

Haiti, History, and the Gods

Joan Dayan

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

Berkeley / Los Angeles / London

*Sèvis zandò, at Alvarez's compound.
Between Gressier and Léogane,
Haiti, 1970. Photograph by Leon
Chalom.*



*Song to "Papa" Dessalines, sèvis zandò. Oungan Alvarez
wears the red scarf of Ogou Desalin. Between Gressier
and Léogane, Haiti, 1970. Photograph by Leon Chalom.*

The lwa most often invoked by today's vodou practitioners do not go back to Africa; rather, they were responses to the institution of slavery, to its peculiar brand of sensuous domination. A historical streak in these spirits, entirely this side of metaphysics, reconstitutes

the shadowy and powerful magical gods of Africa as everyday responses to the white master's arbitrary power. Driven underground, they survived and constituted a counterworld to white suppression. It is hardly surprising that when black deeds and national heroic action contested this mastery, something new would be added to the older traditions.

The dispossession accomplished by slavery became the model for possession in vodou: for making a man not into a thing but into a spirit. In 1804, during Dessalines's massacre of the whites, Jean Zombi, a mulatto of Port-au-Prince, earned a reputation for brutality. Known to be one of the fiercest slaughterers, Madiou described his "vile face," "red hair," and "wild eyes." He would leave his house, wild with fury, stop a white, then strip him naked. In Madiou's words, he "led him then to the steps of the government palace and thrust a dagger in his chest. This gesture horrified all the spectators, including Dessalines."⁷⁵ Jean Zombi was also mentioned by Hénock Trouillot as one of the takos who had earlier threatened Dessalines in Plaisance. Variousy reconstituted and adaptable to varying events, Zombi crystallizes the crossing not only of spirit and man in vodou practices but the intertwining of black and yellow, African and Creole in the struggle for independence.

The ambiguities of traditions redefined by changing hopes, fears, and rememberings are exemplified by the brief mention of Jean Zombi in the 1950s by Milo Rigaud in *La Tradition voodoo et le voodoo haïtien*. "Jean Zombi is one of the most curious prototypes of vodou tradition. He was one of those who, on Dessalines's order, massacred the most whites during the liberation of Haiti from the French yoke. Jean Zombi is actually one of the most influential mysteries of the vodou pantheon: as lwa, he belongs to the Petwo rite."⁷⁶ According to the anthropologist Melville Herskovits, in Dahomean legend the zombis were beings without souls, "whose death was not real

but resulted from the machinations of sorcerers who made them appear as dead, and then, when buried, removed them from their grave and sold them into servitude in some far-away land.”⁷⁷ Born out of the experience of slavery, the sea passage from Africa to the New World, and revolution on the soil of Saint-Domingue, the zombi tells the story of colonization.

An especially important definition is that of Moreau de Saint-Méry, who presents for the first time in writing the night world of what he names *revenans* (spirits), *loup-garoux* (vampires), and *zombis*, which he defines as a “Creole word that means spirit, revenant.”⁷⁸ The name zombi, once attached to the body of Jean, who killed off whites and avenged those formerly enslaved, revealed the effects of the new dispensation. Names, gods, and heroes from an oppressive colonial past remained in order to infuse ordinary citizens and devotees with a stubborn sense of independence and survival. The undead zombi, recalled in the name of Jean Zombi, thus became a terrible composite power: slave turned rebel ancestor turned lwa, an incongruous, demonic spirit recognized through dreams, divination, or possession.

In contemporary Haiti, however, the zombi calls up the most macabre figure in folk belief. No fate is more feared. The zombi, understood either as an evil spirit caught by a sorcerer or the dead-alive zombi in “flesh and bones,” haunts Haitians as the most powerful emblem of apathy, anonymity, and loss. Maya Deren locates the terror incited by the zombi not in its malevolent appearance but in the threat of conversion projected by this overwhelming figure of brute matter: “While the Haitian does not welcome any encounter with a zombie, his real dread is that of being made into one himself.”⁷⁹ This incarnation of negation or vacancy is as much a part of history as the man Jean Zombi. In Guadeloupe and Martinique, zombi simply means evil spirit, but in Haiti the zombi undergoes a double incarnation, meaning both spirit and, more specifically, the animated dead, a body

without mind or, as the Jamaican novelist Erna Brodber, in her recent *Myal*, has so aptly put it, “flesh that takes directions from someone.”

The phantasm of the zombi—a soulless husk deprived of freedom—is the ultimate sign of loss and dispossession. In Haiti, memories of servitude are transposed into a new idiom that both reproduces and dismantles a twentieth-century history of forced labor and denigration that became particularly acute during the American occupation of Haiti. As Haitians were forced to build roads, and thousands of peasants were brutalized and massacred, tales of zombis proliferated in the United States. The film *White Zombie* (1932) and books like William Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* (1929) and John Huston Craige’s *Black Bagdad* (1933) helped to justify the “civilizing” presence of the marines in “barbaric” Haiti. This reimagined zombi has now been absorbed into the texture of previous oral traditions, structurally reproducing the idea of slavery in a new context.

As lwa, then, Jean Zombi embodies dead whites and blacks, staging again for those who serve him the sacrificial scene: the ritual of consecration that makes him god. In this marvel of ambivalence, the zombi is also consumed by the dead who continue to undergo zombification. In *Un Arc-en-ciel pour l’occident chrétien* (1967), René Depestre summons “Cap’tain Zombi,” who consolidates the pieces of history preserved in the name.

I am teeming with corpses
 Teeming with death rattles
 I am a tide of wounds
 Of cries of pus of blood clots
 I graze on the pastures
 Of the millions of my dead
 I am shepherd of terror.⁸⁰

Let us return to Dessalines’s Constitution of 1805, and to the logic