Espousing Ezili: Images of a Lwa, Reflections of the Haitian Woman

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This issue of the Journal of Haitian Studies is dedicated to the memory of
Dr. Pradel Pompius
Prominent Haitian Writer, Educator, Historian and Promoter of Haitian Literature
August 5, 1914—February 27, 2000

Contents

Transnational Perspective
Jean Jonassaint Des productions littéraires haïtiennes aux États-Unis (1948–1986) 4
Alta Mae Stevens Poison and Nurturance: Changing Food and Community Symbolism among Haitians in Oldtown, a New England City 20

Nation Shaping
Gérard Magloire Haitian-ness, Frenchness and History: Deconstructing the History of the French Component of Haitian National Identity 30
Leara Rhodes Haitian Media as a Political Press 44

Gender and Society
Krista White Espousing Ezili: Images of a Lwa, Reflections of the Haitian Woman 62
Régine Latorture Haitian Women Underground: Revising Literary Traditions and Societies 80
Espousing Ezili:
Images of a Lwa, Reflections of the Haitian Woman

This article will look at the iconography of the two main Ezilis, Ezili Danto and Ezili Freda, from a visual culture standpoint in an effort to discern how it informs viewers about the political position of Haitian women of the past and present. I hope to accomplish two goals here. The first is to illuminate how this iconography serves as a signifier for Haitian women's political status. The second is to shed light on why the specific imagery of each Ezili demonstrates these same ideals, since the chromolithographs that have come to represent the lwa everywhere were chosen after Vodou mythology had a chance to solidify. To realize this goal, I will first identify Ezili Freda with mulatta women of the colonial period, and Ezili Danto with the darker-skinned slave women. This generalization is not accurate in modern Haiti's political climate, which reflects complexities about the lwa and the modern political situation of women.

Vodou has been an integral part of the Haitian political landscape since the first African slaves arrived in the colony of Saint Domingue in the early sixteenth century. No historiographer, political scientist or anthropologist can deny the weight of Vodou in the formation of the Haitian state. The meeting of maroons held by Boukman on August 14, 1791 is often cited as the seminal event of the Haitian revolution. Vodou provided not only the organizational structure and rendezvous opportunities for the revolutionaries, but it was also the fire that fueled and sustained their motivation to execute the only successful slave revolt in history. At the time, the brand of Vodou that is now particular to Haiti was in its infancy. It has maintained many of the same elements it began with in Dahomey, but was also elaborated upon, changed and reworked according to the needs of its practitioners, isolated from contact with their origins in Africa and with contact from other African religious practices. Like all viable religions, it has developed and evolved, but maintained the physical immediacy demanded by its adherents. Vodou is a religion not only of the spiritual world, but also of the physical world.

Vodou is, in great part, a religion of the body. The arms, legs and heart dance to draw and praise the spirits. Ears hear the rhythm of the drums and the voice is used to sing praises and plead for intercession. Not the least of the senses used in Vodou ceremonies are the eyes, which choose and make devotional objects and images to remind the practitioner of particular lwas' traits and to please them. Just as the forms of Vodou worship, music, song, dance and ritual have developed over time, so too has the visual vocabulary of the Voudouisant. It stands to reason, then, that many of the sociological, historical and political factors shared in Vodou practice are also part and parcel of the imagery chosen for each lwa.

The Ezilis in particular reveal a great deal on the academically much-neglected subject of Haitian women and their involvement in the political struggles of the nation. In a country where illiteracy is high and much of the cultural and historical detail pertinent to the common person is recorded orally with images as mnemonic markers, art is a richly informative source. Haitians have a rich iconographical vocabulary, and the complexity of symbols used in peasant art is more sophisticated than might be assumed in their generally uneducated circumstances. As with all cultures, religious life reflects the social aims, if not the reality, of its adherents. Many of those values are reflected in religious art. Ezili is the pwen for feminality in Vodou, and so the iconography associated with her can inform both Voudouisants and outsiders alike of values associated with Haiti's women. The Ezilis most depicted in Haiti are Ezili Freda and Ezili Danto, so these will be the focus of this examination.

There is a great deal of femininity inherent in Vodou, both spiritually and physically. Unlike the monotheistic religions that dominate Western Europe, the Middle East and the United States, the female aspect of spirituality is celebrated by the Voudouisant. This is reflected in the arts of Vodou, down to the very materials used. Bright colors in shocking contrast are not unusual in murals and the innumerable chromolithographs of the lwa. Costumes, bottles, drapo and even sculpture are all composed of silks, satins, all covered in liberal amounts of sequins and beads. These items are charged with spiritual energy, especially bottles and drapo, and so the glitter becomes part and parcel of the image of the lwa. The use of such materials, to the Western and monotheistic eyes, serves to create a feminized image of Vodou that is considered both infantile and uncultured. Issues of race, class and religion all serve to reinforce this notion. Inherent in Roman Catholic, Protestant and Islamic attitudes toward Vodou are old convictions of the superiority of the hegemonic patriarchy of monotheism.

