Soul and Vital Force: Vibrant Life Matters and Mortuary Arts in Africana Religions and Beyond

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Abstract: Religious devotees all over the world pray for long and healthy life, one hopefully filled with prosperity and purpose. However, the search for immortality is not a universal quest of humankind. In African and African Diaspora religious communities, few rituals aim to prolong life indefinitely, as this would disrupt the cosmic flow of new and returning souls journeying to earth. Instead, African-derived communities emphasize the quality of a vibrant and well-balanced life, one lived with integrity and intention to fulfill the destiny of the soul(s). This thematic essay highlights core principles of longevity, livity, and the vibrancy of life within Black Atlantic religions. These insights ultimately reveal how life’s vital force is sustained through balance, ritual, and the fortification of souls and divine energies. Case studies explore other religious traditions with similar characteristics in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

Resumen: Los devotos religiosos de todo el mundo oran por una vida prolongada y saludable, llena de prosperidad y propósito. Sin embargo, la búsqueda de la inmortalidad no es una búsqueda universal de la humanidad. En las comunidades religiosas africanas y de la diáspora africana, pocos rituales tienen como objetivo prolongar la vida indefinidamente, pues esto interrumpiría el flujo cósmico de las nuevas almas y de aquellas almas viajeras que retornan a la tierra. Más bien, las comunidades de origen africano enfatizan la calidad de una “vida vibrante” y bien equilibrada, vivida con integridad, y con una intención de cumplir aquel destino del alma. Este ensayo destaca los principios fundamentales de la longevidad, la vitalidad, y el dinamismo de la vida dentro de las religiones del Atlántico Negro. Estas perspectivas, finalmente, revelan cómo la fuerza vital de la vida se sostiene a través del equilibrio, el ritual, y la fortificación de las almas y su energía divina. Los artículos que este ensayo contiene exploran otras tradiciones religiosas con características similares en América Latina, África y Asia.

Death as Initiation

Crouched comfortably before a black-and-white tombstone, the Haitian lwa (spirit) Gede Nibo balances on his heels in the cemetery and casts a knowing glance toward the viewer. While the spirit Bawon Samdi is officially regarded as Haiti’s lord of the cemetery in the Vodou pantheon, all divinities hail from the Gede and Bawon spiritual families reside between their spiritual home of Afrik-Ginen (an African realm of ancestors and spirits) and the liminal realm of the graveyard (Figures 3.1–3.4). Such is the case for Gede Nibo, a renowned healer and elder in the Gede family. A wide-brimmed purple hat with a tapered green ribbon dons the spirit’s head, and against the backdrop of his full black beard, a curved tobacco pipe emerges from his lips. Ever the dapper dresser, Gede (Guede in French) sports a pressed white dress shirt with purple cufflinks, and a polka-dotted handkerchief peeking out from his breast pocket matches the pattern of his purple pantaloons. A diagonally striped tie incorporates all three of his primary colors—white, black, and purple—symbolizing his dominion over the various stages of life, death, and rebirth.

The tombstone that is often represented behind Gede Nibo in many drapo flags features a prominent black cross with white diamonds and an inverted heart in the very center, both emblems from the Haitian Vodou system of divination cards. While the cross is most commonly identified as the iconic symbol of Christianity in a nation such as Haiti colonized by French Catholics, the motif also has deep historical roots as dikenga, an Indigenous symbol of the ancient Kongo Kingdom. In Central Africa, the Kongo cross or dikenga signified the cosmic crossroads between mortal and spiritual realms, a cosmogram that represented dimensions of both time and space in the mystic encounter between worlds (Thompson and Cornet 1981; Martínez-Ruiz 2013). Kongoese citizens Africanized the Catholic tradition between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, and claimed the cross as their own religious symbol (Thornton [1992] 1998; Fromont 2014). Similarly today in Haiti, the cross represents the nation’s plural religious realities, simultaneously embodying the presence of Jesus Christ for Christians as readily as the Gede spirits for Vodouizan, devotees of the African-derived tradition Vodou. And an analogous process of religious mestizaje becomes evident in other communities from the Caribbean and Central America (see Wali in this volume, on Guna Christianity).

In the same type of drapo flags, the silhouette of a white candle sits on the first step of the tombstone, an
Figure 3.1. Drapo ritual flag showing ancestral spirits (lwa) protecting people from disaster in the 2010 Haiti earthquake (FM 362683). Made by Ronald Edmond artisans.

Figure 3.2. Drapo flag of Haitian Vodou practitioners making an offering to ancestors (FM 362685). Made by Ronald Edmond artisans.
offering left behind by loved ones visiting cherished ancestors in the cemetery. On his right arm, Gede Nibo cradles a wrapped brown whip over his elbow, perhaps to ward off Death when someone’s time has not yet come, or to invoke the hotter Petwò and Kongo spirits of enslavement. In his left hand, he carries a shallow dish, likely a kalbas (dried calabash gourd) with popular offerings such as dried fish for the dead. Gede thus engages in an act of ritual reflexivity, generously offering nourishment to the zanset (the ancestors), who are in fact citizens of his own Kingdom of the Dead. Two lilac-colored skulls with otherworldly eyes are perched beneath the spirit, reminding us that despite his manifestation in human form here, Gede indeed expertly balances between the realms of life and death.

In many Black Atlantic communities, as well as of the Indigenous world of the pre-Columbian Americas, death does not signal the end of life, but rather the negotiation of divine energies and new realities of being (see Feinman in this volume, on the balance of the divine forces through the Mesoamerican ballgame). Grieving and mourning naturally occur, but it is generally understood that death affords initiation into the ancestral realm of spirits and may present opportunity for rebirth in a new manifestation. This is how Evelyne Alcide often portrays the Gede spirit of her drapo, or ceremonial flag: as arbiter of life and death with the power to navigate both realms. The Gede family of spirits are known for their tremendous healing powers, and are frequently called upon to help ease one’s transition into the afterlife. Loved ones seek strength and courage from the Gede spirits, and may call for help to heal family members who are unwell in the event that their time has not yet come. However, the Gede do not barter for souls, and Vodou offers no promises of eternal life. Humans are meant to fulfill their purpose on earth as related to the destiny of their soul(s) and to honor the ancestors and spirits through rituals that cultivate vital force (fós or nam), all while recognizing the inevitability of their mortality.

Religious devotees all over the world pray for long and healthy life, one hopefully filled with prosperity and purpose. However, the search for immortality is not a universal quest of humankind. In African and African Diaspora religious communities, few rituals aim to prolong life indefinitely, as this would disrupt the cosmic flow of new and returning souls journeying to earth. Instead, African-derived communities emphasize the quality of a vibrant and well-balanced life, one lived with integrity and intention to fulfill the destiny of the soul(s). This essay highlights core principles of longevity, livity, and the vibrancy of life within Black Atlantic religions, which are also present in other Indigenous religious traditions from the ancient Americas and beyond. These insights ultimately reveal how life’s vital force is sustained through ritual balance, the fortification of souls, and the sustenance of divine energies.

