

# Haiti, Singing for the Land, Sea, and Sky: Cultivating Ecological Metaphysics and Environmental Awareness through Music

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*Abstract: Vodou drummer Jean-Michel Yamba echoes a refrain that has been reverberating through Haitian society for some time: the Earth is dangerously out of balance, and the world's people are the cause. Scientific studies support this uneasy realization: the 2018 Global Climate Risk Index ranks Haiti as the single most vulnerable country to the effects of extreme weather events related to climate change. This article reflects on how humanity's responsibility toward the environment has been deeply encoded as traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) within Vodou spiritual ecology, which is expressed through songs and interactions with the lwa (spirits).*

*Résumé : Le percussionniste vodou Jean-Michel Yamba fait écho au refrain qui résonne depuis quelque temps dans la société haïtienne : la Terre est dangereusement en train de perdre son équilibre et c'est la population mondiale qui en est la cause. Les études scientifiques corroborent cette difficile prise de conscience : en 2018, le Global Climate Risk Index (Index des risques climatiques mondiaux), pointait Haïti en tant que pays le plus vulnérable aux effets des événements météorologiques extrêmes liés aux changements climatiques. Cet article se penche sur la façon dont la responsabilité humaine envers l'environnement a été profondément encodée en tant que savoir écologique traditionnel au sein de l'écologie spirituelle du vodou, ce qui s'exprime à travers les chansons et les interactions avec les lwas (esprits).*

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*O Èzili malad o (x2)  
Nanpwen dlo nan syèl o  
Solèy boule tè o  
O Èzili malad o  
Nou pa gen chans mezanmi o<sup>1</sup>*

*This article has an accompanying video on our YouTube channel. You can find it on the playlist for MUSICultures volume 45, available here: <http://bit.ly/MUSICultures-45>. With the ephemerality of web-based media in mind, we warn you that our online content may not always be accessible, and we apologize for any inconvenience.*

Oh, Èzili is ill, oh!  
 No rain falls from the sky  
 The sun scorches the earth  
 Oh, Èzili is ill, oh!  
 We have no fortune, my friends. (Traditional)<sup>2</sup>

The Vodou *lwa* (spirit) Èzili is a deity of love, at least in simplistic imaginings of her essence.<sup>3</sup> More accurately understood as a family of spirits, some of Èzili's manifestations are syncretized with the Virgin Mary, and her *sèvitè* (those who serve the spirits)<sup>4</sup> often borrow the Catholic iconography of Notre Dame du Mont-Carmel or the sorrowing Mater Dolorosa. Other aspects of her character are represented through chromolithographs of the Mater Salvatoris or the Black Madonna of Czestochowa. This beloved and powerful *lwa* is a complex and conflicting figure, associated at once with beauty, femininity, generosity, and empathy; with fierceness, jealousy, rage, and possessiveness; and with luxury and excess.<sup>5</sup> Through the ancestors of those who seek her guidance today and as a representation of "collective physical remembrance," Èzili suffered forced uprooting from her Dahomey homeland, a transatlantic crossing, the horrors of plantation slavery, and repeated rape by colonial masters (see Dayan 1995: 56, 54-65). With Ogou, deity of power and war, she was central to the 1791 Bwa Kayiman ceremony that launched the Haitian Revolution and was committed to delivering her people. Across the spectrum of her appearances, Èzili has come to symbolize the Haitian nation,<sup>6</sup> its history, its colonialist legacies, its liberationist spirit, and its ecosystem as a whole. When Èzili is ill, so is Haiti. When she sorrows, so do her *sèvitè*. When she mourns that no rain falls and the sun scorches the land, the farmers know her song all too well. And when she complains of having no luck — a frequent refrain she delivers in a doloroso manner — the sentiment resonates strongly within the Haitian population.

Many songs within the vocal repertoire of Vodou convey similar fears, warnings, and lessons about the Earth and humanity's relationship with it. This essay offers a brief exploration of the ecological metaphysics and environmental awareness cultivated through music in Haiti. Its objectives are threefold: (1) to demonstrate spiritual ecology as it is expressed through Afro-Haitian religious practices and note how it relates to local models of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK); (2) to cite a few (of many) song examples that illustrate the deleterious effects of imbalance between the visible (human) and invisible (spiritual) worlds, and that play with tensions between precarity and resiliency; and (3) to reflect on musical navigations of environmental crisis, through

which adherents seek collective healing and rebalancing of the human body, the community, and the land.

## Vodou as Spiritual Ecology

In 2015, Pope Francis published an encyclical titled “*Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*,” in which he appealed to believers to hear the cries of Mother Earth caused by “the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her” (3). In his sharp critique of human “plundering” of natural resources and “violence” against the Earth — sins he locates as the root cause of the sicknesses of the soil, water, air, and all forms of life — the Pope recalls his predecessor Benedict’s reprimand that “the deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture which shapes human coexistence” (6). Synchronistically finding resonance with Èzili’s song for the scorched land, which predates the Vatican’s most recent statement on the environment by many generations, Pope Francis sees the *Mater Dolorosa* present in the global condition:

Mary, the Mother who cared for Jesus, now cares with maternal affection and pain for this wounded world. Just as her pierced heart mourned the death of Jesus, so now she grieves for the sufferings of the crucified poor and for the creatures of this world laid waste by human power. (175)

While an ecologically informed movement of spiritual leaders from many different traditions around the world has been building in recent decades (see Vaughan-Lee 2016), this ecclesiastical letter did much to bring the notion of spiritual ecology into mainstream public consciousness.