Vodou, both in the European and American minds, begins disadvantaged as a religion of inferiors. To the eyes of this sector of Christianity, whose sense of the aesthetic is caught up in issues of class, bright colors, patched fabrics, sequins, drawing and painting uninformed by Italian Renaissance standards, borrowing from European images, looks outrageous at best and gaudy at worst. It is disdained as tasteless, an attempt by the poor to imitate the more sophisticated grandeur of European Christian art of the past. These notions, along with misinformation of the foreign press encouraged by the elite classes in an attempt to eradicate Vodou
during the many Anti-Superstition campaigns in the country’s history, have served to portray Vodou as merely a savage cult to the rest of the world. As David Morgan writes “… distinctions between the aesthetic and non aesthetic, and good taste and bad frequently serve to enforce class distinctions.”

These notions are compounded by the inclusion of a powerful female lwa in Vodou practice, as the world’s major monotheistic religions have minimized or stamped out entirely the femaleness so prevalent in other religions.

This feminization of imagery is true, of course, for any of the spirits honored in Haiti’s most widespread religion. But for Ezili Freda, such feminization is absolutely necessary. Ezili Freda is the lwa of love and beauty. She is the ultimate woman, beyond compare and one whom every man desires and every woman aspires to be like. The image that Haitians have come to associate with Ezili Freda is that of the Mater Dolorosa del Monte Calvario. The luxurious, dramatic flair of theatrical clothing is easily compared with the costume quality of the Mater Dolorosa’s jewelry, which literally drips from her form. In fact, she has so much fine jewelry, that she cannot wear it all. Many necklaces pile upon her smooth throat, but just as many hang from her hands in a waterfall, for her neck and breast cannot accommodate it all. She wears so many rings that two or three must share a single finger. The fabrics of her dress are shiny and soft, of the finest quality. Her halo, a forest of fine rays, mimics precisely the dramatic rays of light emanating from the Cathedral of St. Peter in the Vatican, designed and sculpted by Gianlorenzo Bernini. Bernini’s highly dramatic art was used by the Roman Catholic church to attract converts and reinforce its teachings during the Counter Reformation. What is religion, but the drama of divine power s acted out on earth? Donald J. Consentino has linked colonial dramatic arts with the arts of the peristyle. It is the provenance of theater to fool the eye, to make the inexpensive look luxurious. The poverty of most Vodouisants has spurred them to become theatrical. Their jewelry, their clothing and all their personal accoutrements were not owned by them, but by the men in their lives. When, in the 18th century, the petit blancs turned the law toward oppressing the mulattos, the women suffered just as much as the men. For those affranchis who were the mistresses of white men and who depended upon their sexual allure to live an upper class life, the blow was doubled. They lost the right to wear finely cut clothes, they could not wear shoes, were forbidden via curfew to attend social functions and were legally allowed to be raped by white men. 8

It was not only the richness of her dress and the beauty of the mulatta, which was the portion of non-white Haitian society most likely to be upper class, but also the demeanor of Mater Dolorosa that identifies her with Ezili Freda. Freda’s extravagances are baroque in every respect, and, indeed, during possession, she acts out these very qualities. Ezili Freda is characterized by extremely effeminate behavior and mannerisms, like a flirtatious ingenue. These mannerisms are so pronounced as to be almost caricature. The drama in the image of the Mater Dolorosa fits well with this feminine ideal. The heft of her jewelry serves not only to emphasize her wealth, but also to emphasize her posture and gesture. Her form is soft and pliant, bent slightly forward. She is small, crowded to the center of the picture by the display of wealth around her. Freda’s hands spread wide in a histronic clasp over her heart. That same heart is dramatically pierced by a sword, but the wound is cleverly covered by her mantle, like a stage actor hiding a false wound. Her eyes look upward and to the viewer’s left in a pleading fashion. Her ruby lips are poised to seem on the verge of uttering some plaintive plea. These mannerisms are reminiscent of acting. This notion is reinforced by her grandiose costume. However, it is not far from the image that all society women of the colonial era wished to project—that of the delicate female constitution.9

In the chromolithograph chosen by Haitians to represent Freda, she is ripe for what feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey identifies as the male gaze:

“In their traditionally exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pinups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look and plays to and signifies male desire.” 10
Ezili Freda is exactly that: the signifier of male desire. The slightly parted lips, the averted eyes, the extraordinary beauty and wealth, all of these things contribute to her status as ideally desirable. So, too, were mulatta women in colonial Haiti objects of desire, setting the standard of beauty for the classes of the elite. They were desired by white men for their exotic features as well as their fascinating status as beings halfway between black and white. They were sought after by non-white men for the approximation their light skin made to the ideal standard of white beauty.