**Origin Stories and Sacred Arts of Death**

Death is conceptualized differently in various regions of the Black Atlantic, and numerous African myths of origin describe how death was brought into the world, often due to human foils or epic battles between spirits. Among Efik nations of southern Nigeria and western Cameroon, death was administered as punishment to defiant humans. The Efik creator spirit Abasi emerged as arbiter of life and death. He initially created the earth, followed by the first humans: a man and a woman, possibly named Esefe and Okporo, who were destined to live with other spirits in the divine realm. The human couple expressed their desire to live on earth, but Abasi forbade this as they might come to challenge his authority. Abasi’s wife, Atai, proposed that humans be permitted to live on earth under strict guidelines, and after some persuasion, Abasi agreed to a comprise: the first humans could live on earth under two conditions: they would not cultivate their own food, but rather would return to the divine realm to eat every day, and they would not procreate out of respect for Abasi (Hackett 1998; Scheub 2000).

The new humans respected this divine law of their Efik creator spirits for a time, but eventually both promises were broken: woman desired greater independence and began to cultivate her own crops, while man desired to procreate; they conceived and woman gave birth to many children. Though they tried to conceal their transgressions, Abasi and Atai soon learned of the humans’ offenses and deliberated on a fitting punishment. In order to prevent humans from becoming too powerful as masters of their own destiny, the wise wife Atai sent death and discord into the world so that humans would forever remain humbled as a result of their disobedience (Beier 1966). This Efik story of origin reveals an Indigenous theodicy, illustrating how Efik communities theorized the problem of evil in the world. In this narrative, an onslaught of death and chaos was brought about by a goddess who challenged the divine order by first advocating for her mortal children, and who later unleashed her wrath on her defiant progeny.

Other West African myths also describe human failings as the reason for death’s emergence in the world, but, unlike those from Judeo-Christian religions (see Schweiker in this volume) West African origin narratives...
acknowledge the distinct fate of humans as juxtaposed with other natural beings of the universe. In Central Africa, Tchokwe nations of Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo distinguish humans’ experience of death (and rebirth) as compared to the lifecycle of the sun and moon as celestial bodies. In the Tchokwe graphic writing tradition of Lusona (or Tusona), a myth of creation describes how the sun, the moon, and first human are all given a chicken as a test from the creator God. Upon being instructed to hold the chicken and return to God the next day, both the sun and moon fulfill their tasks with the chicken unharmed, and God rewards them by instructing them to return either every day or every 28 days, respectively. This is why the sun circles the earth to rise and set every day, and why the moon follows a 28-day cycle of rebirth. However, when given the same task, the human became hungry and ate his chicken. Upon the human’s remorseful return, God punished him with death (a fate not bestowed upon sun or moon), proclaiming that all humans would eventually return to God upon their death (Olúpọ̀nà 2014). Such myths remind us that in so many Indigenous narratives of origin, humans exist in relationship to other living beings (such as animals, the sun and moon) over whom they cannot claim superiority. This is the case, for example, for the Incas of Peru, whose actions were always subordinated to the desire of the mountain spirits (see Williams in this volume). This is due partly to humans’ transgressions and irreverent disobedience, which leads to their subsequent humbling.

Still other West African traditions describe death as the unfortunate result of spirits’ divine rivalries which likely precede humans’ arrival on earth. The Akan river spirit (or abosom) Tano is a great healer and protector in southern Ghana, and engages in perpetual (im)mortal combat with his nemesis, Death. When someone falls ill, the abosom Tano and Death race to the person’s side to compete for the individual’s soul. Should Death arrive first, the person will become a new citizen of the ancestral realm, but should Tano win the race, the person will be healed and granted a new lease on life. As in many African and African Diaspora traditions, Death therefore does not constitute an inherently maleficient force, because few if any spirits embody pure notions of good or evil. Rather, as a specter of the ancestral realm, Death represents a destructive but inevitable cosmic force to be respected and even feared, but not abhorred.

Southern Ghana’s Akanland boasts a powerful aesthetic tradition of funerary arts. Notably, this includes the production of intricate kente fabric and other textiles embroidered or embossed with Adinkra, another African Indigenous graphic writing system that dates back at least to the 1600s. These graphic writing systems serve as communication modes for both secular and religious purposes based on ideograms, pictograms, and cosmograms (Mafundikwa 2007; Martínez-Ruiz 2013). Historically, Akan funerary fabrics carried distinct Adinkra symbols with encoded proverbs and historical events in honor of the deceased, and decorated regalia would be coordinated among funeral attendees and family members (Hackett 1998; Ross 1998).

In the mid-twentieth century, a new mortuary arts tradition of Ghana has emerged known as fancy funerals, in which elaborately decorated coffins are constructed for the dead to ensure a safe and “vibrant” passage to the afterlife. Artist Seth Kane Kwei constructed this coffin in the shape of a canoe populated with many rowers who will presumably steer the dead home (see Bandama on Ghanaian fantasy coffins in this volume and Figure 4.14). Often the themes featured in fancy coffins honor a certain vocation, skill, or pastime of the deceased, leading us to imagine that the deceased person honored here may have been a fisherman or a lover of the open waters. As a coastal region, the importance of fishing in southern Ghana cannot be understated, though the rowers’ matching blue and yellow uniforms may also suggest that they belong to a team. The bottom of the canoe has been painted black and the words “Sweet Not Always” and “Time Will Tell” have been inscribed on one side of the boat, reminding us that death may not always be sweet, but that time will tell as descendants live on in memory of the deceased.

Painted in gold in the very center of the canoe are three Adinkra symbols, the middle a traditional golden stool (sika ɗwa) said to have descended from the sky and landed on the lap of the first Asante king, Osei Kofi Tutu I, to mark his rightful heirship in the newly established kingdom; thereafter, the royal successor would be known as Asantehene, religious and political ruler of the Asante/Ashanti people (Hackett 1998). To the right is a ceremonial sword used in many parts of West Africa as a symbol of allegiance to the throne, while the left icon could be a royal baton, all signaling the likelihood that the coffin was crafted for a community leader of great prominence. In this mortuary rite, it becomes evident that not only must the dead be propitiated and properly cared for as an ancestor in the spirit world, but their passage to the afterlife must be made as smooth as possible. In this newer Akan tradition with finely carved coffins in the shapes of cars, planes, food, animals, and sacred objects, fancy funerals attest to the desire for a triumphant conclusion to one’s mortal life as the spiritual life begins anew.

Figure 3.4. Vodou tradition kanari and govi pots which the deceased’s soul returns to inhabit (FM 362680, 362681, 326682). Made by Ronald Edmond artisans.
Figure 3.5. Huastec stone yoke, a representation of ballgame attire (FM 48101).

Figure 3.6. Colima dog, likely from a funerary context, side view (FM 95615).

Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, a world or cultural region that stretched from the southern limits of the deserts of north Mexico down through much of what is now Central America, was a mosaic landscape that was highly differentiated by rugged mountains, wide, flat valleys, and coastal lowlands. Linguistically and culturally, this world also was characterized by diversity, with scores of languages spoken and many different local and regional traditions. Over the 15 or so millennia between the region’s first human inhabitants and Spanish invasion (ca. 1520 CE), political boundaries, economic networks, and spheres of interaction shifted markedly across time and geographic space. This pre-Hispanic world was never entirely unified politically.

