

HOW THE LWA COME TO A HAITIAN VODOU RITUAL

An interview with Sallie Ann Glassman



Initiated serviteurs in Haitian Vodou have the obligation to worship the lwa, deities with which they have a special relation by being called by the deity and undergoing a secret initiation. Non-initiated persons may also attend worship ceremonies honoring the lwa. A lot happens in a Haitian Vodou ritual to manifest the lwa so they may be honored. Sallie Ann Glassman who lives in New Orleans has practiced Vodou since 1980 and she was initiated as *manbo asogwe* (high priestess) in Haiti in 1995. Without revealing the secrets of Haitian Vodou, she explains some of the ways that the lwa are drawn to a Vodou ritual.

Sallie Ann Glassman, welcome to the WRSP Forum!

WRSP: Before discussing Haitian Vodou rituals, please describe how Haitian Vodou differs from what is known as New Orleans Voodoo.

Glassman: The spelling, VODOU, distinguishes the Haitian religion from the more touristy, Hollywood version that is often encountered, sensationalized and branded in movies, ads, and in the tourist shops in New Orleans, commonly spelled VOODOO. Voodoo itself is often confused with HOODOO, a folk practice of herbal spellcraft, conjure, or rootwork. Haitian

Vodou is a bona fide religion with a metaphysical framework around a central deity with numerous intermediary and ancestral spirits, and ceremonies practiced usually in community. To further complicate things, members of my Vodou society and I base our practices on Haitian Vodou, and while we honor and respect the traditions I learned in Haiti and through my Papa, Edgard Jean-Louis (1921–2010), we are practicing Vodou in New Orleans.

WRSP: The “Invisible Waters” appears to be an important part of Haitian Vodou cosmology. What is the belief about Invisible Waters?

Glassman: In the Vodou worldview, the physical world is surrounded and supported by an invisible world of spirit that is more beautiful, more powerful, more vast, and more full of life and potential than the physical world. The two worlds intersect and inform one another. They can influence one another, and Vodou ceremonies are a technology for opening the doors between the two worlds and inviting them to interact.

WRSP: In a Haitian Vodou ceremony the lwa are honored. What is a lwa?

Glassman: The ancestral and intermediary spirits who guide everything in the universe under God are collectively referred to as lwa. They are both archetypal principles as well as forces of nature. Ezili Freda Dahomey, for instance, is the spirit of love and beauty and also references fresh water. Some lwa are gentle and benevolent, some are fiery, magical, revolutionary, and turbulent. All are powerful and none are seen as either good or bad. They were once living people and reflect the complexity of human experience. All are aspects of God’s life-force.

WRSP: Please briefly describe just a few of the lwa, who they are, and their personalities

Glassman: To elaborate a little on Ezili Freda’s nature, she is the quality that allows humans to dream of a more perfect world. She loves pretty, frilly, feminine things—jewelry, perfume, sweet liqueurs, pastries. Her colors are pink and pale blue and sometimes silver. She tends to speak French because she is so refined. She always arrives in possession as a coquette, a flirt. Nothing is ever good enough for her and she never feels loved enough, so her appearance by means of possession usually ends in tears. She is associated with Mater Dolorosa, the Mother of Sorrows, because she is surrounded by jewels and her heart is pierced with a dagger. Poor Ezili! You want to give her everything and it is never enough! Ezili Danto, her sister, is the more revolutionary, angry, warrior side of love. Her colors are red and blue with gold. She likes daggers and fried pork, bowls of blood, peasant breads, moonshine, rum, crème de menthe. She doesn’t speak but only makes a Ka! Ka! Ka! sound because her tongue was cut out



during the Haitian revolution of slaves against slave holders (1791–1804). She was a warrior and would not rat out her brothers in arms. She is associated with Mater Salvatoris, the Black Madonna. Some say the three scars on her cheek were from a fight with her sister Freda (they do not get along). Others say that she got them during the revolution. She is fierce and strong and is willing to roll up her sleeves to do hard work for her children.



WRSP: Why is it important to honor the lwa?

Glassman: In honoring and working with the lwa we develop relationship with all of them. Honoring them over the course of time, we balance all the many aspects of our own makeups. Rather than trying to sublimate or reject or judge parts of ourselves, we learn that all aspects of being are sacred and precious, and that balance is the key to both empowerment and the recognition of the sanctity of being. In serving the lwa our eyes are opened to the preciousness of all frequencies and aspects of the life-force.

WRSP: In a Vodou ritual, it seems to me that the lwa are drawn to the ritual by multiple means. For instance, in a peristyle (Vodou temple), there is a post or pillar called the *poto-mitan*. What is the purpose of the *poto-mitan* in relation to the ceremony?

Glassman: The *poto-mitan* or center pole is the central highway up and down through which the lwa travel. The center pole is usually made of wood with a cement base and symbolizes the Tree of Life, whose roots reach into the rich earth and whose topmost branches reach the heavens. The sap that runs between the two polarities carries meaning, power, and sustenance. The *poto-mitan* forms a crossroads with the floor of the peristyle. The floor is the horizontal arm of the crossroads and the center pole is the vertical. The horizontal is the physical, visible world, and the vertical is the invisible spiritual realm. At the axis, where the two meet, magic happens.