The glamour of the pre-Revolutionary mulatta is so close to that of Ezili Freda, who receives her wealth from her human and supernatural lovers. Like the real women of mixed heritage in Haiti history who aspired to the upper classes, Ezili demands expensive gifts, the most expensive her devotees can afford, in return for her own love and devotion. But also like those mulatta women, she is at her lover’s whims. Her unhappiness is in betrayals and unfulfilled expectations. Ezili Freda is forever in despair, for she is never satisfied. Her lovers cannot give her all that she wants. She depends too much on them for her bliss and happiness. She has one advantage over her colonial human counterparts; her wealth cannot be taken from her, because it is part of her identity as a lwa, and for her, it is very real.

Ezili Danto stands in sharp contrast to Ezili Freda in almost every way. This particular aspect of Ezili is from the Petwo nancho of Iwa. These are the “hot” Iwa, the proactive, aggressive Iwa. It is fitting that Danto should contrast the image of the sweet, Rada Iwa, Freda. Not only do their personalities contrast, but, appropriately, so too do their images. Ezili Danto’s image is borrowed from eastern Europe, where the cult of Mary has a strong following. She is most often represented by the Mater Salvatoris, a black Madonna holding a child. Ezili Danto can be represented by any image of the Madonna and Child, but dark-skinned Madonnas seem to be preferred. Ezili Danto wears a blue mantle, lined with red, and a green robe, both trimmed in gold, and a golden, simply bejeweled crown. She holds a hand to her heart, and stares out at the viewer in a full, frontal pose. The child she holds, identified by Haitians as her daughter, Anaïs, wears a pink robe also trimmed with gold, and a smaller version of her mother’s crown. Everything about Ezili Danto is straightforward. Her clothes are fairly simply cut and of fine but not extravagant materials. The halo that surrounds her head is a set of concentric circles, with the most radiant part extending to the borders with plain, solid triangular rays. The background behind her is simple and monochromatic, with solid gold Jewish stars. Most importantly, of all the lithographs chosen to represent Ezili Danto, the Mater Salvatoris confronts the viewer head on. This is in accordance with her Petwo nature, for the Petwo Iwa do things quickly, fiercely and without hesitation. Danto is the patron of hard working mothers living in hard circumstances. Her dark skin and area of patronage identify her with the Black women of colonial Haiti, who were most often the ones desperately trying to make ends meet for their families. Above all, Ezili Danto is the mother extraordinaire, fiercely protecting her children from harm.

It is easy to see, then, how this Iwa can be linked to the political lives of Black Haitian women of the past. The lives of non-free Black women in Haiti were horrendous. Treated as property, they were raped and beaten legally by their “masters.” They went hungry, worked hard, and endured abuses beyond modern imagining. Worse than their own sufferings must have been to watch the same system imposed upon their own children. Elizabeth Guenard, a French aristocrat, wrote of the infamous “October Days” just before the revolution:

“You have to be a mother and have heard your children ask for bread you cannot give them. She cannot bear it, and her pain makes her capable of doing anything because she sees nothing, feels nothing, except the imperious law of nature commanding her not to let perish who owe her their birth.”

This statement could just have easily been written about the slave women of Haiti, whose concern for their children extended much farther than merely being able to feed them. While their men were inspired generally by the revolution in France, those same women would have found inspiration in the news undoubtedly bandied about the plantations of the scandalous revolt of women against the King of France himself, which led immediately to the capture of the royal family and their permanent removal from Versailles.

Many Haitian women lived in the maroon camps (though they were vastly outnumbered by men) where the revolution began, and had undoubtedly taken part in the liberation of the island. In this context, it should be remembered that the king of Dahomey had created an elite fighting force solely comprised of women as his personal guard. They participated in major wars against the enemies of the king as well as in raids to supply slaves to the Europeans. Even if none of these women had been brought to Haiti in the slave trade, they must have been remembered by some of Haiti’s slave population, as some of the slaves were likely captured by Dahomey’s “Amazons.”