Central places and urban settlements in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica also rose and fell over time (e.g., Feinman and Carballo 2018). Despite the rough terrain, geographically restricted opportunities for water-borne transport, absence of effective beasts of burden, and lack of wheeled vehicles, pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican peoples, as a whole, shared certain key cosmological elements and belief systems. From group to group and one temporal phase to another, pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican cosmologies were by no means entirely uniform or static, and this variability underpinned differences in practice. Nonetheless, fundamental tenets of worldview were widely held.

For example, the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican universe was divided into three general realms or levels—a celestial space or overworld, the earthly level or middeworld, and the underworld or “place of the dead” (Carrasco 1990, 51). The conception of these tiered realms should not be equated with Judeo-Christian concepts of heaven and hell. In Mesoamerica, each tier of the universe was associated with different conditions and even animals. In each domain, time and events passed at their own tempos. Across Mesoamerica, dogs were viewed as companions who could lead the dead to the underworld. Representations of dogs, such as the West Mexican ceramic canine in the exhibition, or sacrificed dogs frequently accompanied the dead at interment.

In pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, movement across these tiered levels of the universe was believed possible for humans, the dead, and supernatural forces, often along some kind of axis mundi, like the trunk of a great tree, that stretched vertically through these tiered domains. Passage from one horizontal realm to others also was seen as possible through caves, fire, sunlight, or the center points of architectural ballcourts where rubber ballgames were played (Carrasco 1990, 52–53). Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican ballgames were not played with precisely the same rules, or the same accompaniments. Although many ballplayers may have worn padded yokes of leather or rubber around their waists to protect their torso and propel the heavy rubber ball that was used in the game, stone yokes, such as the one exhibited, were limited to the Classic period (500–900 CE) along the Gulf Coast (Veracruz State). Stone yokes (Figure 3.5) were too heavy to wear during the game and likely served as ceremonial emblems or were incorporated into ritual events. Despite differences in the form of the court and the associated artifacts, the game always had a tie to life, death, and a portal between realms of the universe.

In pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican belief systems, death was closely connected to the world of the living. Life and death were conceived to be part of a dynamic and complementary opposition. Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican thought recognized that the maintenance of the cosmos required both supernatural action and nourishment provided by humans through offerings and other ritual practices (Figures 3.6–3.9). Bloodletting, death, and sacrifice were seen as necessary aspects of life to maintain cosmic order. Furthermore, deceased ancestors had a powerful impact on the living. Not only could they send malevolent forces and disease if not treated properly, but they served as conduits between the living and the supernatural world (Miller and Taube 1993, 74).

Thus, in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, the deceased remained social actors. The biological dead continued to be socially alive. For example, in certain representations, they were shown to dance at weddings or bear witness to successions of leadership. The death of an individual began a process of rebirth and renewal in which the deceased was seen as instrumental to what befalls the living (Fitzsimmons 2012, 776–77).

Maize was a key staple crop of most pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican peoples, and the plant’s agricultural cycle, from seed to cob to stalk, served as a metaphor for human life and death (Miller and Taube 1993, 28–32). Humans were viewed analogously to maize and other plants grown on the surface of the Earth, born to perish, serving a role on Earth, but also embodying the seed of regeneration (like the corn kernel that gives rise to the next generation crop). This metaphor, portrayed in distinct ways, was a persistent theme in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican artistic representations.

Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican conceptions of life, death, sacrifice, and renewal foster traditions that remain alive today. The active role of ancestors in the world of the living undoubtedly is part of the traditional legacy for contemporary rituals associated with the Day of the Dead. Likewise, Mesoamerican farmers let drops of their own or animal blood and spill alcohol in their nascent maize fields as a sacrifice to the Earth and...
supernatural world when planting to ensure a fertile harvest.

References

Figure 3.7. Colima dog, likely from a funerary context, front view (FM 95615).
Figure 3.8. Classic-period Zapotec (Oaxaca, Mexico) effigy vessel (FM 51884), generally recovered from funerary contexts.
In Haiti, ritual flags known as *drapo* serve as a primary sacred art tradition of Vodou (Figures 3.1–3.3), and many feature spirits of the dead. *Drapo* derive from a blended tradition of European military banners and West African processional tapestries of ritual and warfare. Early Haitian *drapo* may have simply included different colored fabric sewn together, but beginning in the mid-twentieth century, factory textile workers collected discarded beads and sequins and began incorporating them in innovative new styles of flagmaking (Girouard 1995; Polk 1997). Ritualt speaking, *drapo* play a central role within Vodou communities as emblems of a temple's protective patron *lwa*, and when processed around a temple's sacred center post (the *potomitan*), their sequins capture the essence of spirits in motion. As ceremonial tapestries, *drapo* energize the spirits into action, dancing to welcome newly made initiates to a spiritual family and carried as mystic banners to honor the spirits in sacred outdoor processions. This is strikingly similar to the way the ancient Moche ancestors from northern Peru were represented dancing, celebrating, and even copulating for the successful passage of the deceased into the world of the dead (see Muro Ynoñán in this volume, on Moche death and sex). Today's *drapo* often portray *vèvè*, sacred symbols unique to each *lwa*, or artistic interpretations of the spirits in the Vodou pantheon. Perhaps due in part to the harsh realities of life and death in Haiti, the Gede family of spirits are frequently portrayed in *drapo*.

Gede spirits typically manifest in Vodou ceremony through ritual mountings as powerful yet playful spirits with great wisdom and healing abilities; they tell bawdy jokes and tease uptight devotees about all manners of procreation but as arbiters of life and death, they never tell a lie. In *drapo* such as those by Haitian artist Ronald Edmond, the Gede are portrayed in their signature top hats, black, white, and purple attire, wearing sunglasses to see simultaneously into visible and invisible worlds, and are often depicted dancing lasciviously to bring in new life. Grann Brijit, the Queen of the Gedes, may be portrayed with a headscarf, broad-rimmed hat, pipe, and sacred liquor offerings in the cemetery. The Gede can also be represented as skeletons performing everyday actions, resembling the pantheon of Mexico's own vibrant mortuary art traditions of animated skeletons (see Amat in this volume). Spirits of the dead are ceremonially honored in Haiti on November 1 and 2 for All Saints' Day and All Souls Day, recognized as feast days for the Gede spirit family and all ancestors (zansèt yo). The skeletal Gede portraits very much parallel Mexican ancestors and skeletons honored in Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) festivities, some of whom have even taken on sacred personas in a skeleton pantheon such as the well-known La Catrina. Ultimately, Haiti's Gede spirits remind devotees to live their lives meaningfully and with vitality, maintaining a sense of humor in facing the precarious nature of death.