WRSP: I have noticed that in recent years when you perform the St. John's Eve ceremony on the banks of Bayou St. John in New Orleans, or a related ceremony in the International House Hotel, a *papier-mâché* sculpture of Marie Laveau made by Ricardo Pustiano is set up. Does the sculpture of Marie Laveau (1801–1881) serve as the *poto-mitan* in the ritual space that is created separate from your Vodou temple?

Glassman: Ricardo created the sculpture of Marie Laveau initially because it was very crowded at our ceremonies on the narrow bridge, and he wanted there to be a focal point for people who couldn't see what we were doing. However, when we started bringing the sculpture to the International House Hotel and when we moved the Bayou St John ceremony to the banks of the bayou, the sculpture did become our center pole—just as Marie Laveau herself seems to have become a bridge between Haitian Vodou and contemporary Vodou practice in NOLA.

WRSP: You also create one or more altars for the worship of the lwa in a ritual. What is the purpose of the altar and the gifts that are brought for the lwa?

Glassman: Altars stand at the crossroads between the visible and invisible worlds. They are laden with a kind of non-verbal vocabulary that can be read like a book, once you know what you are looking at. We bring little pieces of our everyday world to the altar, elevate them, put attention and focus on them, make them sacred. We bring offerings in the same way that we bring prayers to Spirit. Each of the lwa has things that they like and don't like. So we bring things that they like in order to honor them and to supplicate them to come out of the Invisible Waters, grace us with their presence and communicate with us for a moment.

WRSP: Drumming and singing songs in Haitian Kreyol is important in a Vodou ritual. How do these help manifest the lwa in the ritual?

Glassman: There are specific drum rhythms and songs for each of the lwa and for each part of a ritual. The songs and rhythms are forms of language and encode all the meaning, legacy and history of Vodou. Some songs simply talk about what action is going on during the ceremony. Some talk about the attributes of each lwa. Some call the lwa, some greet the lwa once they have arrived, some bid them farewell and clear the way for the next lwa to arrive. There are hundreds and hundreds of these songs that the Oungenikon, or lead singer, calls from memory and the choir responds. The drum beats are like stones in the Invisible Waters, over which the lwa step into our world. The drums drive the ceremonies and when the drummers sense that the lwa are near, they perform "Casses"—breaks during which the drum patterns go up against the dominant rhythm to encourage spirit possession. Additionally, the drums, the singing, the *asson* (a rattle, covered in beads and snake vertebrae with a bell attached that is used by the priests and priestesses to call the songs), all are speaking and synching with one another. There are at least three drums playing and they are not necessarily playing the same rhythm or even on the same time as one another. It is extremely complex, but when everything is falling into place, it is extremely powerful.



WRSP: During a Vodou ritual, you draw multiple diagrams called *veve* using corn meal, each

veve related to a specific lwa. You draw a veve before the drums. You also draw one or more veve next to the pote-mitan, or the statue of Marie Laveau in the St. John's Eve rituals. What is a veve and does it have something to do with attracting the lwa to the ritual?

Glassman: The veve are graphic images that call the lwa and act as a focal point for the ceremony. We could seriously talk for days on any one of these questions, including this one about the veve! I find them to be 2-dimensional images on the mirrored surface of the Invisible Waters. They tend to have a reflective effect—the top side of the veve is reflected in the bottom and the right side is reflective of the left. I see them as constellations, reflected on the surface of the waters. Most have some form of crossroads at their center. They draw our consciousness inward and draw the lwa outward. The veve are a form of language. The smaller elements are like words forming the full sentence of the veve. They can also be thought of as mouths for feeding the lwa as offerings are often placed on the veve.

WRSP: During a Vodou ritual a couple of serviteurs each will drape themselves in a sequined flag and go around the ritual space together. What is the purpose of the sequin flags and ritually displaying them in the ritual?

Glassman: The sequin flags, or *drapo*, represent the different lwa. The two carried by the Ren Drapo, or flag queens, often represent some of the main lwa honored in that society. They are unfurled ceremonially in the same way that an honor guard might unfurl military or national flags to announce the arrival of a head of state. In this case, the sequin flags announce the arrival of the lwa. As the Ren Drapo together with the LaPlas (Master of Ceremonies) make their way through the temple, honoring different essential power places and people in the peristyle, they allow the community to commune in the presence of the lwa and reestablish sanctity within the temple. With the LaPlas, the Ko Drapo (flag corps) conducts a mock battle with the head priest/priestess and the community. Ultimately the flags and spiritual powers bow to the authority of the priest/priestess, but the priestess kisses the hilt of the LaPlas' machete to show that she knows the source of spiritual power is beyond herself.



WRSP: In a Vodou ritual, a serviteur or priest or priestess, or a non-initiated participant, may become possessed by a lwa. Once possessed the person may be dressed in a color the lwa favors, and the lwa acts and speaks through the possessed's body. What is the purpose of possession and this type of manifestation of the lwa in the ceremony?