Vodou practitioners believe that Ezili Danto participated in the revolution just as the Amazons of Dahomey led raids against the King’s enemies. The role of the Iwa in the revolution was more matronly; to protect “her children,” the slaves of Haiti, and let loose her fierce anger at the oppressors. The two scars on the cheek of the Mater Salvatoris are said to be battle scars from the revolution. Though she is a lwa and not bound to the same strictures of human interaction, implicating Danto in the revolutionary struggle means that it is not beyond reason that women participated just as fully in the fighting as men. This is true even today, as women are depicted in many contemporary murals as moving with men in defiant action, machetes in hand. In the colonial era, one such proactive woman sacrificed a black pig during the oath swearing ceremony at the seminal meeting of maroons under
Boukman which began the revolution. Further linking Danto to revolutionary history is the fact that the black pig is now the animal of sacrifice for Ezili Danto. The folklore of the revolution also says that as the revolutionaries swore their oath, a thunderstorm is said to have broken out, violent storms being the provenance of Ezili Danto. 14

The origin of the image of Ezili Danto might provide further links to her martial aspects, as related to the revolution. This Madonna is of Polish origin, and is known as Our Lady of Czestochowa. The first Poles to come to Haiti were conscripts for Napoleon’s military force, sent to put down the revolution in 1802. Many of these soldiers, who had been freedom fighters in Poland, deserted the French forces and helped the Haitian freedom fighters instead. 15 It is entirely possible that a small image of Our Lady of Czestochowa was brought by one such soldier, became immediately identified as a martial lwa, and eventually became the favored image of Ezili Danto. 16 Surely the chromolithographs of this Madonna were in demand by the descendants of the Polish soldiers and would therefore provide the impetus for the image of a Polish Madonna to be imported to Haiti.

From a purely aesthetic standpoint, it is most notable that of all the images of all the Ezilis, only this image of Ezili Danto stares back at the viewer. In the nomenclature of art, this implies defiance of the male gaze. It is significant that only Danto images, in whatever form, look back at the viewer. Danto is not immediately available as an object of desire, for she confronts the viewer directly. Almost all images of Danto look at the viewer, but most do so coquettishly out of the corners of their eyes, their faces turned to a three-quarter view. No other image has the frank, full frontal stare of the Mater Salvatori. It is her very directness that discourages the viewer from placing her in the position of object. Meeting the beholder’s gaze forces a dialogue, an exchange with her image, thus preventing the kind of voyeurism that the likeness Mater Dolorosa encourages.

Strength is lent to the image by the artistic composition as well. The Mater Salvatori spans the entire width of the picture plane, with strong, solid shoulders that easily hold aloft the child in her arms. The pure geometric elements of both her halo and that of Anais—concentric circles and isosceles triangles placed with mathematical regularity lend Platonic serenity and stability to the lwa’s portrait. The plain background projects calm and focuses the viewer’s attention on the Madonna in the foreground, further marking her as the center of attention. This image of strength derives from what Vodouisants intuitively understood before the age of feminism—that as you look into the eyes of Ezili Danto, she looks also into yours. The visual potency of her portrait is a manifestation of the character of Ezili Danto, who is fiercely independent, not needing the help of men, and thus, not having to conform to widespread, idealistic projections about desirability which prefer women as objects. Not that Danto is undesirable—quite the contrary. But she meets men on her own terms, and is in no way coquettish with either her human or lwa lovers as Ezili Freda is.

The theatrical wealth of Freda is a gross idealization, so overdone as to be nearly unbelievable. In the spiritual world it is real enough. In the peristyle, it is only approximated with devotees’ expensive gifts and spectacular props. Still, it is an impossible reflection of the kind of wealth to which colonial affranchis aspired, and free mulatta women achieved this through display and desirability. On the other hand, Ezili Danto’s straightforward presence reflects the need for direct action necessary to the survival of Haiti’s Black slave women. Lacking wealth and prestige, working under cruel conditions, their choices were more clear cut: fight the system or be consumed by it. However, Danto’s righteous anger followed by swift action or retribution, is also an almost unachievable ideal. Except in the context of violent revolution, avenues of protest for lower class, Black women were nonexistent. After liberation, class struggle once again came to the fore of Haitian society. Where once there had been an uneasy alliance, open hostility broke out as the new mulatto aristocracy tried to regain their hold on the culture, prestige and political power that had been stripped from them by the whites. Simultaneously, they began to exploit the newly freed slaves in exactly the same fashion that sparked revolution in the first place. Tension between Blacks and gens de couleur was played out in politics and the courtroom over the course of Haitian history and is mirrored in tension between the lwas.

Until recently, the basic power structure in Haiti had not changed much since independence was first won. National leaders have come and gone, and race has always played a central role in higher Haitian politics. Whether noirist or nationalist, the upper classes kept financial control of the country. As the twentieth century approached, those who came to power, either Black or of mixed heritage, invariably became corrupt and stole from the treasury to line their own pockets as well as those of their comrades. In the modern era, strict associations of skin color are not applicable to social attitudes about status. Wealth, historically associated with the mulattoes of the colonial period, is still today associated with light skin. However, the actual physical appearance of a person of wealth has very little to do with their identified status. A popular saying states that wealthy people, no matter the color of their skin, are to be called light-skinned or mulatto. Poor persons who may have very light skin, are identified as Black. In Haiti today, skin color is a class distinction, not a racial one. It is a signifier of both economic and political status.