### Soul Journeys and the Multi-Soul Complex

A common philosophical quandary in Western society unfolds in considering what happens to the soul when someone transitions in death. In many West African and African Diaspora traditions, this query becomes exponentially more complex with the introduction of the multi-soul complex: the common Africana philosophy that each person possesses multiple souls. In several West African cosmologies, certain soul-selves are embodied in the physical body itself such as the Yorùbá *ori òdè* of southwestern Nigeria and Kongo *nitù* of northwestern Angola and western Congos (Daniels 2022). Other souls are immaterial, such as the Igbo *chi* (southeastern Nigeria), Akan *kra*, Yorùbá *orí inù*, and Kongo *kini*, which all manifest a person's cosmic double in the invisible realm of spirits. In certain contexts, the soul is regarded as a divine breath as in the Fon se *mèdo* (southern Benin), Yorùbá *èmi*, Akan *honhom*, and Kongo *vìmunu*. In all of these regions, this divine breath comprises an aspect of one's selfhood and is eventually extinguished in death (Daniels 2022). Further, the Akan *honhom* and Yorùbá *orí inù* souls have the power to fly, and upon one's death they transform into bird-like creatures as a person makes their way to the spiritual realm (Ogunnaïke 2012). At times, the soul makes its own way to the ancestral world upon someone's transition to the afterlife, while in other communities, specific rituals such as the smashing of clay pots occurs to release the soul from its human shell. The notion of a fractal or divisible soul that partitions, travels, and transits from one entity to another, either human or nonhuman, is interestingly present in Andean pre-Columbian societies, suggesting some shared notions about the soul(s) and personhood among Indigenous American and African societies (see Williams and also Muro Ynoñán in this volume, on Inca and Moche death rituals, respectively). Consistently across Black Atlantic religious communities however, death liberates the soul(s), and an individual's personhood as it was once known ceases to exist.

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**Figure 3.9.** Incense burner from the pre-Hispanic valley of Oaxaca (FM 191593).
3B The Inca Capac Hucha

Patrick Ryan Williams
Field Museum

The Inca rite of capac hucha, the “royal obligation,” brings into question the fundamental aspects of death in society. It involves the offering of young children as sacrifices to important sacred entities in the Inca world. It is, in many ways, the sacrifice of the future potential of humanity. The capac hucha is not a moment in time, however, as it involves an extensive process of transformation. Those chosen for the ritual of capac hucha may have been removed from their home months or a year or more before their biological deaths in many cases. And they were conceived of as intermediaries to the ancestral deities. The Inca empire prepared for these cases well in advance. Some of the young women may have been taken into service as aqllakuna (chosen women) and destined for this rite. Other girls and boys were chosen from communities throughout the empire. While often the sacred entities to whom they were sacrificed were lofty mountain peaks, in at least one case it was a sacred island in the Pacific Ocean.

In 1892, George Dorsey, future curator at the Field Museum, conducted excavations on the Isla de la Plata off the coast of Ecuador for the World Columbian Exposition. On a triangular point of land between two ravines, at 16 feet below the surface, the excavations revealed the remains of two poorly preserved skeletons and numerous grave offerings (Dorsey 1901). Based on the grave offerings, we presume these were the remains of two young women, although their bodies were not collected nor identified on site. The excavations revealed many ceramics and stone sculptures of the local Chorrera culture and the remains of a sacred Inca child sacrifice, the capac hucha (McEwan and Silva 2000).

The grave offerings accompanying the two individuals included five female figurines (three of gold, one of silver, and one of bronze), six tupu pins (used to fasten a woman’s shawl), and several Inca ceramic vessels which were made in the Inca capital of Cusco, over 1000 miles to the south (Bray et al. 2005) (Figure 3.10). This assemblage of grave offerings is characteristic of the capac hucha, a rite of sacrifice that took place on important occasions in the Inca empire. Such occasions may have been on the coronation or death of the emperor, the birth of a royal heir, a great victory in battle, or in response to a natural disaster. The ceremony did not always involve human sacrifice, which was reserved for the most powerful sacred places, often the peaks of great mountains, or apu.

According to early Spanish accounts, a capac hucha ceremony was preceded by a call to all the provinces of the empire to send as tribute boys and girls between the ages of four and ten years old. Some were required to be children of local lords, and all were to be examples of physical perfection. In some cases, the children were paired as male/female couples and buried as a pair. The children and visiting dignitaries that accompanied them participated in ceremonial feasts, performances, and ritual events for days or weeks in Cusco. At the designated time, the children and their attendants would begin the journey to the sacred places of sacrifice, sometimes hundreds of miles away, dressed in fine clothes and with the various precious offerings to the huaca (sacred entity). Their physical cause of death may have been exposure in the cold mountain air, a blow to the head as they sat in their tomb, strangulation, or intoxication to the point of death. In all cases, the integrity of the body was critical to the ritual.

The examples of capac hucha told in early historical accounts illustrate diverse origins and interment locales for these children. A young girl named Tanta Carhua was buried alive at a huaca in her homeland in the central highlands of Peru after returning from the ceremonies held in Cusco. Another, named Cauri Paccsa, from the northern highlands of Peru, was sacrificed in Chile (Hernández Principe in Bray et al. 2005). Archaeological research on the bodies of children from the Llullaillaco capac hucha burial in Argentina show they consumed coca and large amounts of alcohol in the month before their interment; intoxication may have opened paths to the spiritual realm in Inca beliefs (Wilson et al. 2013).

The capac hucha demonstrates that death is not a single moment in Inca conception. The moment the children are chosen for the capac hucha, they begin a process of transformation. The Jesuit priest Bernabe Cobo indicates that parents obliged to give up their children were not allowed to express any sadness, but rather gestures of happiness that the honor was a great reward were required (Wilson et al. 2013). The moment of transfer from their previous social existence to an Inca offering represented a fundamental transformation in their being. As they left their village, never to return again, they left their social world forever. Their social death preceded by months their physical interment on a mountain summit or in an island tomb.

The days or weeks of ceremonies in Cusco represented the transformation of the children from earthly beings to offerings to the sacred. The moment of biological death, be it through physical violence at the site of their interment, or intoxication and hypothermia that led to the ceasing of their heart and brain to function, was not a clear break either. In fact, the physical preservation of their bodies, surrounded by the precious offerings that made them sacrificed, was likely intended for them to serve as conduits to the apu and the sacred realm. In a spiritual sense, it is unclear if they may continue to exist in a spiritual cognizance with the huaca in which they were interred.

We cannot know how these children felt about their sacrifice on the mountain summits and in the island grave.

Figure 3.10. Inca capac hucha assemblage from Isla de la Plata, Ecuador: miniature ceramic jar (FM 4459); ceramic pedestal-base pot (FM 4460); miniature ceramic plate (FM 4367); gold figurine (FM 4450); and silver figurine (FM 4354).
In the African Diaspora, sacred vessels house various aspects of the soul, and can liberate these souls upon an initiate's death. Haitians hold the physical body as the kò kadav, and within the body, seven “soul-selves” reside: the gwo bon anj (personality soul), the ti bon anj (morality soul), the zetwal (astral soul), the lwa rasin/lwa eritaj (root or inherited soul spirits), lwa mèt tèt (master of the head soul spirit), wonsiyon (collective of soul spirits that accompany the mèt tèt), and nanm (the full self in totality) (Beauvoir 2006). In Vodou cosmology, mystic clay pots serve an essential role during major life changes, as these various vessels each claim responsibility for distinct souls. Haiti boasts several mystic pots: plat marasa (ceramic pots sacred to Marasa), the divine twins akin to the Yorùbá ibeji), krich (clay drinking vessels), pòt tèt (ceramic initiation soul chambers), zen (clay or iron ceremonial pots for initiation and mortuary rites), govi (spirit residences, divination implements, and funerary vessels), and kanari (large clay mortuary vessels). Several of these Haitian mystic clay pots associated with the souls are featured in this exhibition, including two govi and one kanari (see for example Figure 3.4).