Spiritual ecology has been expansively explained as “the diverse, complex, and dynamic arena of intellectual and practical activities at the interface between religions and spiritual ecologies on the one hand, and, on the other, ecologies, environments, and environmentalisms” (Sponsel 2012: xiii). Something akin to this understanding lies at the core of Vodou metaphysics, which, though not codified and thus flexible to deal with the specific needs of its practitioners, revolves around ideals of equilibrium between the visible and invisible and between the human and the natural world, as well as around a connection from the past to the present to the future. In Vodou, for example, Harold Courlander found “an integrated system of concepts concerning human behavior, the relation of mankind to those who have lived before, and to the natural and

supernatural forces of the universe. It relates the living to the dead and to those not yet born” (1985 [1960]: 9). In comparison, Zora Neale Hurston found “a religion of creation and life. It is the worship of the sun, the water and other natural forces” (1990 [1938]: 113). Even the instrumental ensemble — which accompanies many rituals and most *seremoni* (ceremonies), at the heart of which sit the sacred drums — is organized around the interactions of natural and supernatural forces. As Lois Wilcken, long-time pupil of the late master drummer Frisner Augustin, succinctly states, the “primary purpose [of the ensemble] is to stabilize human interaction with ancestors (culture) and with the elements (nature)” (1992: 48).

Reflective of the ecological metaphysics that undergird the Afro-Haitian belief system, the imagery perhaps most central to Vodou is the tree. Through its roots, its trunk that stands on the earth, and its boughs with leaves extending upward, the tree signifies three levels of spirituality (and three corresponding classes of spirits), from the underworld to the earth to the sky (Gilles and Gilles 2009: 83). Early on, this image was transposed to represent the soon-to-be Haitian nation, as revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture, while freezing to death in a jail cell in France in 1802, legendarily wrote:<sup>7</sup>

*En me renversant, on n'a abattu à Saint Domingue que le tronc de l'arbre de la liberté des noirs. Il repoussera par les racines, parce qu'elles sont profondes et nombreuses.* (Madiou 1989 [1904], vol. 2: 327)

In overthrowing me, you have cut down in Saint-Domingue only the trunk of the tree of liberty of the blacks; it will shoot up again through the roots, for they are deep and numerous.

Great attention is paid to the *rasin* (roots) of Haiti and its culture, which are defined in terms of the ancestors. While a sort of cosmic family tree is perpetually being delineated, with its roots extending back to Africa and its branches *ki rive nan syèl* (that reach to the heavens), Vodou's foundational symbolism emphasizes human integration within a broader ecological system viewed across time (back and forward across generations) and space (between the eco-scapes of the sacred homeland Ginen<sup>8</sup> — Africa — and the New World). Such a multi-dimensional ecology might be recast as “eternal arbors” in relation to imaginings of the “original” humans created by Bondye (Good God),<sup>9</sup> implying a connection made with the ancestors through the roots of heritage (Richman 2005: 153). This connection is achieved with the successful transmission of ancestral wisdom. This process occurs, in part, as a person's *gwo bonnanj* (something like a soul or higher consciousness, “the repository of

a man's history, his form and his force. ... [a] valuable legacy") gets transferred after death to one's descendants (Deren 2004 [1953]: 27, 24-33). Overseeing the process of the reclamation of the "soul" (*gwo bonnanj*) are the *oungan* and *manbo* (Vodou priests and priestesses), who are recognized as conservators of tradition and heritage (Yamba, interview, November 16, 2016). At the highest levels of practice, *oungan* may be awarded with the honorific *Ati*, the symbolically rich Dahomean word for "tree" (Gilles and Gilles 2009: 82-83). In fact, Kadya Bosou (Agadje), king of the Dahomey Kingdom from 1708 to 1740, was so aware of the power of memory that victims sold into slavery were made, before boarding slave ships, to circle a "tree of forgetfulness" planted in the ports of Wida and Dyenken to prevent their souls from returning to Africa to seek revenge. It was evidently also an attempt to break the continuity between generations (and, in turn, the *gwo bonnanj*) and the transmission of history (106). And yet, memories, histories, and beliefs traversed the Atlantic and took on new forms and significance in the colonies.

The topic of memory returns us to the introductory song example and to Èzili's concern with Haiti's environment. While other *lwa* are more explicitly tied to the regulation of natural phenomena — for example, master of the crossroads Legba commands the sun and the powerful Agwe oversees the oceans — Èzili approaches ecological dialogues on a meta level. An Afro-Caribbean analogue for Gaia, her beauty symbolizes the possibilities of the land in all its magnitude and grandeur; she represents fecundity, but in the sense of the human "capacity to conceive beyond reality, to desire beyond adequacy, to create beyond need" (Deren 2004 [1953]: 138). Her delight in luxuries and demands for excess amidst poverty — namely, in insisting that her devotees supply her with sweet-smelling Florida water, brand-new soaps, candies, silk handkerchiefs, and jewellery on her arrival — reflect the human propensity for callous disregard of the resources at hand.