The economic inequities of past centuries is little changed, facilitating labels of “Black” and “mulatto.” Activities in the peristyle reflect these tensions, and the iconography of the lwa Ezili Freda and Ezili Danto, though unchanged, apply to modern Haitian women in some of the same ways they did to colonial women. However, many of the strict associations that seem true when speaking of colonial women prove to be less rigid with today’s Haitian women. Similarly, the powers of the Ezilis are not immutable. Ezili Freda is not necessarily dependent upon men for her power, nor is Ezili Danto always a proactive model for women. They each have their strengths and weaknesses. These too are reflected in the imagery of the Ezilis
and the lives of Haitian women. In looking to the Mater Salvatoris and the Mater Dolorosa for similarities to terrestrial women in the modern era, some of the limitations of the lwa become clear, and more complexity is lent to issues of gender in Haitian society.

Ezili Danto can still be strongly linked with lower class women. Her function as a struggling, hardworking mother is still pertinent to the reality of Haitian women, who, on the average, have six or seven children. In modern parlance, the power of Ezili Danto does not always manifest itself as actively as it did for colonial Haitian women. The frank stare of the Mater Salvatoris is threatening in the context of a hegemonic, male power structure like the one in Haiti. The lwa's power is limited in folklore by declaring that she has no tongue. In challenging the male gaze with her own, Ezili Danto steps outside the norms used to portray women in the visual arts of European tradition. If images of her are visually strong enough to challenge the viewer, then her verbal power as a lwa could be devastating, especially given her militant aspects. In the mythology about Ezili Danto, it is said that she does not speak because her tongue was cut out by the Haitian revolutionaries to keep her from revealing their plans. Cutting out her tongue is a way for the patriarchal social system to keep her power in check. The expression on the face of the Mater Salvatoris is not the hard, cold stare of an angry woman, but a soft, imploring look made assertive by her direct gaze. Her rigid frontal pose does not allow for the stagey, dramatic, distinctly female body language of Ezili Freda, and so her facial expression must carry the weight of her message. It is said that she was going to betray the revolutionaries, her children, by giving the enemy some key piece of information. Undoubtedly this had to do with her terrible temper, and some slight she perceived against her person was meant to be punished with the threat of treason. She did not succeed in her punishment, and instead was overwhelmed by the revolutionaries, who cut out her tongue in order to keep her from speaking to the enemy. In this way, agency is removed not only from Ezili Danto's ability to communicate, but also her very being. She depends upon members of the community and other lwas for interpretation of her messages. This is how her independence and overpowering image is curtailed. In the political sense, the Black women of modern Haiti have been silenced in the same manner, for they have a limited political voice.

Like Ezili Danto, the peasant women of Haiti constitute a powerful economic force, relatively speaking, in the lower classes. Of the employed in Haitian society, women make up the majority. The marketplace is especially important to rural Haitian women, not only because they control it, but also because it provides income from what little surplus they can squeeze out of the land. The market is also a good place to visit with other women and exchange ideas verbally. But politically, there is a great silence among Black peasant women. This silence is partially due to lack of time and resources to organize politically, but mostly because it is demanded by the men in their lives. When men hear of wrongs committed against women, their chivalrous (if controlling) attitude demands that they go out and rectify it. If marketplace women are subject to abuse, men will take to the streets in protest upon their behalf. The problem with women organizing in feminist organizations is, basically, that men don't like it. One problem common to all the (feminist) groups is machismo: men cannot bear the idea of women organizing themselves. There is a whole propaganda machine against it.

In an abstract sense, political organizations for women, such as SOFA (Solidarite Fanm Ayisen), are labeled as anticlerical. The traditional, accepted outlet of women's groups is associated with the street vendors and women's auxiliary groups, both of which are linked to the Catholic Church. Since these organizations do not deal with issues based on abuse linked with gender issues, SOFA often competes directly with more accepted groups to help alleviate situations using a feminist framework. This competition with organizations linked to the Church allows accusations of anticlerical activity to be leveled, and many women shy away from SOFA and other organizations like it.