When a Vodou initiate dies, a primary mortuary rite known as desounen takes place, during which the deceased’s body is prepared for burial, various pots are nourished and destroyed, and several souls (the gwo bon anj, ti bon anj, and lwa mèt tèt) are removed from a person. Desounen literally translates as “an uprooting of sound” or removal of life from a person’s body. In essence, the ritual of desounen “desacralizes the body, extricating it from all divine manifestations, and at the same time freeing the gwo bon anj and the mèt tèt to be initiated among the community of the dead” (Desmangles 1992, 69). To ensure a person’s many souls make safe passage to the spirit realm, biological and spiritual family members gather together to perform bohoun, special funerary songs and drumming. The devotee’s physical body (kò kadav) is publicly released from its mortal duties and sent to a subterranean spiritual realm to be refired for the entrance of a new soul (Daniels 2023). Enormous mystic pots known as kanari (Figure 3.4) play a central role here, even in their humble state as unadorned clay vessels. They are ceremonially broken during desounen in a rite called kase kanari, which liberates the deceased person's souls and head-spirit so that they may join their unique spirit realms.

If desounen “uproots sound” to release the body's souls, kase kanari shatters a small portion of the universe to embody the deceased’s final act as a physical person. At this time, three of the devotee’s souls—the gwo bon anj, the ti bon anj, and lwa mèt tèt—are all liberated to pursue their respective paths: the ti bon anj journeys to heaven, the gwo bon anj goes underwater to the ancestral realm of Afrik-Ginen, and the lwa mèt tèt is released into the ether to rejoin the other cosmic spirits. Kase kanari is conducted by both the biological and spiritual family, signifying the rupture of the initiate’s passing and also embodying the liberation of multiple souls and spirits who have animated the initiate. Inducted into ceremony by the community, the purchase and subsequent shattering of the mystic pot kanari embodies a family’s commitment to honor the deceased’s many souls and continue the family legacy of spirit worship in the next generation.

The smaller Haitian clay pots known as govi (Figure 3.4) serve three principal roles in Vodou divination rites: as residences for the spirits, as divination implements, and as mortuary vessels for the ancestors. During rites of initiation in southern variants of Haitian Vodou, each devotee receives seven govi in honor of seven principal lwa or spirits of the temple. These Haitian govi—a Fongbé word from ancient Dahomey/Benin, vi meaning small

References
or child and go meaning gourd or bottle (Blier 1995)—are blessed, fed, and become dwellings for an initiate's spirits on her personal altar. The mystic pots are dressed in colored satin or silk robes that honor the spirits whom they embody: white for the elder serpent spirits Danbala and Ayida Wèdo, red for the warrior spirit Ogou, and blue for the mother warrior spirit Ezili Dantò. In their second role, govi are also used as traditional divination implements, as priests and priestesses (houngan and manbo) invoke the lwa using the clay pot as a channel to directly contact the spirit realm.

In secondary mortuary rites of Haiti, the same earthenware govi appear again in their third role as mortuary vessels. As previously mentioned, desounen is performed when a devotee transitions to release several of her souls. At this juncture, her gwo bon anj or personality soul travels under the water (anba dlo) to the divine realm of Afrik-Ginen, where the spirits and ancestors all reside. One year and one day after a person has been buried, another ceremony occurs known as wete mò nan dlo (or retire mò nan dlo)—literally, to call or pull the dead from the water. In this secondary mortuary rite, the buried person remains undisturbed in her tomb, but the deceased's soul undergoes a transition of residence. Devotees invoke the names of the dead in ritual song to call forth the gwo bon anj of various loved ones who have been stationed in Afrik-Ginen (Deren 1953; Métraux 1959). Each deceased ancestor's gwo bon anj is ritually prepared for a return to the mortal world, this time not in a human vessel but in a mystic clay pot. At the right moment in the ceremony, the gwo bon anj of the dead being called forth are ritually “captured” in their respective govi, and the ancestors regain their ability to speak through the clay vessel. The govi thus become funerary pots as well as “homing” receptacles for the ancestors. From then onward, the ancestral govi will be preciously kept on a family altar or in the community temple, and can be accessed through divination rites for counsel and advice regarding illness, misfortune, or family difficulties. The mystic pots featured here in this exhibition—kanari and govi—ultimately represent the distinct journeys of a Haitian Vodouizan's souls after death. While certain souls are released into cosmic realms, others will be recalled in a new manifestation of ancestral presence on the earthly altars of their devotee descendants.

Twin Souls and Double Deaths

Twins present a fascinating case of plural soul-selves in Africana cosmologies, which explains their complex relationship to death and the invisible realm. While the rates of identical twins appear roughly the same across the world, BaKongo societies of Central Africa (Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, and Congo-Kinshasa) and Yorubá societies of West Africa (southwestern Nigeria and southern Benin) produce some of the highest rates of fraternal and sororal twins in the world (Bandama in this volume; MacGaffey 1986). Twins are regarded in both regions as possessing divine qualities, and must be propitiated while living on earth and afterwards in death. Mapasa, as they are known in Kongo regions, historically followed certain ritual taboos, such as refraining from eating leopards and certain big cats, sacred animals whose spotted or striped coats signal their ability to communicate with the spirit realm (MacGaffey 1986; Fu-Kiau Kia Bunseki-Lumanisa 2001). Traditionally regarded as mediators between worlds, as were Inca noble children (see Williams on the Inca capac hucha ritual in this volume), Kongo twins were instructed neither to kill nor consume the flesh of these revered forest creatures who lived between realms, for to do so would be akin to taking one's own life.

In Yorùbáland, Nigeria, ibeji or twins similarly express otherworldly qualities as part human and part spirit. Sacred wooden statues of Yorùbá twins called ere ibeji may be carved at different points in the twins' lives. In this volume, Foreman Bandama helpfully explains how “twins have the same combined soul, whose stability needs to be maintained if one dies.” Indeed, in the Yorùbá universe, each person possesses a divine double (enikeji) in the spirit realm who walks alongside one during the entirety of one's life. When twins are born, it is said that the enikeji has come along with the mortal person as a newly incarnated spirit (Olúpònà 2022). Because no distinction can be made between the mortal-twin and spirit-twin, ibeji must be treated exactly the same. In Yorùbá and Kongo communities alike, twins are showered with loving care and attention, for any angered twin can bring strife to the family, and orchestrate great chaos in the community.

Vibrant twin traditions persist in the African Diaspora, with elaborate ceremonies to honor twins known as gemelos in Cuban Spanish and jimo in Haitian Kreyòl (from the French jumeaux). Tellingly, while twins possess these secular titles in both Caribbean nations, they are revered as both mortal and divine, and thus also carry mystic monikers: ibeji in the Cuban Lucumi/Regla de Ocha/Santería religion and in Haiti, the more commonly used term is marasa (a clear derivation of the KiKongo mapasa), especially among the Vodou communities. Such twin devotion appears on altars, as with the ibeji statues of Cuban Lucumi/Regla de Ocha/Santería traditions. Here the wooden-carved twins likely imported from Nigeria are paired with two porcelain ceramic vessels with different colored beads. The male twin (left) stands behind a pot with a red-and-white necklace for the orichá (spirit) of thunder and lightning Changó, while the female twin (right) faces a pot with mostly clear and blue beads for Yemayá, orichá of the sea and mother of fish and all humankind. These vessels are periodically fed as divine nourishment for the doubled spirits of ibeji.

