

# Serving the loa

- Vodou, Vaudou, Vodun, Voodoo....
- Practitioners have no name like that for the religion, they are just „serving the loa (lwa)
- Loa/lwa = spiritual being
- 1797: Médéric Louis Merauy de Saint Marie, a Martiniquean traveler describes a dance he had witnessed in the french colony of St. Domingue (later: Haiti), dedicated to a powerful being called „Vaudoux“

# Serving the loa

Médéric Louis Moreau de St. Méry on the subversive potential of „Vaudoux“:

„ [...] [they] dance it in public, to the sound of the drums and of rhythmic handclapping. They even have this followed by a dinner where [they] eat nothing but poultry. But I assure you that this is only one more calculation to evade the watchfulness of the magistrates and the better to guarantee the success of this dark cabal. In a word, nothing is more dangerous [...] than this cult of Vaudoux. It can be made into a terrible weapon - this extravagant idea that the ministers of this alleged god know all and can do anything.“

# History of Vodou in Haiti

- Today, Haiti is the western part of the island „Hispaniola“ that was named „Haiti“ by the Arawaks, those Indians who lived there before the arrival of Europeans
- Slaves from Africa since 1517
- Spanish settlers abandoned that place and french pirates took over
- French authorities took over control, establishing colonial power in 1675
- 1697: Treaty of Ryswick divides the island into french and spanish part (Dominican Republic of our days)

# History of Vodou in Haiti

- French government had no interest in the slave's religious life
- Church authorities labeled religious practices of slaves as „satan's work“
- French farmers gave little portions of land to their slaves
- Small-scale-farming characteristic to Haiti up to our days

# History of Vodou in Haiti

- Blending of catholic and african elements
- Slave-religion played an important part in Haitian revolution
- February 1791: uprising, that led to equal rights for the Mulattoes
- August 14, 1791: meeting in the „Bois de Caiman“, led by Boukman
- January 1, 1804: Declaration of independence

# History of Vodou in Haiti

- After independence, plantation system ceased
- Land grants to black population
- Subsistence farming
- Twopartite society: farmers on the countryside, elite in the towns
- Place of Vodou-religion on the country

# History of Vodou in Haiti

- Isolation from European Catholicism
- Until 1860, no contact with official church
- Bush-priests (pret-savanne)
- 1860-1900 no attention paid to religion of the slaves by church authorities
- 20th century: campaign against those practices, labelling them as Satan's work

# History of Vodou in Haiti

31. Who is the principal slave of Satan? – the principal slave of Satan is the houngan [vodou priest]
32. What are the names given by the houngan to Satan? – The names given to Satan by houngan are loas [the names for the vodun in haitian Vodun], angels, saints, morts [ancestors] and marass [the divine twins]”
33. Why do houngan give the names of angels, saints and morts? – [...] in order to deceive us more easily.
- 34 How do men serve Satan? In sinning, casting spells, practicing magic, giving food-offerings, manger les anges [souls], manger les marasses [divine twins]



# Export of Vodou

- During Duvalier's reign many Haitian fled, which led to the founding of Vodou-centers in Miami, New York and Montreal
- Before that time, Vodou was exported to the southern parts of the USA, namely Louisiana, where french farmers fled to during the Haitian Revolution, taking their slaves with them.
- We still find „hoodoo-doctors“ as healers and sorcerers in that part of the USA today

# Marie La Veau, voodoo queen from New Orleans



# Vodu: a name for many traditions

- Members of ~ 70 different ethnic groups have been brought to Haiti.
- The different spirits, dances and rhythms belong to different „nations“.
- In a ceremony, there are always different „nations“ that are involved.
- M. Herskovits (in the 1930ies): 17 & 21 different „Nations“
- He named: Rada, Petro, Dahomey, Ginen, Nago, Ibo, Congo, Wongol.

# Vodu: a name for many traditions

3 different meanings of the „umbrella-term“ „Vaudoux“ or „Voodoo“ or „Vodu“ according to Harold Courlander:

- Only the Nago- & Arada-Rites
- Complex Rites, that have formed around Nago & Arada-Rites, taking in Kongo- and Igbo-Rites a.s.o
- All of die Afro-Haitian Rites

# Vodu and „Magic“

- Throughout Haiti, we find belief in spirits, ghosts, sorcery and witchcraft.
- A central role in that context is played by the so-called „wargas“ („gardes“). These are objects able to focus magical power.
- The lwa of the rites of Vodou can also be the powers working in that wargas.
- But to gain secret control over those forces is not the aim of those rites. Rather, a spiritual relationship to the lwa is sought.

# Vodu and „Magic“

Maya Deren:

„A magician's apprenticeship consists of exchanging his services for secreted, concealed information, whereas the religious neophyte, by virtue of experience and ordeals, matures spiritually to an understanding of things which have been frankly evident in public ritual all along“

# Petwo & Rada-Cults

## Petwo (petro)

- Aggressive
- Hot
- Linked to Revolution
- New World origin
- Rum is used in cults

## Rada-Cult

- Balancing
- Cool
- Linked to the African homeland (Ginen)
- Arada / Allada, the Dahomean holy city
- Water is used in cults

# Petwo & Rada-Cults





# Spiritual world of Vodou

- Bondye (Dye Bondye = Dieu bon dieu)
- Lwas (mysteres)
- Ancestors (les morts)
- Other spirits

# The Vodou-“Temple“ (ounfo/hounfor)

- House of the leader of the cult
- Cult group = one family
- Head of the cult = mambo (priestess) &/or oungean (priest)
- Initiated members = Ounsi (children of the house)

# The Vodou-“Temple“ (ounfo)

- Countryside ounfo are normally farms
- A couple of buildings
- Home for the mambo/oungan and their family
- Buildings for the lwa (decorated with veve (vévé), the symbols for the lwa)
- Trees & plants, animals
- Poorer ounfo only one building

# Altars in Haitian Vodou

- Objects connected to the Iwa
- Tureens, trays and bottles
- Pictures and statues of catholic saints
- Candles, stones & the like
- Toys for the twin deity Marassa
- Ritual dress
- Basin for water spirits