In this way, the political voice of Black Haitian women, like that of the mutilated Ezili Danto, is silenced. Even some of the propaganda used against such organizations can be linked to the Vodou lwa. On a religious level, Vodou and Catholicism are often perceived to be in competition by the Catholic church, even if they are not by the Vodousant. Ezili uses the iconography of the Christian Mary, but the two are not the same. Ezili is Mary, but Mary is not Ezili. The perceived conflict of the two symbols of spiritual womanhood has always been part of the threat perceived by the Catholic church. Similar to the accusations of anticlericalism against feminist organizations, the Church has spread misinformation about Vodou in an attempt to impose its patriarchal structure on the African traditions of Vodou. In both cases, some aspect of Black Haitian feminality, whether political or spiritual, is subdued by opposing forces.

On a more concrete level, the age old accusation of lesbianism is thrown at Haitian feminist organizations, as it is with American feminism. This is pertinent because Ezili Danto is also said to be a lesbian. Here, women's active political participation and the aggressive stance of the lwa are linked by their outsider status. The aggressive actions of the Petwo lwa Danto are associated with male behavior. By patriarchal social standards, in whatever part of the world one goes, women should be soft, vulnerable, and need caring for. Ezili Danto defies these cultural norms, and is thus placed in the role of the lesbian. Since sex and gender issues are always intertwined, women's sexuality is often defined in terms of adherence to gender standards. As an aggressive, volatile force, Danto is a woman who acts like a man, and therefore is considered to be outside societal sexual norms. Political activism couched in terms of gender issues is not part of the female sphere by lower-class Haitian standards, so the same outsider social and sexual status is often given to feminists as a way to limit their power and the desire of Haitian women to become more politically independent. Not wanting to be labeled as lesbians, many
women shy away from organized feminism, and deny themselves one avenue for having a political voice. This does not mean that Black women are kept from accomplishing major feats in Haitian politics or that they sit meekly by and watch things happen around them. It simply makes it harder, and thus Ezili Danto is an excellent patron for these women in political struggle. Just before the regime of Francois Duvalier, women were beginning to organize themselves in workers’ unions, most notably, the coffee workers’ union. During the first years of Duvalier’s rule, these organized women were repressed, beaten, and often killed by Tonton Macoutes, and organized women’s political groups disappeared in Haiti for decades. When Jean-Claude and Michèle Duvalier left the country, 15,000 women came out in the streets to celebrate this victory. Since then, notable political victories have been won by women. When an undue tax burden was placed on vendors selling their products in Haiti’s open-air markets in 1986 and 1987, women got organized, protested, and got the law repealed. Though this is a less violent example than that of Haiti’s original poor Black women, it is still a victory gained for women in the persistent, strong tradition of Ezili Danto. The handicaps afforded Ezili Danto in popular mythology are tempered by the strengths of the lwa, just as patriarchal control of political voice is balanced by the perseverance of poor Haitian women.

Ezili Freda is just as pertinent a figure in the lives of modern Haitian women, and more affluent (read: mulatta) women of mixed heritage in Haiti have taken a more active role in Haitian politics as history progressed. For example, the Négritude movement, though a cultural, literary phenomenon, was a direct protest by Haitians of the more privileged classes against the American occupation of Haiti from 1915–1934. The instigation of the Négritude movement by Haitian nationals in Paris was heralded by the publication of La Revue du Monde Noir, whose first issue was co-written by André Nardal. This movement sparked political and social resistance to foreign occupation of their country by members of all classes in Haiti. The intimate involvement of a wealthy woman in the instigation of such an important social movement (which profoundly affected race relations in the United States as well) is indicative of the kind of political action typical of Haiti’s upper class women. Upper class feminism tends to be ideological in Haiti, as it is in the United States. This kind of abstract approach to feminism goes hand-in-hand with the conception of Ezili Freda. Freda is the embodiment of beauty in Vodou. As mentioned earlier, that beauty is an ideal, unattainable by human women, and is therefore, abstract. It is a social force among Vodouisants, a source for comparison and, to some extent, gauging human women. So, too, is the academic feminism of upper class women representative of an ideal. Its aim is to affect social circumstances, and in so doing, to affect the real circumstances of Haitian women by association. It does not tackle the concrete, day-to-day problems of the Haitian peasantry. Even in the near past, Olga Benoit of SOFA has said that Haitian Feminism is centered within the university system and academia, and that, “...they don’t put forward specific demands for women. The real women’s organizations today are made up of peasants and women from the poor and working classes.”

This does not mean that all upper class women only concern themselves with ideology and not with concrete practice. Nor does it suggest that ideological feminism is completely tangential to political change. But like the concerns of upper-class feminists, the beauty and wealth of Ezili Freda is more ideological in its bent. It is more abstract, intangible and not related to immediate reality. However, as the 20th century progressed, the place of Haiti’s women became more fluid, and so the strict association with Ezili Freda and the upper classes and Ezili Danto with the lower classes became less apt. Crossover in the appropriation of both Ezili Danto and Ezili Freda as signifiers of mulatta women became especially pertinent with the rise to power of Francois Duvalier.