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Figure 3.11. Yorùbá *ere ibejí*: twin figures in wood (FM 303438, 9-A114395d).
Life and death are powerful forces whose balance, or lack thereof, cannot be left to chance or nature. But what happens when they are doubled, literally, through the birth or death of twins? Traditionally, the birth and/or death of twins always swings the pendulum of these forces rather violently amongst many African communities (Mobolade 1997). For much of Africa, twins are feared and considered a bad sign of impending danger that can be averted by the elimination of one or both of the newborn children. However, historical shifts amongst the Yorùbá people led to the current patterns in which twins are revered and celebrated both in life and in death (Leroy 1995).

The Yorùbá people are concentrated in southwestern Nigeria, but they are also found in neighboring Togo and Ghana. They are one of Africa’s largest ethnic groups, with over 25 million members (Leroy et al. 2002). One of their most peculiar features is a genetic disposition that has given the Yorùbá people the highest recorded rate of twin births in the world. Their dizygotic twinning rate is 4.4 percent of all maternities, or about 45 sets of twins in every 1000 births. This, coupled with other historical challenges, often led to high infant deaths. In ancient times, the Yorùbá people, just like most of the African ethnic groups, used to reject and even sacrifice newborn twins. This is now all but forgotten and as if they were the living children because failing to do so is believed to lead to negative consequences such as poverty and illness (Mobolade 1997). This responsibility is then passed on to the surviving twin when he/she is older.

The manufacture of the ibeji statues among the Yorùbá people was done by skilled carvers because they are made from wood. The wooden figures are always carved in an erect adult posture with hands on the hips and are fixed to a round or rectangular baseplate. Often, the associated adornment included non-wooden materials such as bracelets, waistbands, and necklaces made from terracotta clay, cowrie shells, or valuable metals like copper, bronze, or silver. The statues are generally small and never life-size (about ten inches tall), but carved in unmistakable human likenesses. These sizes have to do with how they are used at special occasions, because the mothers of the deceased twins are expected to dance with these ibeji tightly held in their palms or tucked in the wrappers on their waist at annual occasions (Leroy et al. 2002). The general workmanship of the ibeji statues speaks to the long artistic traditions expressed in ancient kingdoms such as Benin and Ife. Marked stylistic differences do occur according to the region and artists, and these differences can be noticed in facial expressions, hairdos, tribal scarring heads, and head covers.

Yorùbá’s ere ibeji tradition has since spread to several parts of the world, mainly to the West Indies and the eastern coast of South America (the “slave coast”) because of the transatlantic slave trade. Accordingly, the transposing of the Yorùbá twin belief system into African Diaspora religions Candoble and Macumba (Salvador de Bahia region) and Umbanda (Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo regions) in Brazil is not surprising (Leroy et al. 2002).

References


Marasa in Haiti refers to mortal twins as well as the sacred twins who represent the spirit of children. Traditionally, the term marasa also refers to “uncanny children” with mystic qualities, those born with a caul, with teeth, with hair, or those of breech birth (McGee 2022). Though in recent decades, the carved tradition of wooden statues has not been maintained in Haiti as in West Africa, twins are honored with plat marasa, ceramic vessels that hold offerings for a family’s mortal twins and the sacred spirit duo. Plat marasa comes either as a tripartite ceramic set with three removable pots in three conjoined bowls or as two conjoined bowls with pots and one ancillary bowl and pot that can be added or removed. It may appear peculiar that mystic pots honoring the sacred twins include three mystic pots, but this embodies the principle of marasa twa (literally, “twins of three”). Marasa twa honor either triplets or the child who follows twins—dosi if a boy, dosa if a girl. It also recalls the Vodou adage that 1+1=3, a philosophy that highlights the mystic power of exponentiality, in which twins manifest a divine energy more powerful than the sum of their combined parts. More studies should be conducted on the intriguing parallels between the practice of twins veneration among African societies and that of noble children, particularly with physical malformations, leading to their sacrifice among the Indigenous communities of pre-Hispanic Peru, such as Chimú, Moche, and Inca (capac hucha) groups.

As divine mortal beings, twins’ mortuary rites often blend worship traditions for revered ancestors and spirits. Following a twin’s end of life (or the tragic death of both twins) in Yorùbá communities, the ere ibeji play an essential role as an embodied manifestation of the lost twin, ensuring that parents and relatives can continue to care for the deceased twin’s spirit. These ere ibeji may be adorned with beaded necklaces and intricate regalia, including cloaks of cowrie shells or colorful seed beads in more affluent families to signal a family’s devotion in honoring the legacy of their departed twin(s). In Haiti when a family experiences great strife, especially with (twin) children who persistently fall ill, people may identify this misfortune as a result of displeasure of the Marasa, referring either to the spirit twins or a deceased pair of twins in the family lineage. To appease the divine duo, Vodouizan will host a ceremony called manje marasa, a sacred feeding of the twins. As mortal manifestations of the lwa Marasa, neighborhood children are invited to partake in a spiritual feast, and offered mayi moulin (cornmeal porridge) on traditional “plates” of banana leaves, along with sweet treats and kola kouronne (Haitian cola). In this way, the lwa Marasa (twin spirits) as well as the family’s zansèt marasa (deceased twin ancestors) may be satiated, and can restore harmony and wellness to the living family.

Disruptive Death: COVID-19 and the Haitian Earthquakes

Cosmologically speaking, Vodouizan do not pray for immortality, as only the lwa—the divine energies who orchestrate order in the universe—live forever. But like so many religious devotees around the world, a common Haitian prayer for elders and juniors alike is the blessing of a long and productive life. The most devastating deaths are those that occur traumatically and unexpectedly: the deaths of children, road accidents, deadly illnesses with no treatment, natural disasters, and pandemics. Haiti has experienced its own share of catastrophic deaths en masse, including two seizable earthquakes in the past 12 years: the 7.2 magnitude earthquake of Port-au-Prince on January 12, 2010, and the recent 7.0 magnitude earthquake of Les Cayes on August 14, 2021. The 2010 earthquake killed approximately 250,000 people, injured 300,000, and left millions of people displaced (Germain 2011); the 2021 earthquake killed approximately 2250 people, injured 12,765, and left at least 330 missing (International Medical Corps 2021). These earthquakes are the result of Haiti being situated between two geographic fault lines: the Septentrional Fault and the Enriquillo-Plantain Garden Fault. Such scientific explanations must be underscored as missionaries and televangelists such as Pat Robertson asserted that Haitians were killed during the 2010 earthquake and other historical atrocities due to a supposed “pact with the devil” made in 1791 to defeat the French colonizers (Stewart [Diakité] 2010). The truth is that Haitian maroon soldiers and enslaved citizens held a revolutionary congress at a northern site called Bwa Kayiman, and in a Vodou ceremony honoring the spirits on August 14, 1791, they pledged their allegiance to the lwa to build a free Black republic and the world’s first anti-imperial nation-state.