When contextualized within centuries of aggressive extraction of Haiti's natural resources, this aspect of Èzili's behaviour (making a show of extracting riches from the poor) brings forth an unfolding critique of over-consumption in a capitalist, neoliberal global economy.<sup>10</sup> That is, this critique can be assessed through Haiti's trajectory from the colonial plantations that sent massive quantities of sugar and coffee to Europe at immeasurable expense to the island's soil and to the enslaved Africans and Creoles who made production possible (see Burnard and Garrigus 2016); to the export to North America during the 19th and 20th centuries of nearly all of the vast old-growth mahogany and walnut forests — the (conveniently overlooked) basis for the country's much remarked-on deforestation crisis (see Bellande 2015); to today's unregulated and likely unlawful mining of minerals like gold, copper, uranium, and bauxite

by multinational corporations that is polluting the waters and scalping the mountains (see Regan 2013). Èzili's vindictive fury, which emerges whenever she becomes jealous or feels she is not receiving sufficient love and attention, might be read in conjunction with the hurricanes that have devastated the Caribbean isles with increasing force and frequency in recent years (see Thiele 2017). Such metaphors may seem difficult to maintain, except for the fact that (a) Èzili is expressly called on as a guide during such unsettling times, and (b) more broadly, the lwa are themselves accretions of meaning, accumulating histories, tales, encounters, disasters, and victories as though they are growing archives of memory and experience. Those memories and experiences, whether triumphant, traumatic, or mundane, have become part and parcel of each lwa's mythical identity, and are key to their power.

A more direct presentation of a Vodou spiritual ecology is offered by Azaka, the lwa appointed as (mystical) Minister of Agriculture who oversees the crops and who is a healer with deep knowledge of the medicinal properties of plants.<sup>11</sup> Syncretized with the Catholic Saint Isidore the Farm Laborer, the patron saint of farmers, Azaka is likewise depicted as a *peyizan* (rural farmer), dressed in denim with a woven straw bag (*makout*) slung over his shoulder and a machete in hand. Thematically, his songs tend to address the planting and harvesting of crops and the weather or climatic events that support or impede their growth, as does this one, shared by drummer, Vodouizan, and metaphysical thinker Jean-Michel Yamba:

*Grenn tonbe, plan leve la  
Grenn tonbe, plan leve vre  
Azakamede men sezon di konsa  
Fòk sa chanje o*

*Zakamede pote lapli o  
Zakamede pote bèl fwi  
Zakamede pote lapli o  
Jaden sanba yo byen fre  
Azakamede men sezon di konsa  
Fòk sa chanje o. (interview, August 10, 2015)*

A seed falls, a sapling rises  
A seed falls, a sapling truly rises  
Azakamede [lwa of agriculture], look:  
A difficult season like this, this must change, oh!

Zakamede [the lwa] brings rain  
 Zakamede brings nice fruit  
 Zakamede brings rain  
 The *sanba*'s [a spiritual singer] garden is fresh [has a cool  
 breeze, is beautiful]  
 Azakamede, look:  
 A difficult season like this, this must change, oh!

While preparing her noted ethnographic portrait of Brooklyn-based manbo Mama Lola, Karen McCarthy Brown encountered a similarly themed musical *devinèt* — a riddle, a prominent form of Haitian orality especially prized in the countryside — for Azaka. “Only a careful listener would have realized that it was the ravaged earth who spoke in this song,” she noted:

M'malere, m'malere vre;  
 Se defòm m'genyen . . .  
 M'malere, m'malere.  
 Se pa achte m'achte;  
 Se Bondye kreye-m malere.  
 Moun-yo bale sou do mwen.

I'm unfortunate, I'm truly unfortunate;  
 It's crippled I am . . .  
 I'm unfortunate, I'm unfortunate.  
 It's not something I brought on myself;  
 God created me unlucky.  
 People sweep on my back. (Brown 2001 [1991]: 58-59)<sup>12</sup>

Such a riddle would have reverberated strongly in the diaspora of New York City where this song was delivered, as many immigrants from Haiti over the past several generations have in fact been environmental refugees, fleeing a land that makes rural life and subsistence farming a punishing and often impossible existence (see Myers 2002). Although Azaka is rumoured to be wealthy (but excessively stingy), he has come to symbolize both the misery of the rural poor and the often barren, environmentally degraded land. This, then, is a spiritual ecology that often gets articulated in terms of lack and loss, even as it maintains a lingering hope — as in Louverture's declaration about black liberty “shoot[ing] up again through the roots, for they are deep and numerous.”

## Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Konnesans

Through practices and performances of Vodou, the *sèvitè* and *lwa* make observations about their landscape and environment in ways that overlap with traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). Intriguingly, TEK has been defined in striking parallel to spiritual ecology as

the evolving knowledge acquired by indigenous and local peoples over hundreds or thousands of years through direct contact with the environment. ... [It] is an accumulating body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (human and non-human) with one another and with the environment. It encompasses the world view of indigenous people which includes ecology, spirituality, human and animal relationships, and more. (Harrington 2015: vii)

Perhaps the most pronounced example of TEK in Haiti lies with the traditional healing practices and herbal remedies guarded by the *medsen fèy* or *dòktè fèy* (leaf doctors), who are frequently also *oungan*, *manbo*, or other spiritual guides. *Medsen fèy* are “pharmacists” with strong ties to the countryside who intrinsically (if not also through biochemistry) understand the scientific properties of leaves, herbs, and roots for healing. Much of this pharmacological knowledge dates back to the indigenous Taíno and African-born enslaved people, and has, over many generations, been translated into daily contemporary life through the drinking of homeopathic teas, tinctures, and infused alcohols and the use of leaf-based rubs, compresses, and baths (see McClure 1982 and Rouzier 1997).<sup>13</sup>

Many songs in the Vodou and traditional repertoires directly cite the use of healing leaves and are used as healing incantations alongside therapeutic baths and medications. The following example was recorded in Port-au-Prince by Haitian-Canadian musicologist Claude Dauphin and was sung for me decades later by Haitian journalist and Vodou adept Konpè Filo (interview, January 5, 2018):

