes around acting like the love goddess Erzulie Dantor will be labeled 'unnatural' by church and state alike. Anyone who lets out too much of the storm god within will most likely find herself institutionalized. Even illness is regretted partly because of the loss of consistent personality, as in: "I'm not myself today. I have this awful cold." And, whatever other reasons we may have for fearing drugs, we also fear them because they cause people to act in ways inconsistent with their ordinary selves. Because we fear them, we exorcise inconsistent behavior from ourselves and inconsistent persons from our community. Mental institutions and ghettos are created to deal with inconsistencies. (Neither of these institutions, by the way, is indigenous to Haiti.)

One of the reasons we cling to the consistent personality is a simple failure of imagination. We seem to think that the only alternative to consistency is chaos. This failing has put blinders on us in many areas. To give some random examples: Every one of the early Western commentators on Vodou and many of the recent ones have described possession rites as orgiastic and uncontrolled, although they are highly controlled and ritualistic. R.D. Laing built a career on 'discovering' that the speech of schizophrenics is not the meaningless babble it had been assumed to be. Women are often said to be unfit for positions of responsibility (President of the United States for example) precisely because their moods may shift with their biology. One could not count on them to be consistent.

Yet another failure of imagination is involved in our need for consistency in our communities. This is our inability to conceive of any other alternative to equality than inequality. The idea of the equality of all persons which is fundamental in American culture, is an idea laudable in itself. Yet it becomes a problem when carried to the conclusion that since all persons are equal, so all persons are the same. In America, like every other place in the world, we are faced each day with evidence to the contrary. Because we have nothing within our official description of our society to enable us to explain these differences among people as *social* facts, we all too often see them as *biological* facts. As Louis Dumont points out in the introduction to *Homo Hierarchicus*:

In a universe in which men are conceived no longer as hierarchically ranked in various social or cultural species, but as essentially equal and identical, the difference of nature and status between communities is sometimes reasserted in a disastrous way: it is then conceived as proceeding from somatic characteristics—which is racism,¹⁰

and, I might add, sexism.

Furthermore, the image Westerners have of society as an arena in which one person is equal to all others and free to create himself or herself as he or she chooses, not only prevents us from understanding the realities of oppression, but also prevents us from understanding, in an immediate way, the degree to which we are ourselves the products of our social situation. Failure to recognize the formative role of our families and the society out of which we grew leads us to reject our responsibilities to those groups. This, in the words of Alexis de Tocqueville, not only makes “every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants, and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.”¹¹ Dumont notes with irony that the myth of the individual has reached its apogee in a society in which we are more dependent on each other for material things than ever before in history.¹²

The contemporary Westerner understands the essence of personhood to lie in an inner private self that is not available to the community, while his communal identity is seen to come from the roles he plays in society, in family, job, political party or religious group. The image of self in Western society would be one of a single, indivisible center surrounded by a plethora of personae or social masks. It is interesting to note that while, for the Haitian, the dialectical tension built up between individual and communal identity is mainly a debate about rigid versus flexible images of personhood, it is not that at all for us in America. For us the debate is unity versus multiplicity. It is interesting that the culture with the greater sense of history has the more static view of self.

From one point of view, the rich pantheons of Vodou gods make up a language of personality types; this language clarifies styles of life; it locates and marks off boundaries of being. The development of the pantheons of gods is part of the most basic sort of meaning creation. That is to say, it is part of the process by which a name is assigned to a moment in the flow of experience and then frozen, held apart, by being compared to other moments said to oppose or parallel it. The discovery or creation (both are true) of the names of the gods, is the discovery and/or creation of a very special sort of language, one especially well suited to handle existential situations—to describe behavior, to understand and judge human action, to build self-awareness and integrity, to understand oneself and others in the past, and to project particular people and situations into the future.

¹⁰Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: An Essay on the Caste System* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 16.

¹¹Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (London, 1875), pp. 90-92, quoted in Dumont, p. 18.

¹²Dumont, p. 11.

The process of articulation in the language of god-and-self which occurs in Haiti through the multiplication and differentiation of the gods, occurs in the Judeo-Christian world in two ways. It happens rather crudely through the creation of a category of the 'other', the satanic, the grotesque, the demonic. The category is too big not to be oppressive. Nevertheless it has proven itself quite useful in a number of situations such as, the Crusades, the period of slavery, the colonial era, the anti-Communist campaigns.

The second way in which differentiation is introduced into the Judeo-Christian godhead is through history. This is a far more subtle and complex process, and ultimately, a more satisfactory one. The monolithic god of the Jews enters history: with Abraham, in Egypt, at Mt. Sinai, in Jerusalem, at the destruction of the Temple. Each appearance reveals a new facet of God's character and along with it a new perspective on human potentiality. Finally God takes on a body, appears as Jesus, and with the body comes a full life story episode after episode, each tale the occasion for exploring a new way of being. The primary emphasis is still on unity. That is largely what the upsets surrounding the 'heresies' of the early church were all about. Some knew intuitively that God had to be kept one and whole at all cost.

Monotheism and historical awareness are thus interdependent points of view. Haiti has neither a single god that excludes all others nor a very strongly developed sense of her past, no very broad and clear picture of her future. In the confrontation between Haitian and Western industrial (particularly American) culture that is taking place now, Haitian culture is bound to be the loser. It is a pity for there is a lot that we could learn from Haiti about differences among people, differences within people and the importance of family and community life. But this knowledge is not the kind that we are equipped to recognize easily. We deal with Haiti primarily in terms of that crude category of the Other, the satanic. Late shows, paperback thrillers and comic books—even some books that parade as scholarly work—caricature the island and its religion. Devil worship. Sexual orgies. Black magic. Primitive, pagan, uncouth! This caricaturing of Haiti that goes on in popular culture is not without interest or importance. I believe it is fair to say that, our propaganda machines work at full speed only in the face of a genuine challenge. This bit of comparative work at the end of my study of the center and the edges of the Haitian *vèvè* is meant to do no more than suggest, in the most broad and general ways, the lines along which a more careful comparison of Haitian and American images of self might move. Perhaps the first step beyond this should be to ask ourselves where our images are that describe both self and cosmos. Where are our mandalas? What is the equivalent of the *vèvè* in American culture?