Each of the Ezilis have their strengths and weaknesses, and the latter are more clearly illustrated in comparison with modern Haitian women. Until now, Ezili Freda’s power has been described as passive and retroactive, often relying on the males around her to create the active circumstances of her position. Ezili Freda is not necessarily dependent upon men for her power, and neither is Ezili Danto always a proactive, positive model for women. For example, the power of Ezili Freda may at first glance seem passive. But in fact, her sexual attractiveness is a decided advantage. In the overwhelmingly male dominated culture of Haiti, Freda actively seeks out the admiration that goes in tandem with submission to the male gaze. Men are so enamored of her, that they give her the best they have to offer.

Francois Duvalier’s rise to power was intimately connected with populism. Duvalier courted the lower classes in Haiti, appealing to outrage of their economic condition intimately linked with race. He had gathered inspiration for his populist, noirist platform from his college days and association with the founders of the Négritude movement. Two women played key roles in the Duvalier dynasty; Francois Duvalier’s wife, Simone, and the wife of his son, Michèle Bennett. The fact that Michèle Duvalier was mulatta caused a great deal of tension in the political climate of Jean-Claude’s reign. Though Simone Duvalier was lighter skinned, she was considered a Black woman, because she had indeed come from the poorer classes. In terms of this discussion, this identifies Simone Duvalier strongly with Ezili Danto. Not so Michèle Bennett, whose very light skin and upper middle class background set her firmly in the mulatto classes. Upon the death of her husband, it was Madame Duvalier who held the reins of power, not the named successor, Jean-Claude. He was much more interested in living a decadent lifestyle than actually taking part in the day-to-day affairs of running the country. But he chafed under his mother’s guidance, and his interest in Michèle Bennett was a weapon he could use to assert his independence.

Simone Duvalier disapproved of the marriage on many grounds, not the least of which must have been Michèle Bennett’s transparent attempts as social climbing. A marriage between Jean-Claude and Michèle Bennett also went counter to the
noirist ideals of Duvalierism; marriage to a mulatta woman would make it seem that he was spurning the populist ideas of his father’s regime. In the end, Michèle’s manipulative nature and sheer determination to become the most powerful woman in Haiti won out. The symbolic struggle between Ezili Danto and Ezili Freda was mirrored in Michèle Bennett and Simone Duvalier’s struggle for power over political influence in Haiti. And as with the Ezilis, a man, Jean-Claude Duvalier, was at the center of the conflict. It is not only Michèle Duvalier’s identified racial status that identifies her with Ezili Freda. The sexual habits and desire for wealth of Jean-Claude Duvalier’s wife also identify her firmly with the lwa of love and beauty.

Despite her availability to the male gaze and adherence to normative Haitian standards of femininity, Ezili Freda is hardly the helpless female. It is her very nature as a socially and sexually traditional woman that makes her power so acceptable. In every way, Michèle Duvalier’s rise to power in Haiti mimicked the kind of traditionally female weapons of power used by Ezili Freda. It was precisely her promiscuity that brought her to the attention of Jean-Claude Duvalier. Promiscuity is one of Ezili Freda hallmarks, and her sensual appeal is what attracts men and lwas alike, helping to provide her with her wealth. Freda’s wealth, which is literally and figuratively mythological, as discussed above, was made a reality for Michèle Duvalier by the millions of dollars embezzled from the Haitian treasury to buy an endless stream of luxuries. Her excesses were quite theatrical, as pointed out by Elizabeth Abbott:

“(The First Lady of Haiti should probably look like) Simone Duvalier —reasonably chic, moderately bejeweled. Certainly not like Michèle, spectacularly adorned from closets full of Valentinos, Givenchys, and other haute-couture dresses glittering with so much jewelry that her diamonds looked like baubles, so that sophisticated Haitians snickered about her tastelessness behind her back.”

It seems that Michèle Duvalier excesses were as baroque and staged as the image of the Mater Dolorosa, and just as much part of the display as was she herself. Her wealth was at the expense of the Haitian people, with the lower classes suffering the most. Though Ezili Freda asks the best of her devotees, she does not demand to the point of bankrupting them. Michèle Duvalier was Ezili Freda gone bad.