While the nation’s physical damage proved calamitous in both Haitian earthquakes of 2010 and 2021, the most harrowing reality involved the tragic loss of so many lives, and people’s inability to bury their loved ones. Aid workers and healthcare providers worked to dig mass graves for the dead and the dismembered, but hundreds of thousands of missing-person reports seemed to flow in an endless stream of grief. In Vodou as in Christianity, being unable to find loved ones and inter the dead can have disastrous spiritual
consequences for the soul, which caused tremendous upheaval in a nation beset by mass mourning. More recently, Haiti has been reeling from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. And while COVID-19 has had far more devastating consequences in North America than in Haiti, concerns surrounding such a dangerous virus in a nation already struggling with public health infrastructure problems have alarmed healthcare workers about the possibilities of a full-blown outbreak.

Haitian artists, similarly to other artists all around the world (see Wali on responses to the pandemic in this volume), have responded to these recent natural disasters and the pandemic with portraits of earthquake victims and survivors; divinely inspired natural disasters and the pandemic with portraits of their religious orientation. A large mystic eye likely emerges next to cumulus clouds, perhaps a signal that while largely accosted by Pentecostals who accused Vodou devotees of having caused the earthquake (Payton 2019), Vodouizan kept their temple doors open, and often held mass funerals to pray for the unburied dead, regardless of their religious orientation. A large mystic eye likely inspired from Freemason iconography (Kali 2019) emerges next to cumulus clouds, perhaps a signal that BonDyè (the creator God) bears witness to all devastation.

Before our eyes, the metropolis of Port-au-Prince has become a necropolis, but the Vodou spirits have not forgotten their children. In the upper left corner, the mother warrior spirit Ezili Dantò wears her signature crown and a pair of orange wings to rescue a woman from her home; the woman wears dark blue, Dantò's signature color, perhaps signaling her devotion to the Black Madonna. Above in the top right, the mermaid queen of the seas LaSirènn swims through the sky with a tail of multi-colored scales and pulls another survivor from the ruins. Poised with the ritual rattle (ason) in her right hand that marks her priesthood, she may be preparing a ritual healing ceremony for the injured mortal. Alternatively, this same spirit could also be interpreted as the rainbow serpent spirit Ayida Wèdo with her brightly colored serpent tail. Finally, the Iwa Brav Gede (at times also known as Gede Nibo) appears in the top right corner with a dark-colored suit and top hat. Golden speckled angel wings may allow him to rise more swiftly from his subterranean domain of the afterworld Afrik-Ginen. In his left hand (the spiritual side), he carries a calabash bowl of food offerings to nourish the human child he has rescued from below. LaSirènn and Brav Gede hover over a partially crushed long white building. Two of the building's doors are open, one orange and the other red, and they resemble the intricate iron doors of urban Vodou temples. This may signal that while largely accosted by Pentecostals who accused Vodou devotees of having caused the earthquake (Payton 2019), Vodouizan kept their temple doors open, and often held mass funerals to pray for the unburied dead, regardless of their religious orientation.

And while foreign aid intervention is visible from the United Nations helicopter overhead (noticeably absent from both Alcide and Azor's earthquake depictions), on the ground, Edmond renders the real front-line workers of 2010: Haitian civilians and local aid workers, including a pair of civilians who transport an injured woman to safety (see also Mutcherson in this volume, on other front-line workers disproportionately affected by the pandemic in the US). The flag also renders a sophisticated trompe l'oeil effect, with a skewed perspectival landscape of the Earth. Along with overturned houses and shattered concrete buildings, the Earth is unevenly rendered, and appears menacing as it threatens to swallow the city and its inhabitants whole.
Between the third and tenth centuries CE, in one of the driest deserts of the Western Hemisphere, the Moche society thrived. Considered by many as one of the first state-level entities from pre-Hispanic Andes (cf. Quilter and Koons 2012), the Moche were organized into diverse political confederations governed by elite family clans, who controlled large portions of the valleys of the north coast of Peru (Quilter and Castillo 2010).

The Moche are particularly recognized, among many aspects, by the level of complexity of their elite burials. Discovered within large adobe pyramids or huacas (e.g., Sipán, Ucupe, El Brujo, and Huaca de la Luna), the Moche elite burials are composed of underground quadrangular-shaped adobe chambers often decorated with niches, platforms, and mural painting. The chambers contain the remains of high-status Moche lords and ladies accompanied by dozens of luxury items, including silvered and gilded copper crowns, nose ornaments, and headdresses, as well as warfare and ritual paraphernalia of various materials decorated with the most intricate designs and motifs.

Something particularly intriguing about these contexts is the striking similarity between the funerary ornaments that accompany the individuals and those with which mythological beings are depicted in Moche narrative art while performing ceremonial activities. For many, this is an indicator not only of the religious nature of the funerary items, but also their powerful transformative agency (Kaulicke 2000), suggesting that high-status individuals were interred as personifying gods and goddesses from the Moche pantheon. Whereas discussions about whether these divine identities were gained (and performed) in life or ascribed during funerary rituals have remained unresolved, it is undeniable that, in Moche society, immense power, prestige, and wealth was held in the hands of a few families in the region, who were likely related one to each other by kinship and hereditary rights.

But, as many have claimed, the Moche cannot be reduced to the sophistication and material richness of their grave goods, despite their exuberance. Death in the Moche world was particularly conceived in relationship to a specific understanding of environment, landscape, ancestors, and life regeneration. The Moche are considered both a cause and consequence of a long process of adaptation and life regeneration. The intervention of ancestors, who needed to be sexually stimulated for such an endeavor. “Tree of life” emerged, too, by the intervention of ancestors, from which emerges the so-called “tree of life.” Some iconographers have suggested that the “tree of life” emerged, too, by the intervention of ancestors, who needed to be sexually stimulated for such an endeavor. The ancestors were thus mediators for the reestablishment of the much-desired order.

Although perhaps disturbing for modern eyes, graphic and vivid representations of sexual acts, possibly mimicking the deeds of the Moche mythological hero, are ubiquitous in Moche art. Humans, nonhumans, and hybrid beings are represented as actively engaged in sexual practices that involve masturbation, fellatio, and coitus. But not all entities had the same privilege to be represented, and Moche sex cannot be equated with erotism or pornography. Elite individuals seem to be preferred in these types of depictions and it is very likely that sexual acts were ritualistically performed, too, as part of larger performances of death in Moche religious centers (Quilter 2019). After defeating these creatures, the hero acquires parts of their physical attributes, enabling him to remain victorious in his feat, which culminates in a copulation act with the moon goddess, from which emerges the so-called “tree of life.” Some iconographers have suggested that the “tree of life” emerged, too, by the intervention of ancestors, who needed to be sexually stimulated for such an endeavor. The ancestors were thus mediators for the reestablishment of the much-desired order.

Figure 3.12. Moche vessel featuring ancestor-like figures engaged in an activity of sexual stimulation (FM 288074).
Edmond has also created a magnificent collection of ritual flags depicting the spirits valiantly fighting Kowona (the coronavirus), the most deadly infectious disease to affect Haiti since the cholera epidemic of the 2010s. In these drapo, the spirits of the dead combat larger-than-life representations of the coronavirus, entering a martial dance of epic proportions. The healer-warriors portrayed include both the Gede pantheon as well as than-life representations of the coronavirus, entering a drapo. In these (the coronavirus), the most deadly infectious disease, Edmond’s 2020 Bawon le Médcin du Covid-19/Bawon the Doctor of Covid-19 (Figure 3.3). Bawon appears in a grey fedora, black pants, and a white suit jacket long enough to recall a doctor's authoritative white coat. In his right hand, he holds a tall baton, which simultaneously symbolizes his status as an elder and also the virility of his phallus. Bawon's eyes are concealed behind a pair of sunglasses which allow him to see in both visible and invisible realms, and he judiciously wears a face mask to protect himself (and his loved ones) from the virus. A white candle in his left hand hints that he is saluting the ancestral bones over which he dances. Night appears to have fallen from the chrome-colored beaded background, and the coronaviruses glow blue and red as they illuminate the tombstone behind him.