*Mwen pral nan Gran Bwa*  
*M pral chache fèy o* (x2, with line above)  
*Lè m a retounen*  
*Ya di m se wanga m pote.* (Dauphin 1986: 136)



I'm going to Gran Bwa [mystical Great Forest; a corresponding lwa]  
 I'm going to look for leaves  
 When I return  
 They'll tell me that I've brought poison / magic.<sup>14</sup>

Gran Bwa, as commemorated in this song, is both the mystical Great Forest and a corresponding lwa. The mystical forest Gran Bwa holds symbolic ties to Bwa Kayiman, the site of a ceremony said to have launched the Haitian Revolution, thus making it an important historical reference point. The lwa Gran Bwa, linked to the Catholic Saint Sebastian who stands tied to a tree, is a well-respected but enigmatic spirit of the forests who owns the leaves and knows their magical and medicinal secrets, for good and bad intentions. He is a symbol and protector of the rich earth. Citing this lwa, Haitian-American psychologist and conflict mediator Margaret Mitchell Armand traced the connection between TEK and spiritual ecology when she observed, "The power of healing from Gran Bwa lies in our connection to our higher self through nature" (2011: 95). Haitian anthropologist Rachel Beauvoir expounded that much of the healing power found in the forest revolves around playing with states of consciousness and the science of transformation:

The forest draws together, regroups and vibrates with waves that diffuse modality, a natural temple for all those determined to go beyond. Its approach is operated under conditions where transformation already has begun — enlightening the dreamlike states induced by the prior crossing of Kafou [lwa of the crossroads]. Ordinary and subliminal consciousness meet, creating new time and space, enhancing development. (1995: 169)

Often accompanying such natural healing practices, which endeavour to transform the physical state of the body and one's supernatural being, is a knowledge base referred to as *konnésans*, which might be viewed as a spiritually extended form of TEK. While the term in Kreyòl can be used to describe knowledge or consciousness in a broad sense, this special form of *konnésans* is acquired through initiation (Wilcken 1992: 121). Besides healing, *konnésans* encompasses knowledge of Ginen (the spiritual homeland, Africa), the lwa, history, ancestral wisdom, sacred song and dance, codes of morality, and the proper manipulation of energies within the universe. Appreciation of the power of *konnésans* to save lives appears in several favourite songs, such as "Fèy o":

*Fèy o! Sove lavi mwen, nan mizè mwen ye o! (x2)*  
*Pitit mwen malad, mwen kouri kay gangan Similò (x2)*  
*Si li bon gangan, l a sove lavi mwen*  
*Nan mizè mwen ye o!*

Leaves! Save my life, I'm in misery, oh!  
 My child is sick, I hurried to oungan [Vodou priest and healer]  
 Similò's house  
 If he's a good oungan, he'll save my life  
 I'm in misery, oh! (Traditional)<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, beyond their role as spiritual guides, oungan (such as Similò in this song) and manbo frequently serve as critical community-based health practitioners in a country that lacks adequate access to formal medical care (see Maternowska 2006).

## A Vodou Take on Postcolonial Ecological Theory

Another beloved song about healing leaves and roots carries the added weight of memory:

*Twa fèy, twa rasin o*  
*Jete bliye, ranmase sonje (Traditional)*

Three leaves, three roots, oh  
 To throw down is to forget, to gather up is to remember.<sup>16</sup>

Beneath the literal sense of these lyrics, the deeper meaning points out the choice to embrace or refuse one's heritage, ancestors, and way of life. Jean-Michel Yamba, who sang about Azakamede (above), may well have had "Twa Fèy" in mind, when he told me:

*Nou menm ayisyen nou rejte sa k pou nou. Nou pase tout sa k pou nou anba pye, n al pran lòt bagay. Se nòm al pou n peye l. Se sa n ap peye la. Nou pa ka yon bagay epi nou pè l, ou wè sa m di w? ... Sa se sa yo rele ratres la: tout moun ap fini avèk la nature just tan yon vin fè l cho. Ou konprann? Tout nasyon viktim, e fè kraze la nature la. L'Europe en premyè kraze la nature, se kounyela yo tèlman wè yo kraze la nature yo mande padòn. ... Yo kraze tout bagay andann tè a, yo pran tout bagay nan namn li. (interview, August 10, 2015)*

We Haitians, we've rejected that which is for us. We trample everything that's ours beneath our feet and go take something else instead. It's normal that we pay for that. That's what we're paying for now. We can't be something and be afraid of it. You understand? ... So that's what they call [global warming; literally, "recession," "shortening," "diminishing"]. Everyone is "using up" nature until they cause [the climate] to become hot. You see? Every nation is a victim and is destroying nature. Europe first "broke" Nature; now they see their destruction to Nature and are asking for forgiveness. ... They destroyed everything inside the Earth, they took everything in its soul.

Yamba's layered reflection mourns many Haitians' rejection of their culture, identity, resources, and memory. It is also an observation of the heightened environmental precariousness the country's citizens routinely endure. This is no overstatement: the 2018 Global Climate Risk Index identified Haiti as the country most vulnerable to the effects of extreme weather events related to climate change during 2016, and the second most vulnerable over the two-decade period from 1997 to 2016 (Eckstein, Künzel, and Schäfer 2017: 4-9). This is largely the cumulative result of extreme deforestation and environmental degradation from centuries of aggressive overuse of the land. As such, Haiti's environmental precariousness gets magnified on multiple inextricably intertwined fronts, from the effects of natural disasters compounded by the despoiled land, sea, and sky; to the overreaching interventionist aid and "development" efforts that often threaten the country's sovereignty and undermine local solutions; to the general weakness of the Haitian State, which lacks adequate infrastructure and regulation to manage the fundamentals of modern-day society, including policing, sanitation, energy, and education.