Freda’s imagery, however, is not limited to comparisons with Haiti’s upper class mulatta women. The imagery of Ezili is used by the lower classes to satirize just the sort of abuses engaged in by Michèle Duvalier and her husband. Haitians exhibit a keen sense of the farcical and ridiculous, and often use it to their advantage. Among Vodouisants, to be ridden by a lwa is a great honor. But when a male individual cross-dresses and takes on especially effeminate mannerisms, the humor value cannot be denied on all levels. The houngan or male priest steps outside of social norms. He does this not only because he is possessed by the lwa, and can therefore speak with otherworldly authority, but also because he has become a transsexual. Indeed, Ezili is the patron of gay men. Now outside the established order, the possibilities for social commentary become ripe. As Ezili prances around the peristyle in a man’s body, she personifies wealth, but because of the comedic aspect, the display can also become a scathing commentary on the economic inequities in Haiti. The iconography of Ezili Freda was used in the most popular poster during the dechoukaj of the Duvalier regime in Edouard Duval-Carrie’s painting of Jean-Claude Duvalier dressed as Ezili. It depicts him dressed in a wedding gown, playing upon rumors that he was a homosexual. Numerous murals appeared after the election of Jean-Bertrand Aristide to the presidency of the Virgin Mary (read also: Ezili Freda) with a portrait of Aristide over her heart. This makes a powerful statement about the belief of the common people in the divine favor, Catholic or Vodou, of Aristide’s presidency. Ezili Freda’s image and iconography serve as a useful tool for social commentary for the poor classes of Haiti. Therefore, Ezili Freda cannot be said, in contemporary Haiti, to be strictly associated with upper class women. Nor can it be said that Ezili Danto is now a signifier only for lower class Black women in Haiti. Power lines in politics are not so clearly defined, and neither is the iconography of the lwas.

The history of Vodou and the political history of Haiti are intimately linked. Vodou was one of the catalysts for the formation of the country. During its political infancy, Vodou, in its current Haitian form, was also being born. Religion is always reflective of social values, and the iconography of Ezili Freda and Ezili Danto fit well with colonial accounts of the position of Haitian mulatta women and Black women respectively. The display of self and wealth in the main image of Ezili Freda mimics that of the mulatta mistresses and aristocrats of Haiti’s colonial period. Likewise, the fierce fighting spirit of Black Haitian slave women is mirrored in the battle-scarred, straightforward stance of Ezili Danto. The conflict between these two classes of women is also reproduced in stories of conflict between the two Ezilis over men. These similarities can also account for the choice of the Mater Dolorosa and the Mater Salvatoris as representations of the two Ezilis. Haitian social norms and the mythology of the lwa were formed before European chromolithographs had a chance to reach Haiti.

These are, of course, generalizations. It is easy to make such broad statements concerning women in a long-gone-by historic era. It is clear from the examination of contemporary Haitian women, that strict association of each lwa with a particular class of woman is too simple. The imperfections in making an absolute statement about the connection between the lwas and Haitian women are amply demonstrated by the examination of the recent history of women and politics. Many parallels between Ezili Danto and poor/Black women are pertinent, as are correlations between upper class/mulatta women and Ezili Freda. But there is a much more fluid relationship between the power of the lwas and the position of women in politics, and comparisons with both lwas are pertinent to both classes of women.
The opposition of the classes to which mulatta women and Black women have been assigned is still reflected in the Ezilis, as the jealous Ezili Freda often lashes out at her counterpart, Ezili Danto, in an attempt to protect what she perceives is rightfully hers. But like the terrestrial women of colonial Haiti, the two Ezilis cannot be easily separated. They are, to use a tired phrase, two sides of the same coin, whose roles and desires are intimately linked with the consciousness of the nation.

Notes

1 Chromolithographs were not in wide distribution as personal images until the high Victorian Era (approx. 1870), and so Haitian Vodou mythology had almost 100 years to solidify itself before inexpensive images of either the Mater Dolorosa or the Mater Salvatoris had a chance to circulate and become widely accepted.

2 Eastern Europe has been influenced more by Orthodox Greek Catholicism, in which there is a very strong female element in the cult of Mary.


4 Morgan, 29.

5 Donald J. Consentino, “Introduction: Imagine Heaven,” Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou, (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 41. Due to the sophisticated nature of Haiti’s visual vocabulary, it is doubtful that this irony would go unnoticed by the populace. Since chromolithographs of the saints would doubtfully have reached Haiti before the Victorian Era, the mythology behind the Iwas was probably well established and nuances interwoven by the time the Mater Dolorosa was chosen to represent Ezili Freda.


7 Heinl and Heinl, 33.

8 Abbott, 13.


11 Yalom, 29.

12 Yalom, 29.


16 This point obviously requires more research and study, and this explanation is merely suggested as a possibility.


18 Benoit and Joachim, 37.

19 Benoit and Joachim, 37.

20 Benoit and Joachim, 36.


22 Benoit and Joachim, 36.

23 Benoit and Joachim, 35.

24 Nicholls, 158.

25 Benoit and Joachim, 35–36.

26 Benoit, 35–36.

27 Abbott, 253.

28 Consentino, 35.


References


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