# Altars in haitian Vodou



# Altars in haitian Vodou



# Altars in haitian Vodou



# Altars in haitian Vodou





# Altars in Vodou



Traditional altar  
for legba and  
Gu in Benin

# Altars in Vodou



Traditional  
altar in Benin

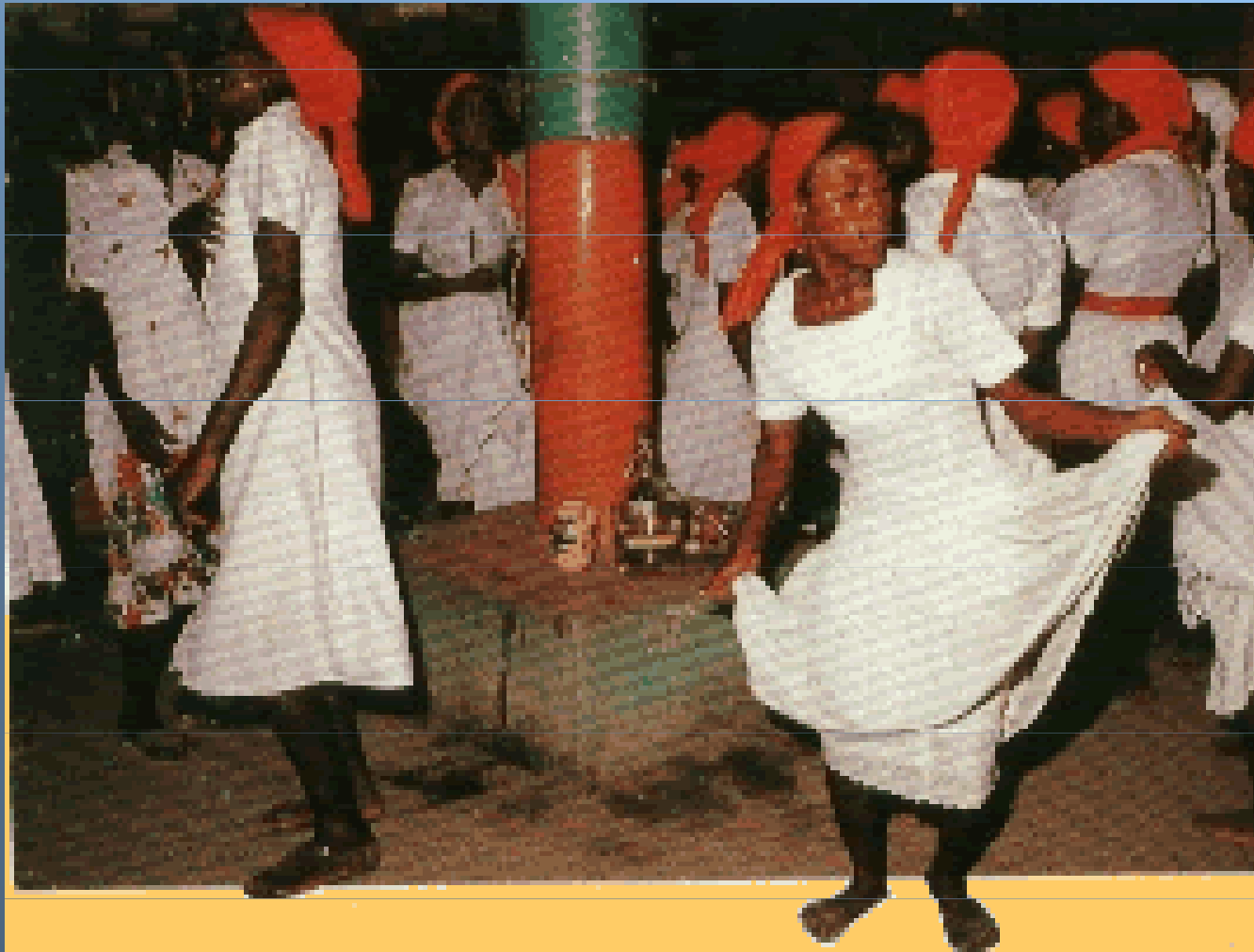
# The Peristil

- The room, in which feasts & festivals take place
- A terrace with a roof
- Poteau mitan, the middle pillar
- Connects lower, middle & upper world
- The Iwas use this poteau mitan to travel to the peristil
- Example for the concept of „axis mundi“

# The Peristil



# The Peristil



# The drums

- Are kept in the peristil
- Rada-set: 3 drums with one head attached
  - Pitit (from „petit“)
  - Segon (from „seconde“)
  - Manman (the mother)
- Petwo.set: Congolese drums,
  - in petwo-rites also a whip is used
- Other rhythmic devices:
  - Asan (ason) calabash with beads & bones
  - bells

# A set of Rada-drums



# Ason





# Differences between cult- houses

- Every center is autonomous
- No scriptural fixation of tradition
- Adaptability of west-african traditions to changing historical, cultural & social circumstances & settings

# Healing Ceremonies

- More important in everyday life than the more spectacular features of the religion
- Healing ceremonies partly responsible for commonly held image of Vodou as witchcraft & sorcery
- Marriage to a lwa
- Divination to find out cause of illness

# Healing Ceremonies

- Trétmen (treatment):
  - Meal for hungry spirits
  - Ritual bath
  - Making a pwen (point)
    - Focussing of the person's problem
    - Object linking to the cause of problems
    - Sympathetic symbolising of the situation
    - Symbolic change of the situation
    - Context of the concept of the „voodoo doll“

# Zombies

- Ti bonanj: little good angel: conscience
- Gwo bonanj: personality of a given person
- Lwa mèt tèt: the lwa, master of the head = personal guardian angel
- After dead, connection between gwo bonanj & lwa mèt tèt has to be resolved ritually
- Sorcerer can transform the gwo bonanj into an evil spirit

# Zombies

- The living dead
- Bodies taken from the grave by the sorcerer (Bòkò)
- Because the gwo bonanj has already left the body, the Zombie is revived without personality
- Is used for hard labour, a working machine without a soul

# The Iwas

- Hundreds of Iwas in Vodun
- Origins:
  - West Africa
  - Central Africa
- Some, like the Gede, organised in groups
- Vévé (vever): drawings of corn meal, flour or gunpowder to concentrate the energies of the Iwa
- Lave Tét (washed head): Initiation ritual
- Kouche, as described by Katherine Dunham

# Kouche (receiving the lwa mét tèt)

- Kouche = to be laid on the floor
- Calling by the lwa (dream or mediumistic experience)
- Manifesting of the spirit in possession trance: ounsi bosalle (wild ounsi)
- From ounsi bosalle to konesans (from conaissance, knowledge)
- Washing of the head: ounsi lave tèt
- Time of Instruction (up to years)

# Kouche: grades of initiation

- Ounsi bosalle
- Ounsi lave tèt
- Ounsi kanzon: marriage with the Iwa
- Oungenikon: song master, leading the invocations in the ceremonies
- The initiation does not only serve the benefits of the individual ounsi, but also the community (the ounfo) through ritual dance



