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On Looking at a Vodou Altar

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Altars Happen

KAREN McCARTHY BROWN

I want to change your view of altars by telling you a few things about them in Haitian Vodou. Altars happen. Altars must be fed. Altars must be awakened. Altars wax and wane in potency. Altars breathe.

Altars tell stories. Altars reveal the state of being of individuals and communities. Altars can be in a bottle, or under your skin, or buried in your yard. They can be hung in the rafters of a house or the limbs of a tree, or they can be placed on the ground, on a table, or at the foot of a tree. A grave can even be an altar. Altars are places where the living and the dead, the human and the divine, meet. Altars are places where healing happens. To understand what I mean by healing, we need a few basic terms.

In Vodou circles *konesans* refers to sacred knowledge, the knowledge of how to heal. It is a word with a wide referential field including complex information about herbs and arcane teachings. Most important is the fact that *konesans* refers to open channels of communication with the ancestors and the spirits who provide the healer with information about what is going on at the deepest levels of persons, or even about what will happen to them in the future.

"Heating up" is another term used in relation to healing. It is always used in an active mode, as in: "The spirits will not come to help us until the ceremony is *byen shofe*," well heated up. It is only when the singers, dancers, and drummers at a Vodou ceremony are performing enthusiastically that the spirits will be enticed to "ride" one of the faithful. Yet it is not only large groups that are able to heat things up sufficiently to bring about transformation. A healer's own energy can be similarly raised and heated by gazing into a candle flame when she wishes to call one of the spirits for help in performing a treatment. And if charms are expected to work over time, they also must be periodically "heated up" by being focused on and prayed over. Often a candle is lighted by the charm or "point" as part of this process.

A point, or *pwen*, is the ritual condensation of a thing. When healing charms are called *pwen*, it means that, in them, human and divine energies have been brought to an exquisite focus so they can be used to bring about healing transformations. When change is desired in a relationship hot with anger, a *pwen* can be made containing ice and sugar syrup to cool it down and sweeten it up.

With the concepts "point," "knowledge," and "heating up," we move close to the root metaphors that shape the Haitian Vodou understanding of healing, and also the Vodou understanding of what an altar is. Altars are *pwen*, points of contact between the human realm and the spirits. They are places where someone with sufficient *konesans* can orchestrate energy, human and divine, to bring about healing. □

On Looking at a Vodou Altar

DONALD J. COSENTINO

A heap of rubble, piled up at random, is the fairest universe.

Heraclitus

You don't make art, you find it. You accept everything as its material.

Charles Simic

It is through the perspective of Vodou that Haitians construct their peculiar *weltanschauung*: a way of seeing history, contemporary society, and the superstructure of religion in one master narrative. From this perspective, history collapses into myth, the secular into the sacred, the momentary into the durative. This totalizing vision belongs to Vodou, which doesn't blink before any of Haiti's brutal, and often obscene, history. The vision doesn't lie, but it does force meaning out of every event, including those which more secular societies repress, or even deny. To look at a Vodou altar cluttered with sequined whiskey bottles, satin pomanders, clay pots dressed in lace, plaster statues of St. Anthony and the laughing Buddha, holy cards, political kitsch, Dresden clocks, bottles of Moët & Chandon, rosaries, crucifixes, Masonic insignia, eye-shadowed kewpie dolls, atomizers of Anaïs-Anaïs, wooden phalluses, goat skulls, Christmas tree ornaments, and Arawak celts is to gauge the achievement of slaves and freemen who imagined a narrative broad enough and fabricated a ritual complex enough to encompass all this disparate stuff.

Forced into the sugar plantation, mansion, hellhole, cathedral, whorehouse, Masonic lodge, armory, and opera palace of colonial St. Domingue, Africans reassembled the *objets trouvés* according to an aesthetic they carried in their heads, their hearts, their entire bodies. Out of torn lace, sequins, feathers, and empty whiskey bottles they made working models of heaven, Guinéés of cracked crystal. Theirs is the work of artists. "Frozen waterfalls" and "dances for the eyes" is how David Byrne, musician and impresario, describes their altar assemblages. He compares sacralized Afro-Caribbean detritus to "visual jazz, constantly reworked and reactivated." Altars are played, like a musical instrument, augmented through constant use. Their aesthetic is improvisational. They are never "finished." Behind the musician's description lurks the iconoclast's nightmare: the suggestion that religion, like theater, depends on artifice. Altars are stages and priests are actors. Vestments are costumes, sacramentals are props, and all liturgies enact a provincial version of the divine comedy.