Yamba suggests that much of Haiti's precarious state comes down to Haitians failing to remember and hold dear the nation's history, identity, and values. Yet simultaneously, everyone is implicated: the Vodou metaphysicist intuits postcolonial ecological theory, suggesting that despite recent Western environmentalist concerns, this is a human problem initially driven by the insatiable hungers of European colonialism that gave rise to the neoliberal capitalist global economy, rather than a distinctly Haitian problem. Yamba's assessment is congruent with the globalization of consumptionism and dumping (and the associated uneven repercussions and benefits) that postcolonial ecologist Rob Nixon has denounced as slow violence: "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed

across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2011: 2).

Returning the formulation of the slow violence of environmental degradation back to the Haitian case, Caribbeanist cultural studies scholar Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert points out the world’s largely untroubled obliviousness to the transnational history and politics that have led to Haiti’s vulnerability, even as the country has become regarded by some aware observers as “the canary-in-the-coal-mine of the Anthropocene” (2016: 65). One particular concern is the mainstream Western media’s ubiquitous discourse of resilience as a convenient and guilt-assuaging descriptor (from a Western perspective) for the Haitian population, which is faced with the “fate” of chronic environment-related tribulations including the 2010 earthquake, cholera, and successive hurricanes. As Paravisini-Gebert indicates, the typical Western projection of Haiti’s resiliency gets idealized and reduced as

strength gained from a history of confronting adversity. This image of the Haitian people as Sisyphian heroes fated to roll their immense boulder up the hill of poverty and privation separated their sufferings from their history, relegating their poverty to a *natural* condition. (70, emphasis in original)

In other words, the underlying political and structural processes that have led to such chronic conditions of suffering get expediently whitewashed out of the equation. Moreover, resiliency as a concept reifies a hierarchy of human value: populations whose “plight” is to be an “endlessly resilient” people, versus those who are privileged not to hold that burden.

Even so, notions of being that might be ascribed as resiliency (or perhaps rather as the will to persist) exist widely within Haitian cultural expression. By incorporating a well-known song from the traditional repertoire into their 1993 hit “Fèy” (Leaf), politically engaged popular *mizik rasin* (roots music) band RAM employed a different angle of the fèy trope:

*Fèy yo gade mwen lan branch mwen*  
*Yon move van pase, li voye m jete* (x2, with line above)  
*Jou fèy tonbe nan dlo se pa jou a li koule*

Leaf, they see me on my branch  
 A fierce wind comes along and throws me off  
 The day the leaf falls into the water is not the day it is submerged.<sup>17</sup>

The direct metaphor, also transliterated as “The day you see me fall is not the day I die,” expresses the will to persist when faced with a destructive blow. Yet Haitian listeners decoded a deeper meaning: the lyrics came to refer to the determined popular resistance to the coup d’état that sent President Jean-Bertrand Aristide into exile. RAM’s song, embraced by Aristide’s supporters, was censored by the Raoul Cédras regime that supplanted Haiti’s first democratically elected president.

While *au courant* assessments identify slow violence as a primary underlying cause of environmental precariousness, historical roots of the ecological crisis have also been located in the ideological formulations that govern worldviews, which are equally useful when contemplating spiritual ecology. In contradistinction to the Pope’s “Laudato Si” encyclical, which sees a moral imperative in Catholicism to heal humanity’s relationship with the Earth by healing human relationships and those with God (2015: 89, 159), historian Lynn White, Jr. proposed that the Judeo-Christian tradition was the primary source of the crisis. In White’s regard, Christianity, “the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen,” initiated a stark human-nature dualism unknown in pre-existing pagan and animist ethics, while encouraging believers that it is “God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (1967: 1205).<sup>18</sup> Thus, the conversation is brought back around to the realm of the sacred with the recognition that “what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them” (1205). Again, Yamba matches White’s critique with his own complaint against the extremes of colonial extractionism: “they took everything in [the Earth’s] soul.”

## The Principles of Healing and Balance in a Precarious World

Vodou encourages tapping into *konesans* (spiritual consciousness) to seek root causes and appropriate responses to spiritual imbalances, which may manifest as political, social, financial, medical, or environmental troubles. Ati Max Beauvoir, a Sorbonne-trained biochemist and *oungan* (Vodou priest) of the highest order, taught that Nan Ginen is “le jardin des ancêtres” (the garden of the ancestors) (2008: 13). What happens when humanity fails to respect the multi-dimensional sacred ecosystem of Ginen — measured across time (via the ancestors) and space (to the spiritual homeland and back again, and between the visible and invisible worlds) — is demonstrated through Beauvoir’s description of the *Iwa Ayizan*, keeper of the faith and guardian of the *ounfò* (temple, “the place of spiritual birth”<sup>19</sup>), as

*La Terre Sacrée, entretient chez l'homme le sens de la racine, c'est-à-dire de la loyauté et de la fidélité à la Tradition ancestrale. Quand on décide de faire abstraction d'un tel concept, socialement ou collectivement, comme les terres ou les forêts où les arbres qui perdent subitement leurs racines, elles se changeraient bien vite en déserts. (52)*

The Sacred Earth, which nurtures within humans the sense of their roots, that is to say, of loyalty and fidelity to the ancestral Tradition. When one decides to disregard such a concept [as the Sacred Earth], socially or collectively, just like the lands or the forests where the trees have suddenly lost their roots, they rapidly turn into desert.