# Kouche: the Ritual

- Gathering of items needed for Ritual, special items related to each lwa
- No exchange of money, but much spending
- Initiation for ounsì lave tèt takes place in djévo, a sanctuary room
- 3 days ceremony
- Separating gwo bonanj from the person
- Pot tèt for the gwo bonanj

# Kouche: preparing the pot tèt

- After preparation of the pot tèt, the ouns is promenade with their pot tèt on their heads

# The Lwa's energy focused by vever (vévé)

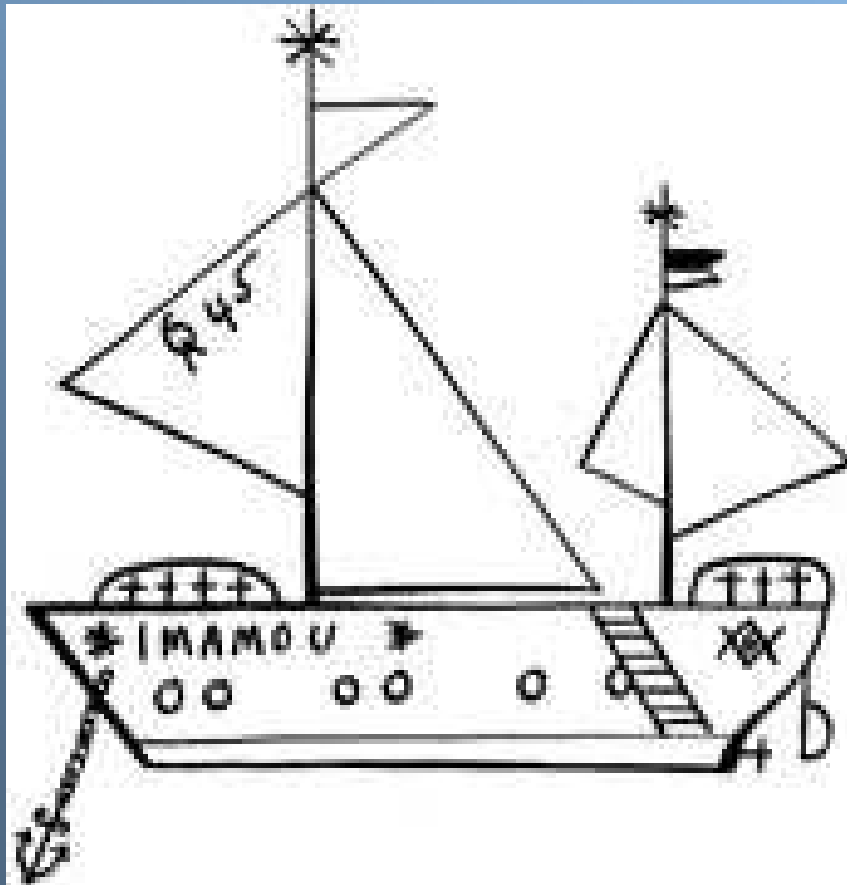


# The Lwa's energy focused by vever (vévé)



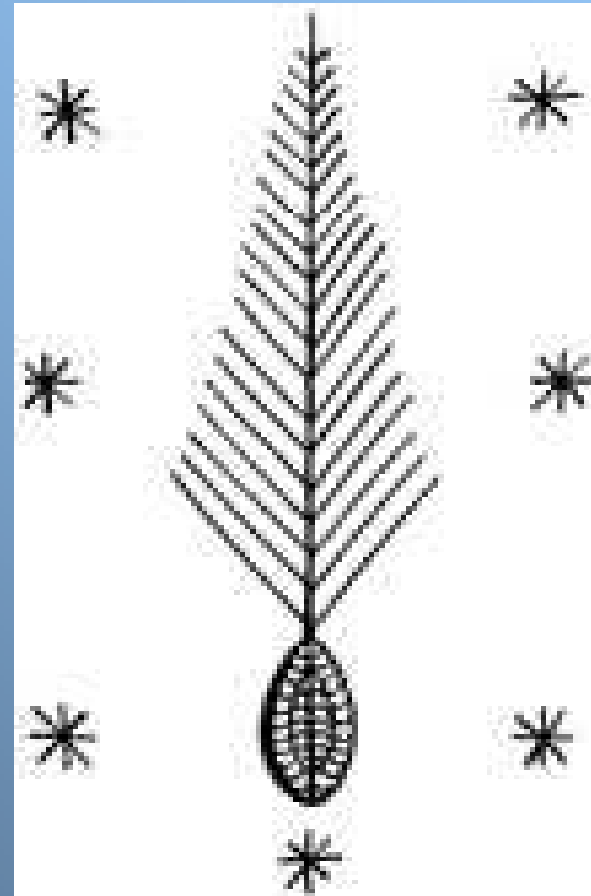
Maya Deren  
(Eleonora Derenkovskaya, 1917-1961)