Glassman: Through possession trance, the lwa are able to walk among us and communicate with us. They are not dead and gone, they continue to interact with the community. In return, the lwa give us guidance, healing, advice, empowerment. It is very much a symbiotic

relationship. Our remembrance and respect for them keeps them alive, relevant, and vibrant, and they help us manage and navigate our very human condition.

WRSP: Are there any other ways the lwa are brought to the Vodou ritual that I have left out?

Glassman: Everything in a Vodou ceremony is intended to align our consciousness with a particular lwa: the pouring of water, the spraying of rum, the lighting of candles, the dance steps, the litanies—everything is part of a technology for opening the doors between the Visible and Invisible worlds and drawing through power.

IMAGES

Image #1: Manbo Asogwe Sallie Ann Glassman and Houngan Gary Lertalee Howell at the altar to Marie Laveau on St. John's Eve, 23 June 2017, Bayou St. John, New Orleans. Courtesy of Catherine Wessinger.

Image #2: Mater Dolorosa/Ezili Freda Dahomey in Haitian Vodou.

Image #3: Mater Salvatoris/Ezili Danto in Haitian Vodou.

Image #4: Hurricane Turning Ceremony in La Source Ancienne Ounfo peristyle on 15 July 2017. Courtesy of Catherine Wessinger.

Image #5: Drummers at St. John's Eve ceremony, 23 June 2017, Bayou St. John, New Orleans. The drummers (left to right) are Logan Shutts (standing); Damas "Fanfan" Louis, a Haitian master drummer and houngan; Peter Gustafson, and seated on the far right, Andrew Wiseman, an Ewe priest and drummer. Courtesy of Catherine Wessinger.

Image #6: Drapo at St. John's Eve Ceremony, 23 June 2018. Courtesy of Catherine Wessinger.

Sallie Ann Glassman, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!

[Sallie Ann Glassman](#) moved to New Orleans from Kennebunkport, Maine in 1976, and she has lived in New Orleans ever since. She was first taught about Haitian Vodou by an individual in New Orleans known as André the Martiniquan. In 1980 Glassman and friends formed a group named the Simbi-Sen Jak Ounfo to perform Vodou ceremonies. At the same time, she founded and participated in a group affiliated with the Caliphate Ordo Templi Orientalis (OTO) in New Orleans named the Kali Lodge. Also during this period, she took painting lessons at the Art Institute of New Orleans for four years, and she continues to draw and paint. Her pastel drawings for *The Enochian Tarot* were published in 1989 with a book by Gerald and Betty Schueler. Although she attained the position of Deputy Grand Master in the Caliphate Branch of the OTO, she left the OTO by the late 1980s and dedicated herself to Haitian Vodou. In the early 1990s, Vodou rituals were performed in her home from which she drew inspiration to make pastel drawings of the lwa for *The New Orleans Voodoo Tarot*, published in 1992 with a book authored by Louis Martinié. In 1995, Glassman performed her first public Vodou ritual in the Bywater neighborhood of New Orleans to ask Ogou to protect the neighborhood from crime.

She also began holding an annual Vodou ritual at Bayou St. John, on St. John's Eve, June 23, continuing the tradition begun by [Marie Laveau](#) (1801–1881), who was the foremost Voudou queen of New Orleans during the nineteenth century. In 1995 Glassman opened the Island of Salvation Botanica near her home in Bywater, and later that year she traveled to Haiti where she was initiated as *manbo asogwe* (high priestess) by *houngan asogwe* (high priest) Edgard Jean-Louis and *houngan asogwe* Silva Joseph. She traveled to Haiti six more times and Edgard Jean-Louis also visited New Orleans several times, including after the massive earthquake in Haiti in 2010. In 2000 Glassman published her book, *Vodou Visions*. In 2005, right before the Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, Glassman's peristyle (temple) was opened in Bywater for rituals with her congregation renamed La Source Ancienne Ounfo (See, La Source Ancienne Ounfo website). After Katrina caused the flooding of much of the city after levees were breached, Glassman and her partner Pres Kabacoff, a real estate developer, undertook to contribute to the recovery of the city by contributing to the revitalization of one area of New Orleans on St. Claude Avenue. A building that formerly housed a furniture store was purchased and named the New Orleans Healing Center (See, New Orleans Healing Center website n.d.), and art exhibits and festivals were held there even while the property was being renovated. The Island of Salvation Botanica (See, Island of Salvation Botanica website n.d.) was relocated to the Healing Center, which grew to house diverse shops, businesses, and healthcare offices. The first Anbla Dlo (Beneath the Water) festival was held the New Orleans Healing Center in 2008, which highlighted New Orleans music and culture and included a symposium of experts on issues involving water. The New Orleans Healing Center was officially opened in 2011, and also that year the first New Orleans Sacred Music Festival was held there. In 2011 Glassman and Kabacoff married and they live in their unique home in Bywater. In 2014 Glassman was named New Orleans Top Female Achiever by the *New Orleans Magazine*.

References

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