The implication is that spiritual drought is at least as destructive as the physical one that has led to desertification of land that was tropical rainforest just 500 years ago.

To assist with warding off spiritual drought (which subsequently might encourage a more harmonious relationship with the natural environment), the *Lapriyè Ginen* (Ginen Prayers), a mass or liturgy in four movements, may be performed at the beginning of a Vodou service. It serves to assist those who offer such sung prayers to “glide subtly” toward God while gaining moral grounding and increased ability to address worldly problems (M. Beauvoir 2008: 58-59). Ati Beauvoir’s interpretation of this practice is supported by ethnomusicologist Rebecca Sager’s findings on Vodou *chanson* in the north of Haiti: Vodou singing “places practitioners in proper relationship with each other, with nature, with spirits, and with Bondye — God” (Sager 2009: 92-93). Sager goes on to describe how Manbo (Vodou priestess) Marie Rose imparts lessons of *respè* (respect) and *kwayans* (beliefs) while facilitating contact with the *mistè* (the “mysteries,” the spirits of the invisible world). The *mistè*, in turn, have the duty to educate people, although they do not intervene in human-made problems; they share all necessary knowledge, but people must take responsibility for working through the solutions. Today’s political, economic, and environmental challenges, Marie Rose assesses, are “the consequences for not heeding the spirits’ guidance” (Sager 2009: 107).

Seeking guidance from the *lwa* and *mistè* is an act often associated with the *lakou*, a sacred yard or “vital space, a place of multidimensional life where several families or, rather, an extended family shares all aspects of life (spiritual, economic, cultural)” (Beaubrun 2013: 31). Dedicated to the primary functions of preservation, protection, and renewal, *lakou* are crucial to resetting proper relationships between people, nature, the spirits, and God. They are sites of

homecoming, where those born in the lakou, often having migrated to cities or other countries, periodically return to seek rebalancing and reconnection with their roots. They are conservatories, where collective history and memory is held and passed down (Yamba, interview, November 16, 2016). They are centres of healing, where medicinal teas, tonics, and baths of leaves, herbs, and roots are prepared and administered to balance any misaligned properties in one's body or soul. In the lakou, regular dances, feasts, and ceremonies are held for the lwa, who are said to "dance in a follower's head" or "ride their horse" (what might elsewhere be viewed as trance or possession; see Deren 2004 [1953]) as they pass along konnesans — literally embodying knowledge in the *sèvitè* and dancing the Sacred.

Beyond everyday life in the lakou, special commemorative and restorative annual events take place throughout the country, including *fèt chanpèt* or *fèt patwonan* — the feasts honouring the patron saint of a town or community. During each festival period, many Haitians at home and abroad, regardless of whether they claim affiliation with Vodou, make annual pilgrimages to the centuries-old lakou of Souvenance, Soukri, and Badjo (or to any number of other smaller family-based lakou) on designated days of celebration. The here-named trio of historic lakou, all located in the Artibonite region, are state-designated sites of national patrimony, and thus the several days of intense sacred ritual activity at each locale are permeated with discussions of heritage and memory, and of respect — for self, for community, for history, and, as is increasingly articulated in national discourse, for the sacred environment.

Haiti's best-known and attended pilgrimage by far, however, is that of Saut d'Eau (Sodo), which takes place each July in the Plateau Centrale town of Ville-Bonheur and at a nearby 100-foot waterfall for Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Èzili. Local legend has it that in the area, the Virgin Mary appeared on a palm tree that a French priest subsequently cut down, purportedly to avoid superstitious practices from spreading. Rather than suppressing interest, however, today tens of thousands of visitors flock to Fèt Sodo seeking sanctities and blessings from the Virgin Mary and Èzili. Following a Eucharist Mass at the Ville-Bonheur Catholic church, pilgrims attend Vodou rites at the waterfall, where they bathe ritually with *fèy* to renew themselves spiritually. Devotees discard their old clothing in the falls and depart with new white garments to symbolize letting go of the old and dirty and embracing the new and clean.

In their idealized forms, the lakou and spiritual pilgrimages are about collective healing, a rebalancing of the human body, community, and land. The notion of balance itself is perhaps the most ubiquitous and potent of all concepts in Vodou, even in its apparent simplicity. Balance (or the potential for balance) is illustrated as *kalfou* (or *kafou*) — the crossroads. Taking the

symbol of the cross, which finds its most powerful point at the intersection of its vertical and horizontal axes, *kalfou* represents the various decisions one may make and paths one may take in life, as much as it represents the intersection between the physical and spiritual worlds and between the visible and invisible. The *lwa Legba*, who was present at the birth of the world and who is often depicted as the sun, is understood as “the medium through which that primal energy [‘the fire of life’; ‘divine creative power’] was funneled to the world, the cord which connects the universe eternally with its divine origin” (Deren 2004 [1953]: 97). *Legba* is therefore the central pillar of the world, the master of the crossroads, the translator who sees into the past and the future, and, ultimately, who knows Life and its destiny (97-100).