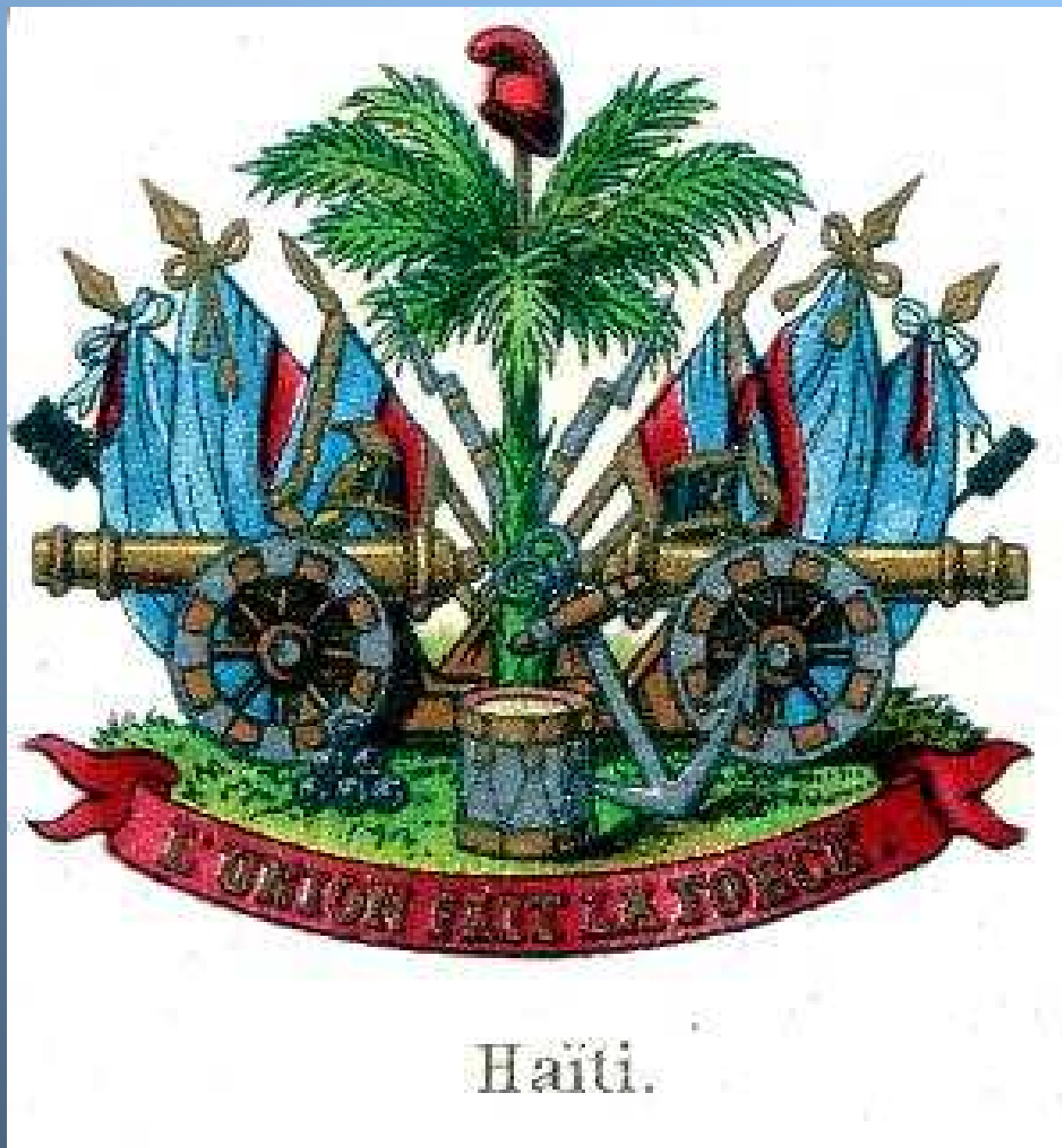




Aroyo (Agwe)  
Lwa of the sea  
Ship or fish  
Saint Ulrich  
Patron of sailors  
& ships

- Aizan Velekhete (Ayizan Avlekete)
- Represents the "female principle"
- Important role in initiation ceremonies
- Personal Lwa of Jean-Jaques Dessalines





Aizan Velekhete (Ayizan Avlekete) depicted in the Haitian national flag

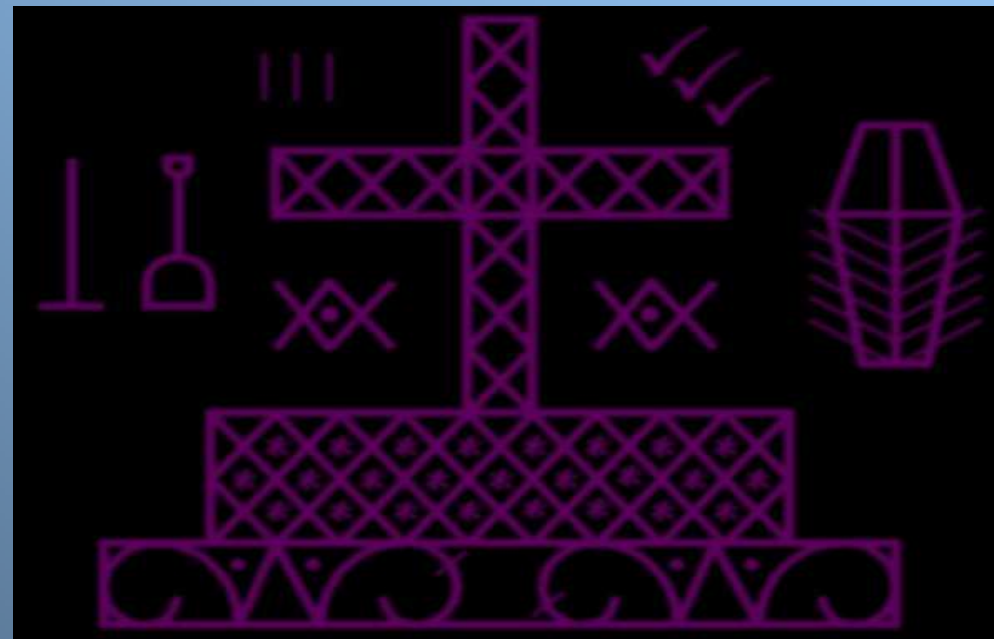
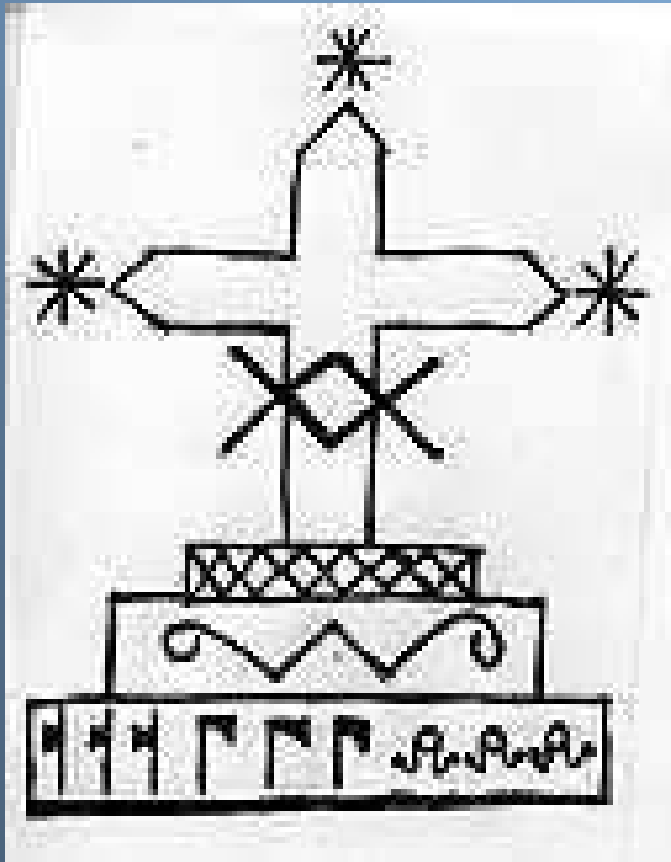


# The gedde-family of Lwas

Baron Cimetiere (bawon)