Vodou has exemplified the intense artificiality of ritual observance for a very long time. Within its heterogeneity, Derek Walcott discerns the model for all Caribbean art:

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole....This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are dis-



PHOTO: GARY GARNICK, COURTESY OF THE UCLA FOWLER MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HISTORY

Rada Altar

This altar is set to serve the *lwa* of the Rada "nation," who are considered "pure" African, sweet-natured, and cool. Here ritual specialists may invoke the spirits, make offerings, leave petitions, and do healings on behalf of the Vodou "family." Liquor, perfume, jewelry, soap, money, and other such luxuries are left on the altar as gifts for the *lwa*.

Catholic chromolithographs are understood to manifest the spirits' divine attributes. Ezili Freda as "Our Lady of Lourdes" presides over all the other *lwa* from her niche. St. Peter with the keys to heaven images Legba, who opens all barriers. Gede is given a separate space against the wall, to the left. Pots for the Marasa (Sacred Twins) can be seen in the niche below. On the side walls are vestments for dressing the *lwa* when they "mount their horses" during ceremonies.

This altar was designed by David Mayo in consultation with oungan Wilfred Ignace. Most of the objects come from the Port-au-Prince altar of Sauveur St. Cyr. The museum installation roughly adheres to the original model.



PHOTO: GARY GARNICK, COURTESY OF THE UCLA FOWLER MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HISTORY

Petwo/Kongo Altar

Petwo/Kongo rites honor creolized *lwa* with assertive Kongo-derived imagery. Bound medicine packets known as *pakèt kongo*, consecrated to spirits such as Simbi Makaya and Rèn Kongo, proclaim their Kongo identity. Fewer chromoliths appear in Petwo sanctuaries than in Rada ones, though Ezili Dantò and Ogou Balendjo (a Petwo warrior) are present in Catholic form. So is St. Expédite, who is set upside down as an inducement to "work" on behalf of his devotee. A framed photo of Jean-Bertrand Aristide sits next to a statue of Ezili. He is there because, as President of Haiti, he too has lots of "work" to do.

The figures standing to either side of the Petwo altar are said to represent male and female Indian chiefs royally "dressed" in ribbons and feathers. But their names and costumes also evoke the royal lineages of Central Africa: Wa Wangol (King of Angola), wearing chains, and Rèn Kongo (Queen of Kongo), wearing beads. Divination, associated with Petwo rites, is often effected through playing cards like those spread out on the table. The *tcha-tcha* (rattle) may be used to summon the *lwa* for assistance.

This altar was designed by David Mayo in consultation with oungan Wilfred Ignace. Most of the objects come from the Port-au-Prince altars of Silva Joseph and Edner Pierre. The installation roughly adheres to arrangements on Joseph's altar.

parate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent....This is the basis of the Antillean experience, this shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these shards of a huge tribal vocabulary, these partially remembered customs, and they are not decayed but strong. They survived the Middle Passage.

(The Antilles: Fragments of an Epic Memory, 1992, p. 2)

Have any people been confronted with a more heterogeneous repertoire of materials for spiritual reconstruction? Which bricoleurs have been so fortunate? Is this the revenge of the Caribbees—that for all the preposterous cruelty of slavery, and in part because of it, the interior of an *ounfò* recalls the extravaganza of temple life in the Alexandria of Cleopatra (or Cecil B. De Mille); or the Rome of Isis and Mithras, when Christianity was only one of several mysticisms challenging the hegemony of a fading pantheon? Does the position of Haiti at the crossroads of the most cosmopolitan routes of the eighteenth century account for the odd congruence between so much of Vodou (as the exemplary Afro-Caribbean religion) and other agglutinating religions: Fon, Kongo, and Catholicism historically; but also distant cognates like Hinduism, with its overlap of Aryan and Dravidian deities; or the Cao Dai of Vietnam, which canonizes Joan of Arc, Confucius, and Madame Curie? □

From *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, pp. 27–28.