When Vodouizan sing, “*Legba, ouvri baryè pou mwen*” (*Legba, open the gates for me*), they are making a cosmic demand: they are asking for an opening, to see the way, and for help navigating the crossroads of life. When a *lwa* mounts a horse (or inhabits the body of a *sèvitè*, as possession might be described), that event is a physical manifestation of the node between the physical and the divine, where the human becomes divine and the divine becomes human; it is a fleeting moment on the precipice of balance between the visible and invisible. When filmmaker-ethnographer Maya Deren observed that “for the *loa* [*lwa*] of cosmic forces, there is an end to labor in the achievement of some natural cosmic balance” (2004 [1953]: 144), she suggested that the *lwa* may always remain essential, at least until there is some understanding of what a natural cosmic balance can be. Africologist and *oungan asogwe* (high-ranking Vodou priest) Patrick Bellegarde-Smith follows in this direction: for him, the crossroads are eternal and represent infinite choice and possibility (2004 [1990]: 29). By implication, finding a way past the current heated impasse in ecological debates and remedying actions will not be possible without navigating the crossroads that perpetually emerge in front of us. There are, however, if not infinite solutions, infinite possibilities for finding ways forward.

## At the Crossroads of Ecomusicology and Sacred Ecology

Ecomusicology has sought to draw together the discursive spheres of “music, culture, sound, and nature at a time of environmental crisis” (Titon 2013: 9). In many instances, this has meant demonstrating how environmental awareness has been cultivated through music. The literature has largely focused on defining and commemorating spaces and aural/performative experiences; examining and promoting musical creation in the wake of environmental destruction and climate change; and formulating “ecology” and “sustainability” as metaphors



inspired by their scientific origins to understand musical expression in an environmentally, technologically, and economically evolving world (e.g., Allen and Dawe 2016; Pedelty 2016; Schippers and Grant 2016).

Despite Lynn White's paradigm-shifting demonstration of how Western culture has forced a human-nature dualism on our treatment of the environment — which has more recently been echoed in music scholarship as a critique of ecomusicology's tendency to "reaffirm" the divide between "the cosmological and anthropological orders" (Ochoa Gautier 2016: 109) — ethnomusicologists have infrequently considered the metaphysical conceptions of the bonds between humanity and the environment. Notable exceptions include the classic ethnomusicological studies of Steven Feld with the Kaluli in the Papua New Guinea rainforest (2012 [1982]), Marina Roseman with the Temiar in the Malaysian rainforest (1993), and Anthony Seeger with the Kĩsédjê (Suyá) of Matto Grosso, Brazil (2004 [1987] and in Allen and Dawe [2016]). Through these studies, we learn how the sonic worlds of these cultures are conceptualized and how, in each, living beings can seemingly occupy multiple states of existence, as in the humanness of animals, or in the boy who became a *muni* bird. More recently, Helena Simonett has written about sentient ecology among the Yoreme in Northwestern Mexico where trancing musical humans become birds (in Allen and Dawe 2016), and about Yoreme cosmivision that sees "the world of the sun, the sea, the trees, the flowers, the mountains, the rocks, and so forth [as constituting] the sacred environment" from which "musical inspiration emerges" (2014: 116). But there is much more we can do to reflect on sacred ecologies of the sort in this essay, and on the interconnectedness between humanity, the divine, and the environment, as well as on how shifting relationships between these three entities effect changes to material and immaterial culture (see Dirksen 2019).

Presumably from its earliest configurations, Vodou has expressly cultivated a metaphysics that binds together the visible and invisible within the multi-dimensional sacred ecosystem of Ginen. The practice of developing environmental awareness through Vodou and traditional chanson has permeated Haitian culture in a broader sense, in that several popular music bands have drawn Vodou themes and messages on sacred nature and environmentalism into their repertoires, even appropriating *mizik lakou* (music that originated in a lakou, often initially voiced by a lwa). While there are many examples, including that of RAM cited above, one of the most haunting songs is sung by Manzè (Mimerose Beaubrun) of the popular *mizik rasin* (roots music) band Boukman Eksperyans. The song portrays the priest of Agwe, lwa of the sea, mourning the loss and misuse of Haiti's resources:

*Imamou lele woy*

—*Kouman nou ye* (x4, with line above)

*Gade yon peyi k ap gaspiye*

—*Kouman nou ye, Imamou lele wo, kouman nou ye*

*Gad' on solèy cho k ap gaspiye*

*Gade bèl tèt nonm k ap gaspiye la*

*Sa se enèji k ap gaspiye*

*Gade bèl gason k ap gaspiye*

*Gade bèl jenn fanm k ap gaspiye la*

*Sa se enèji k ap gaspiye*

*Gade ayiti k ap gaspiye la*

Imamou [the sea lwa Agwe's priest] cries out, *woy* [expression of anguish]!

—How are you?

Look at a country that's being spoiled

—How are you? Imamou cries out, *woy*, how are you?

Look at a hot sun that's being wasted

Look at the [intelligence] that's being squandered

That's energy that's being wasted

Look at the handsome boys who are being lost

Look at the beautiful young ladies who are being misused

That's energy that's being wasted

Look at Haiti that's being wasted here! (Boukman Eksperyans 1998)<sup>20</sup>

Vodou ecological metaphysics recognizes that some of the most profound crossroads people face today are questions about their relationships with nature and their regard for the visible and invisible. For those who are attentive, the lwa serve as guides to konnesans and the infinite wisdom of the universe, but the responsibility for human-made problems, and the power to act, lies exclusively in human hands. Despite the dire warnings of scientists and the amplifying environmental concerns of many global citizens, a window of possibility to respond remains in the Vodou cosmovision: *Jou fèy tonbe nan dlo se pa jou a li koule*. The day the leaf falls into the water is not the day it is submerged. 🌿

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## Notes

1. All transcriptions and translations from French and Haitian Kreyòl to English throughout this text are the author's unless otherwise indicated. Any errors are my responsibility alone.