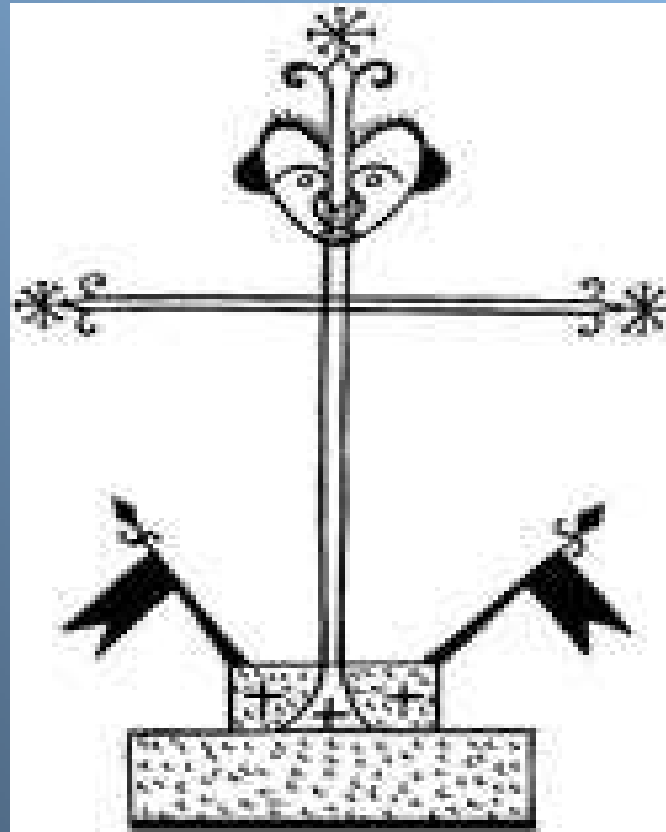
Manman Brijit

Baron Samedi



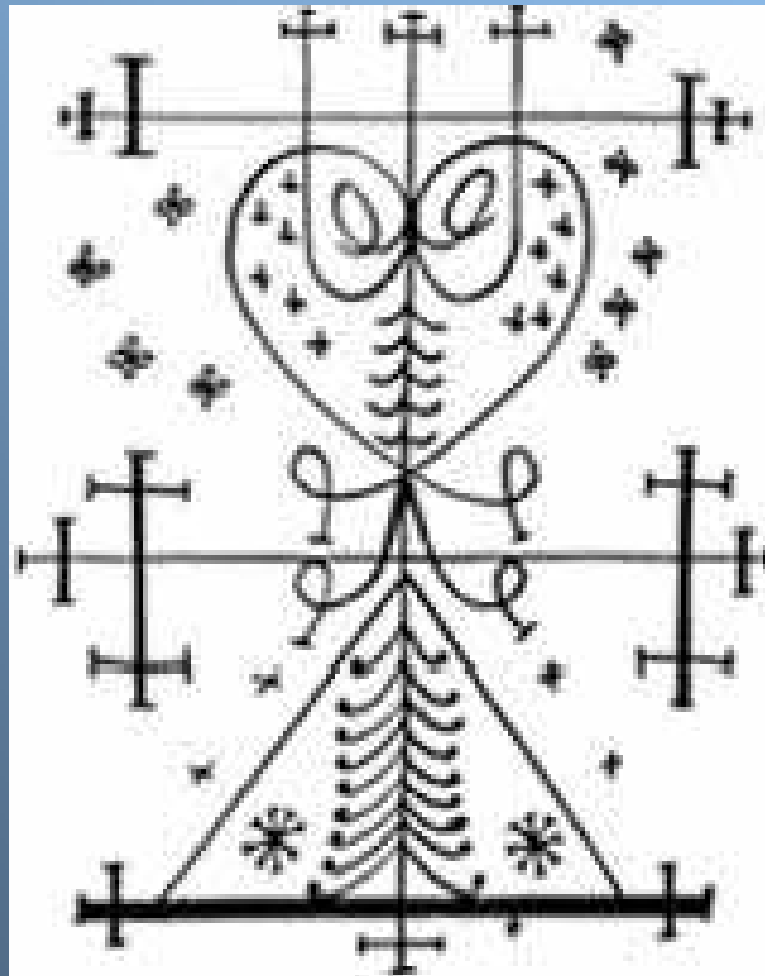
# The gedde-family of Lwas

Baron Cimetiere (bawon)



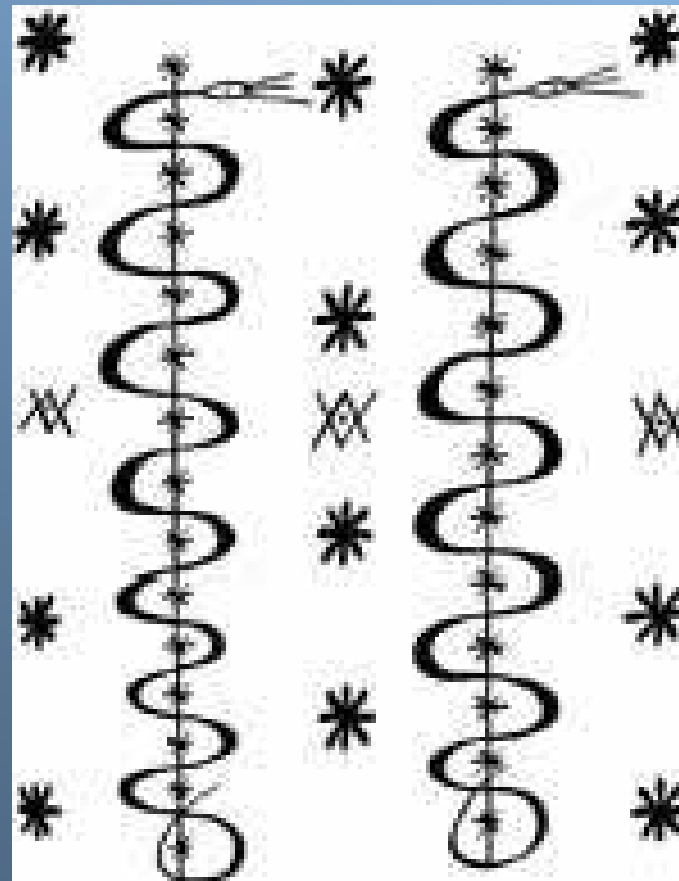
# The gedde-family of Lwas

Manman Brijit (Brigitte)