References


one of so many which has claimed the lives of his mortal children. To be clear, Bawon the COVID-19 Doctor is a new spirit of the Vodou pantheon. In the same way that the Dahomean-Benin spirit Sakpata of disease developed the powers to cure his devotees of smallpox, a contagious virus which devastated global communities between the 1600s and the 1800s, a new Haitian iwa was needed in the face of the coronavirus pandemic of the twenty-first century. And who else could battle the virus with as much grace as the great healers and arbiters of life, death, and rebirth—the Gede and Bawon spirits? In these Kowona flags, the spirits of death reveal themselves as healer-warriors, combatting mortal diseases with mystic powers and great aplomb. Haiti’s Gede and Bawon spirits thus emerge not as fearsome grim reapers but rather as fearless protectors of their human children.

**Vital Force: Livity and Longevity**

Across the Black Atlantic world, religious devotees work to restore cosmic harmony through the active maintenance of vital force, especially in the face of death. Vital force refers to the divine source of energy that resides in every single entity—animal, vegetal, and mineral. In Yorùbá traditions of southwestern Nigeria, this principle is called ìrẹ and in Fon regions of southern Benin se identifies the same concept. Each being possesses ìrẹ or se that is fortified through righteous living and ritual practice. This notion of vital force has persisted in the African Diaspora as well. Haitian Vodouizan use the term fōs to discuss physical strength and spiritual power, while namn refers to the soul or cosmic energy of a person or sanctified object. In Jamaican Rastafari, livity identifies righteous living and the concept that Jah or God has imbued an energy or life force in all living beings (Edmonds 2003).

Immortality is neither sought nor desired among most Africana religious communities. Indeed, the life expectancy of Black people in Africa as well as the African Diaspora remains decidedly lower due to heavy histories of colonialism, neocolonialism, and more contemporary ramifications of racial injustice. However, prayers abound for Black Atlantic devotees to live full, purposeful, and intentional lives. A life of longevity, vibrancy, and integrity honors the destiny linked with one’s unique soul collective. Righteous living in African-derived traditions includes worship and care for guiding ancestors and spirits, the utmost respect for elders, the maintenance of harmonious relationships and vital force, and leaving a meaningful legacy for the next generations to come. These concepts resonate with the ideologies of life and death still present among many other Indigenous
groups all around the world. When death occurs, a ripple emerges in the cosmic pool of the universe. In addition to the physical acts of care that prepare a deceased person for rest and burial, death must be addressed on a spiritual level to restore harmony to the community and assist newly initiated ancestors in their transition to the ancestral realm. It is through the cultivation of a vibrant life and divine fortification of the soul(s), the creation of mortuary arts and rituals of balance, that death can be recognized not as enemy of humankind but as one of many cosmic energies to be propitiated in the restoration of harmonious communal living.

References


Performing Death

Luis Muro Ynoñán
Field Museum

Abstract: Death affects the living in multiple and complex ways. Social groups across time and space have designed diverse coping strategies to deal with the pain, frustration, and anger that the loss of a loved one produces on the living. Mortuary rituals play a critical role in how humans deal with emotions associated to death. Rituals are important in processes of remembering and forgetting. They also offer the possibility to reconfigure and restitute the social relationship of the living: forging, challenging, and reinforcing (new) social orders. When we die, we continue influencing the relationships between others long beyond our physical presence. This chapter offers perspectives about the performance of death, the agency of the dead, and how our existence transcends and continuously gives shape to the memories, actions, and hopes of the living. Case studies present examples of non-Western practices orchestrated around the preparation, both physical and symbolical, of the body before its eternal journey to the afterlife.

Resumen: La muerte afecta a los vivos de formas múltiples y complejas. Los grupos sociales a lo largo del tiempo y el espacio han diseñado diversas estrategias para afrontar y lidiar con el dolor, la frustración y la ira que produce en los vivos la pérdida de un ser querido. Los rituales mortuarios juegan un papel fundamental en la forma en que los humanos lidiamos con las emociones asociadas con la muerte. Los rituales son importantes en los procesos de memoria, pero también de olvido. Ellos ofrecen la posibilidad de reconfigurar y restituir las relaciones sociales entre los vivos: forjando, desafiando, y/o reforzando (nuevos) órdenes sociales. Cuando morimos, seguimos influyendo en las relaciones entre otros, aún mucho más allá de nuestra presencia física. Este capítulo ofrece perspectivas sobre la escenificación de la muerte, la agencia de los muertos, y cómo nuestra existencia transcende y continuamente da forma a los recuerdos, acciones, y esperanzas de los vivos. Los artículos que este ensayo contiene exploran ejemplos no Occidentales de la ritualización y la escenificación alrededor de la muerte.

“Death may be the greatest of all human blessings.”
—Socrates

“Our dead are never dead to us, until we have forgotten them.”
—George Eliot

Epicurus once said that death should not worry us, because as long as we exist, death is not here, and when it comes for us, we no longer exist. Through death, we become aware of our finitude. However, whereas for many of us death might be imperceptible and perhaps sudden, for those that we leave behind, death is a deeply affective experience producing feelings and emotions from which they can hardly escape. Death affects us in multiple and complex ways, and, as Damien Hirst reminds us, it is perhaps the impossibility of comprehending it that that causes us the most anxiety, terror, and fear.

Throughout time and space, humans have created diverse ways to cope with the pain, frustration, and anger produced by the loss of a loved one. Rituals have played a critical role in how humans deal socially with the sensations of emptiness, chaos, and crisis that death creates. Rituals are important in the processes of remembering, as well as forgetting. They also offer the possibility to reconfigure or restitute the social order of the living: forging, reinforcing, and challenging (new) social relationships and meanings.

But social relationships and meanings are not just cognitively constructed. They are forged through actions and experience. Unlike ritual—often framed within religious structures and liturgies—performances are actions that, because of their aesthetic, theatrical, and dramatic nature, forge meanings through the body, movement, and nonverbal language. Whereas all rituals are performances, not all performances are rituals. Yet, they both constitute means of expressing emotions in moments of crises and disruption: from the large-scale funerary spectacles celebrated by the Inca of Cusco to the small-scale Japanese household commemoration rituals. Social actions orchestrated around death, whether collective or individual, ritual or not ritual, forge potent meanings that enable us to reconfigure our position in the world. We could say, then, that human beings face the tragedy of death through actions, and that the human experience with death is, above all, performative.

Both rituals and performances around death have been critical in the social evolution of human groups, and have contributed to the formation of communities, identities, social hierarchies, and religious beliefs. Such rituals and performances, with a special emphasis on those from the pre-Hispanic Andes, my own area of expertise, occupy a central theme of this chapter (Figures 4.1–4.7). The power of action, perhaps even more than thought, lies in its capacity to activate emotions, memories, and experiences, and thus constitutes a powerful tool to heal