I Married a Voodoo Altar

DAVID MAYO

Creating an installation for “Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou” was one of the most unusual and satisfying experiences of my career. It became a relationship with a subject that possesses a remarkable human spirit and an aesthetic to which I was immediately drawn.

The design started as they all start. A floor plan. It designates three altars. Key elements. The interpretive culmination of an exhibition which we hope will be the definitive exploration of a belief system long maligned and generally misunderstood. Three small bubbles in 6,000 square feet of presentation. The complexity has grown and steadily taken shape after years of conceptual planning. I’ve used this time to get inside the head of curator Donald Cosentino. Where does the scholar’s passion intersect with the reality of this thing called Vodou?

I’m hauling the same stereotypical baggage as anyone who has grown up grooving to the B-movie bliss of *I Walked with a Zombie*, voodoo curses, dolls and pins.

The art of Vodou has reached out and grabbed me. This is serious, lay-it-out-the-way-you-feel-it, no-excuses-no-apologies, get-out-of-the-way-if-you-don’t-want-to-play art whose sole purpose is to change the way you see, feel, live. I’m sold. But what does this have to do with the exhibition? Time to reel in the visceral attachments and try to understand what this all means and what I can do to translate these feelings into an exhibition.

June 1993, Port-au-Prince. I now have a basic understanding of Vodou. I’m stuffed with history, personalities, aesthetics, and interrelationships, but now it is all going to become very real. The consultants have gathered in the Haitian capital to review the organization of the exhibition. My design accommodates the projected inventory of materials, interpretive moments, visual icons, and yes, altars. The assembled experts pore over every detail. Passionate discussions synthesize the physical aspects of the exhibition with the spiritual and lifestyle realities of Vodou. But the looking glass awaits. My opportunity to get a little closer to Vodou metaphysics will follow.

A Vodou ceremony for all the *lwa* washes over me. The music pounds into every pore, energy spits through the seams of communal ecstasy. This is not demure, pass-the-host, watered-down-wine, amen religion. This feels more like rock & roll. At the zenith of which I’m ushered into Edner Pierre’s Gede altar room. Altar—the nexus of a cosmic playground. Power seems to visibly steam off this thing. The aesthetic is vaguely hierarchical. Relationships dart and merge. Textures are fueled by a dizzying range of object types. Layers of use are evidenced by spent offerings and libations. The light. The light tweaks it all into full motion. Highlights flicker, seductive shadows weave and dodge, tiny pinpoints dance on murky reflectives. Here lies the crossroads. I mentally follow paths into netherworlds which tug and cajole, yet reveal only seething power, reverence, function, purpose. This is not something to be toyed with. This altar is alive and should not be taken for granted. I make my offering and back away, humbled, impressed.

November 1994, Port-au-Prince. I’m back in Haiti with the “Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou” recovery team. The U.S. embargo has been lifted, allowing us to return and recover altar objects languishing in a Port-au-Prince warehouse. We are finally able to pick up the pieces of our careful strategy laid waste by yet another round of corruption, political posturing, and discrimination that has plagued Haiti throughout its history. We move fast. This may be our only chance to put the final pieces together.

A daunting “to-do” list propels us through the streets of Port-au-Prince. I’m able to document nearly a dozen altars in addition to the ones which provided the bulk of the material for the exhibition. Every altar I see expands my sense of the aesthetic at work here. Vodou altars lead convoluted lives, expanding and contracting, ever evolving. The altars which earlier provided objects for the exhibition have metamorphosed and floresced. They stand with renewed beauty and undiminished power. I’m now looking for power points. The confluence of aesthetic which dictates commonality. A commonality which breeds a near nuclear visual reaction. Color, light, spatial qualities, texture,