# Danbala & Aida Hwedo (Ayida Wèdo)

The snake Lwa, the divine serpent



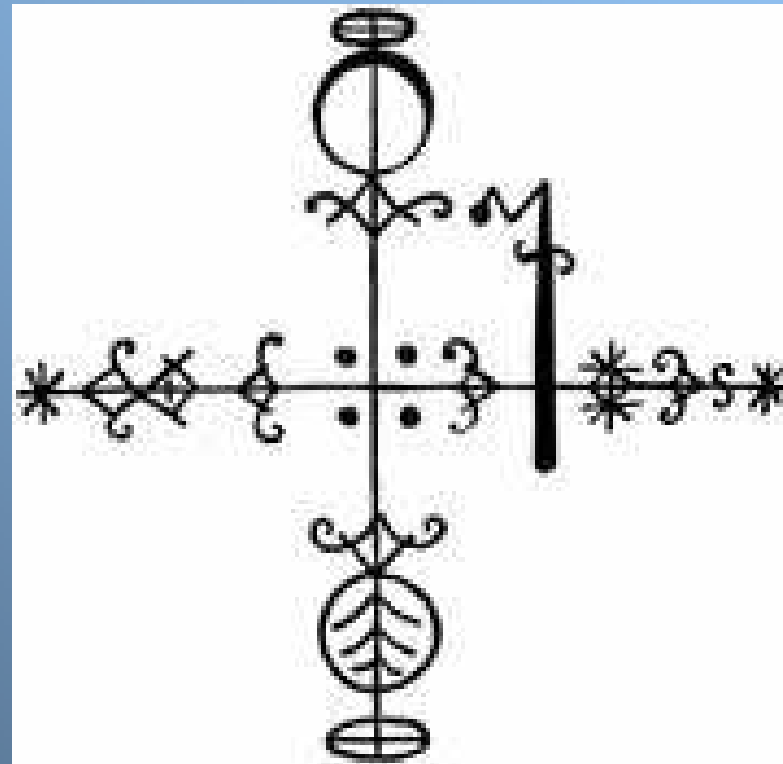
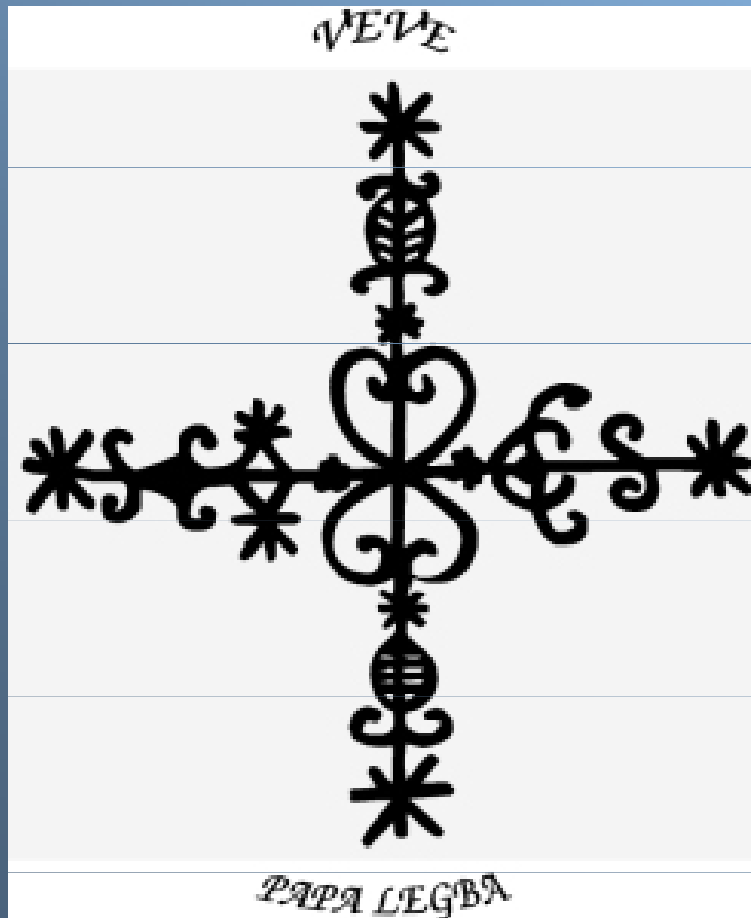
# Grand Bois (Gran Bwa)

Vegetation & forest



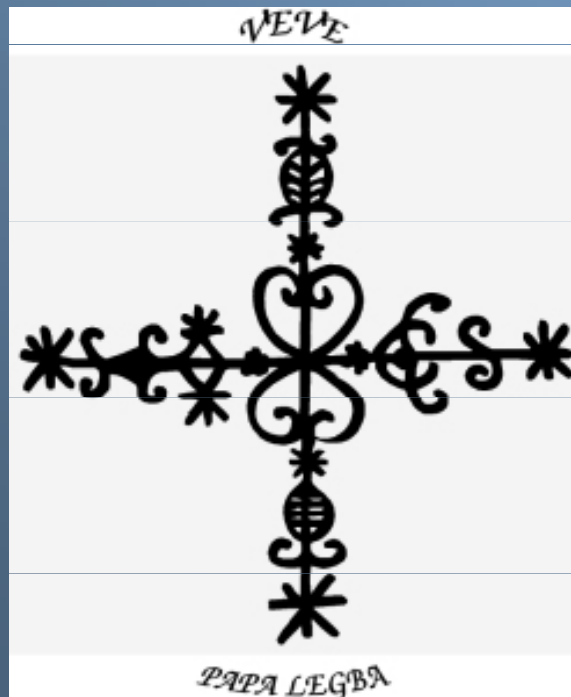
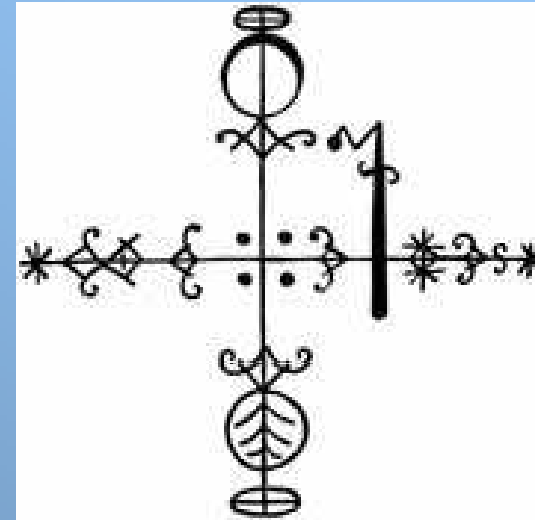
# Legba Ati-bon