2. "Èzili malad" is one of the most frequently heard songs for Èzili. Haitian classical composer Werner Jaegerhuber transcribed and arranged it into a suite of folkloric songs for voice and piano (1943), later rearranged by Julio Racine (2004). Racine's arrangement of "Èzili malad" may be heard on the CD *Belle Ayiti* by the ensemble ZAMA (2007), which is listed in the discography.

3. Substantial descriptions of Èzili (Erzulie) and her many manifestations have been published by Brown (2001 [1991]: 220-257), Deren (2004 [1953]: 137-145), Guignard (1993: 113-122, 271-278), and Marcelin (1949, vol. 1: 73-98), among others. Any of these should be read in tandem with Joan [Colin] Dayan's contextualizing commentary (1995: 54-65).

4. The word *sèvitè* may also be used to connote the spiritual head of a *lakou* (sacred yard).

5. The *lwa* are expressly not idealized figures; rather, they represent the entire possible range of human emotion, reflection, and behaviour. Among Èzili's manifestations are Èzili Freda, Èzili Dantò, Èzili Je Wouj ("Red Eyes"), and Marinèt, representing both "hot" and "cold" *Petwo* and *Rada* aspects of the metaphysical practice. For more discussion on distinctions between the *Petwo* and *Rada* branches of Vodou, see Guignard (1993). Quoting Haitian historian Thomas Madiou, Dayan suggests that Èzili's polar opposites are a logical result of Saint-Domingue's "unprecedented spectacles of civility and barbarism" in which "transported Africans, uprooted French, and native Creoles found themselves participating together" (1995: 58-59).

6. In striking parallel, the Virgin Mary was declared the patron saint of the island rechristened Hispaniola, which was the first location in the Americas to be colonized by the Europeans (Gilles and Gilles 2009: 98).

7. This statement for which *Louverture* is best remembered, which explicitly draws on Afro-Caribbean spiritual symbolism, belies the complexities of other public declarations. He also issued an ordinance against “*le Vaudoux* and ‘all dances and nocturnal assemblies’” in 1800 and a constitution in 1801 that affirmed Roman Catholicism’s place in public life (Ramsey 2011: 48-50).

8. Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique and Didier Dominique (1989 [1987]) offer a nuanced treatment of *Ginen*, which metaphorically refers to the spiritual homeland or the Isle Beneath the Sea while literally referring to the Gold Coast, or Africa, in its broadest sense. *Ginen* is also a way of exploring a moral grounding.

9. Vodou is a monotheistic belief system at the distant centre of which stands Bondye, or Good God, with a pantheon of *lwa* who intercede on behalf of the *sevètè* in their daily lives — a set-up much like the Catholic God and Saints. Many Vodouizan see Bondye as the same God as the Christian God.

10. This assertion splices together my personal research encounters with the *lwa* and their *sevètè* with Dayan’s postcolonial reading of *Èzuli* (1995: 54-65) and Paravisini-Gebert’s post-earthquake assessment of Haiti’s history of environmental degradation using postcolonial ecological theories (2016).

11. Guignard (1993) profiles *Azaka* in several of his manifestations, including *Azakamede* and *Kouzin Zaka*, as do Marcelin (1940, vol. 2: 83-96) and Brown (2001 [1991]: 36-78).

12. The transcription and translation of these lyrics are preserved as printed in Brown (2001 [1991]). I suggest an alternate translation: “I’m in misery, I’m poor; I’m crippled / deformed ... I didn’t buy these troubles; God created me unlucky. People trample over me.”

13. Such practical knowledge about ecological uses of natural resources is largely valued across the spectrum of class and colour — making traditional healing practices a rare unifying element of Haitian culture. Multinational pharmaceutical companies have expressed great interest in local knowledge about the healing properties of plants in the Caribbean and South America.

14. *Wanga* may be a charm, talisman, or spell.

15 “*Fèy o*” has been widely performed and commercially recorded, thus literally transported from the Haitian countryside to concert halls around world. *Fèrè* Laguerre’s choral arrangement for *Choeur Simidor* is classic (c. 1950), but I also direct the reader to Issa El Saieh’s big band jazz version (c. 1950). More recent renditions by Simon and Garfunkle, Azor (*Lénord Fortuné*) and Eddy Prophete, Leyla McCalla, and numerous school and church choirs in Europe and North America make for good comparative listening.

16. Julio Racine’s arrangement of “*Twa fèy, twa rasin o*” may be heard on the CD *Belle Ayiti* (2007). *Ti-Coca*, *Dadou Pasquet* with *Magnum Band*, and *Emeline Michel* have each recorded enlightening versions of the song.

17. This line is also rendered as “*Jou ou wè m tonbe a se pa jou a m koule*” (The day you see me fall is not the day I die). The base proverb is phrased in ecological terms: “*Jou fèy tonbe nan dlo se pa jou a li koule*” (The day the leaf falls into the water

is not the day it is submerged). This song is featured on RAM's 1995 album *Aïbobo*, and the music video is worth viewing for the depth of its symbolism: [https://youtu.be/HNe\\_PJebyi8](https://youtu.be/HNe_PJebyi8) (accessed March 7, 2018).

18. Genesis 1:28 of the King James Bible reads, "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." This verse is echoed in the land, sea, and sky formulation of this article. In his encyclical, Pope Francis declared that sin had ruptured humanity's relationships with God, our neighbours, and the earth, thus distorting "our mandate to 'have dominion' over the earth" (2015: 48).

19. Deren (2004 [1953]: 148).

20. This song is featured on Boukman Eksperyans' 1998 album *Revolution*. The sea is the birthplace of all humans and the graveyard of all resting souls.

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