The first Lwa called at all ceremonies



# Invocations to Papa Legba

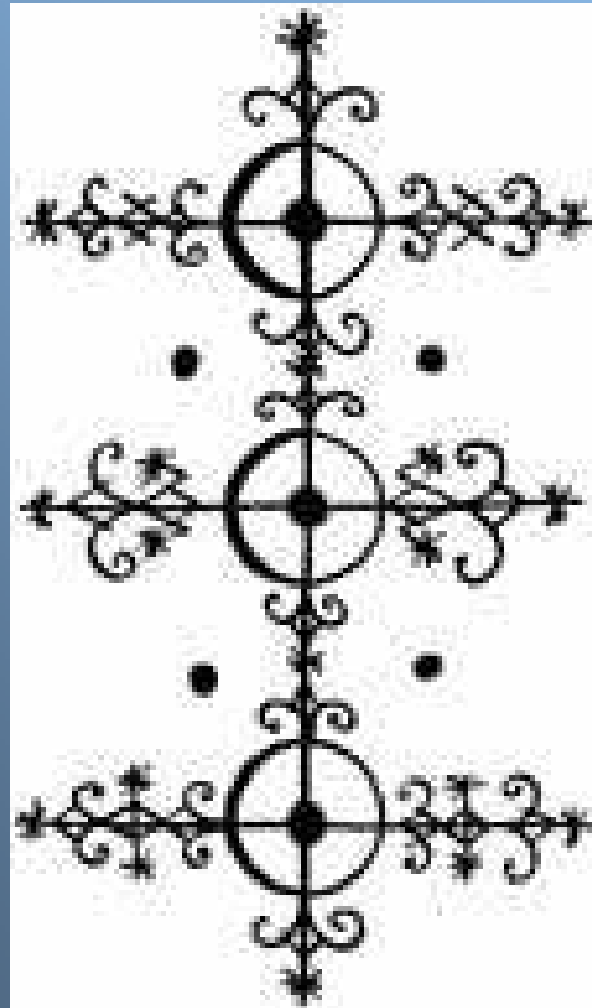
Open the road for me,  
Legba, I want to pass through  
Open the road for me  
Papa Legba, I am here  
Open the gate for me  
Master Legba, I want to get in



Papa Legba  
Have patience  
At your service  
Ago, ago-e  
Papa Legba  
Come from Guinea  
That we may pass

# Maraca Dosou (Dosa); Marasa

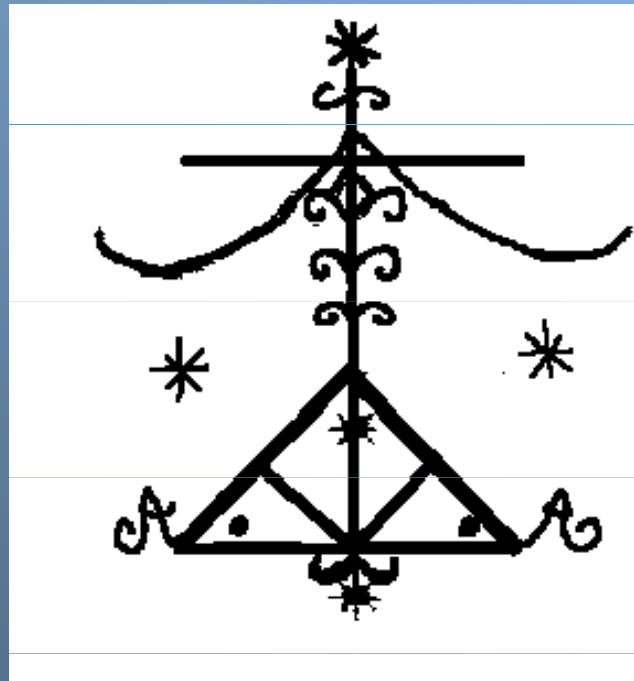
The primordeial couple, the twin deities



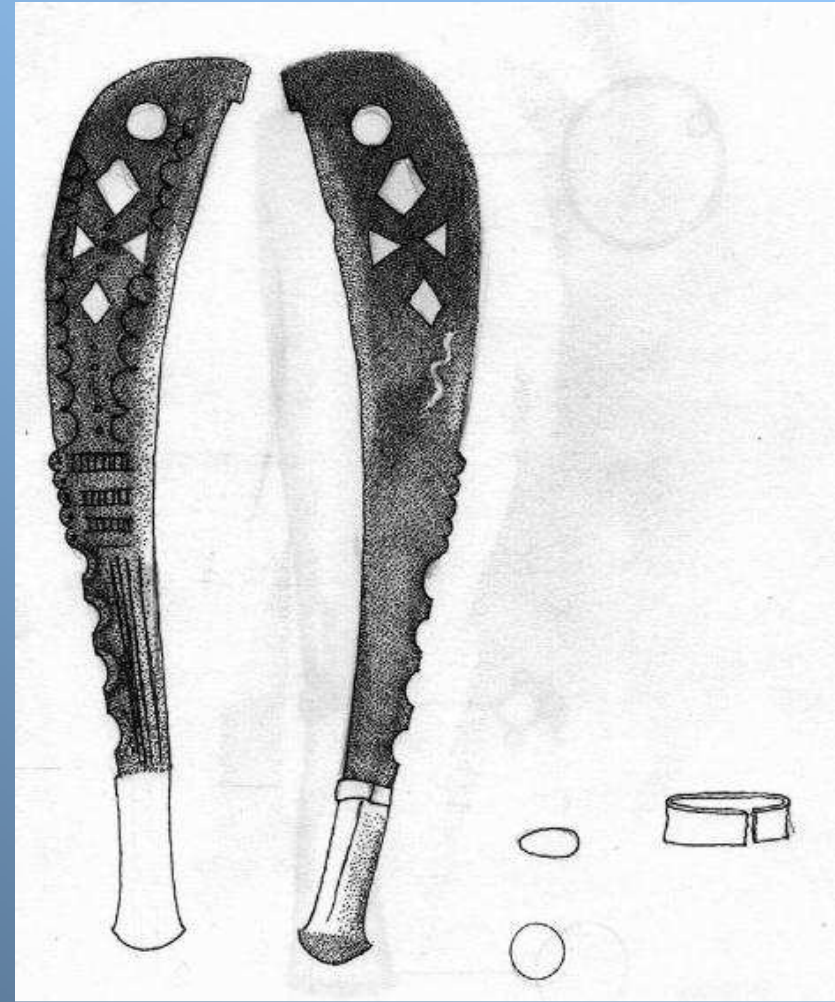


# Ogou

Several Ogou  
Ogou Sen Jak Majé  
Ogou Panama

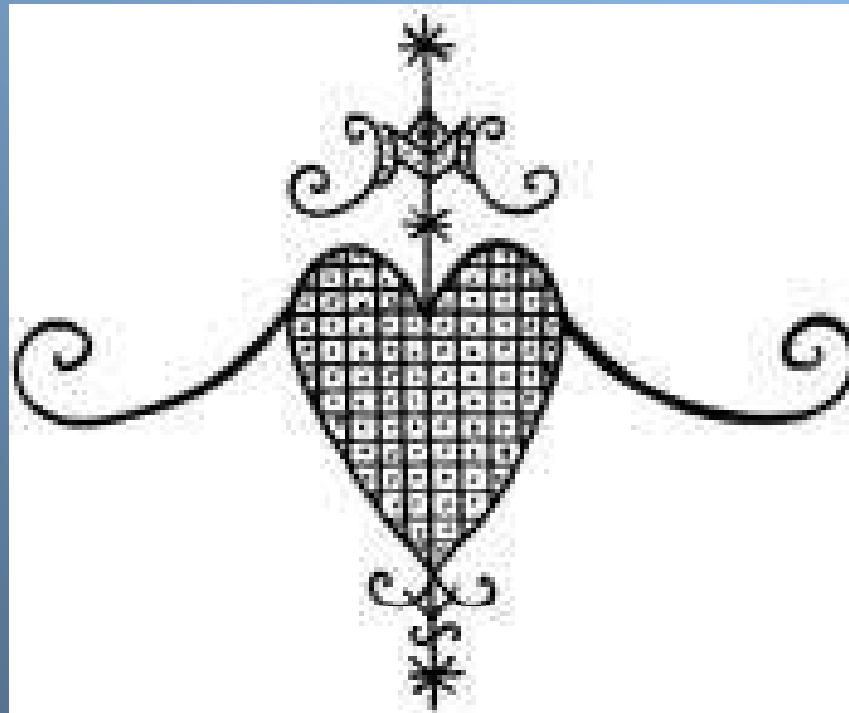


# Ogou with Gubasa



# Erzulie / Ezili

Female Lwa of love; Virgin Mary



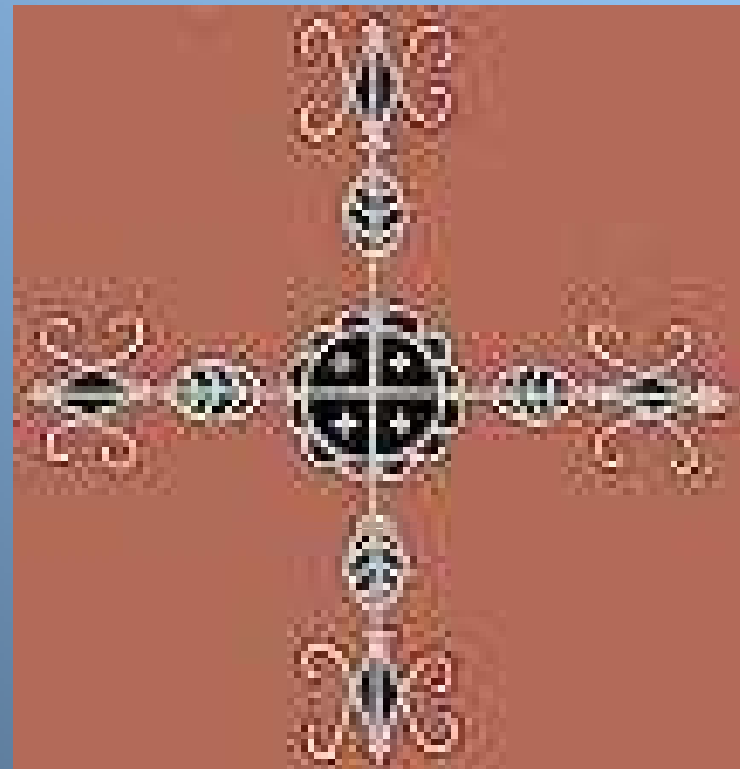
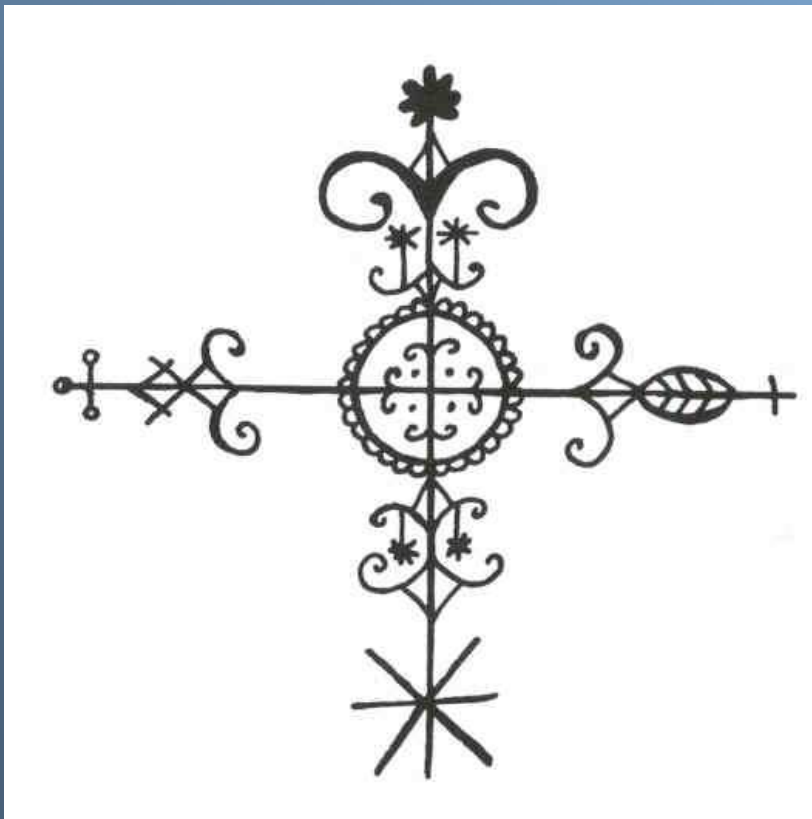
# Simbi

A congolese family of water spirits

Simbi Dlo, Simbi Andezo

Simbi pwen has special magical ability: nkisi

Petwo Simbi: Simbi Anpaka, Simbi Ganga, Simbi Makaya



# Nkisi (Pl: Minkisi)



# Nkisi (Pl: Minkisi)



# Nkisi (Pl: Minkisi)

