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FOR THE FLOWER OF GINEN: THE ARTISTRY OF CLOTAIRE BAZILE,
A HAITIAN VODOU FLAGMAKER¹

Anna Wexler

As the only objects in significant numbers to cross over from the ritual space of the perisil (Vodou temple) into international art markets², the sequinned surfaces of Haitian Vodou flags now reflect tracklights in North American galleries as well as candles burning in darkened sanctuaries. Clotaire Bazile is one of the great contemporary flagmakers and the pivotal artist in the relatively recent metamorphosis of the flag from a primarily ritual form into a commercial art object.³ He is also a working oungan (Vodou priest) who has conducted services for the lwa (spirits) and private healing consultations for close to thirty years. My doctoral research has focused on the interface between his work as a oungan and his career as a flagmaker, including his transposition of modes of contact with the spirits - and the standards which shape his expression of this privileged access - to the sphere of artistic/commercial production.

In 1973 two French travellers who had come to Bazile in Port-au-Prince, Haiti for a card reading (divination) asked him to unroll the flags they could see resting on top of a cabinet in his altar room. Here is his account of the interaction:

A tourist guide leads two French people for a card reading. While I am reading the cards for them they look up - (I think it is) because of the roof, it is so crude. At that time gas lamps (discolored it with smoke). The roof was made with tin from an oil drum. When I notice that I tell the guide, look how they're staring like that, they're too nosey, don't bring them again. But they don't hear that. And the woman continues to examine something and talks to her husband and then she asks me (in French), do you want to show me that object, it interests me. I ask which thing. She says it's the thing with fringe which interests me. I say O.K. I open it. I show them - a beautiful Sen Jak, a beautiful Danbala. She goes crazy! She says to her husband she wants to buy it. I say it's not to sell, I made it, it's for the beautiful lwa, to signal the lwa when I conduct services. She asks how much money I would ask for it. I repeat it's not for sale. The guide says if you sell it, the same way you made these you can make others. I'll send other people to buy them.⁴

As a result of the ensuing transaction, Bazile began to produce flags for the French customers and others they sent his way. His younger brother, Jean Benjamin, an ebenis (cabinetmaker), helped him to build the frames on which the

satin surface and burlap backing were stretched for sewing. There were already boxes of sequins and beads around which his older sister, Charlotte, had brought home from the American owned garment factory in Port-au-Prince where she worked as a supervisor. The "flash of the spirit" (Thompson, 1983) in the glittering, sequin saturated contemporary flag travelled via such factories where crocheted and embroidered clothes were ornamented with sequins and beads which workers (earning approximately \$.14 an hour (Ridgeway, 1994)) swept up after an order was finished and their colors were no longer needed.⁵ They brought them home or sold them cheaply in the Mache Fè, the central marketplace of Port-au-Prince. Bazile attributes the proliferation of sequins on the commercial flags beginning in the late 1960's/early 70's to the operation of these garment factories, a consequence of the economic policy first articulated by François Duvalier in the late 1960's and initiated around the time of his death when his son Jean Claude assumed the presidency. A principle goal was increasing U.S. investment in light assembly, re-export industries based on the allure of an ostensibly docile, cheap labor force (Trouillot, 1990).

I came to Bazile seeking an ideal of religiously motivated artistic activity which I envisioned as flowing seamlessly from the inspiration of the lwa and only incidentally resulting in monetary rewards. I sought an image of his creativity cordoned off from economic motives, projecting the split between inspiration and remuneration in the European Romantic figure of the artist. I wanted to see Bazile as almost accidentally producing flags (with and for the spirits) close to their religious prototype rather than consciously transforming them into art objects to appeal to tourist markets. As such, they would retain their aura of ritual sanctity while crossing into the domain of "pure" art.

Unconditioned by what Bourdieu (1993) describes as the "charismatic" image of the artist whose commercial motives are transposed to the dealer, Bazile presented his marketing activities as integral to his creative production. Shortly after we were introduced by an American collector of Haitian art in 1991, he showed me a business card which he had designed in the initial phase of his career, presenting it to me as a sign of his accomplishment as an artist/flagmaker. Under his name it read "Expert on Voodoo Decoration, Wholesale and Retail" with small drawings of a radiating sun and candle to the left of the words. He explained that these images identified him as a oungan who could "balanse tout bagay" (make everything go forward) with the light of the sun and the burning candle. When I asked him if he felt any conflicts about making Vodou flags for sale as "art" - until the late 1940's or early 1950's a strictly ritual form - he matter-of-factly answered no. He explained that he turned all the proceeds back into his temple, into serving the lwa and supporting his family and sosyete (members of his temple society). "Se menm bagay" (it's the same thing), he told me. It wasn't until our later discussions of his dreams that I

began to comprehend the interconnections between worlds encapsulated in that brief remark.

From the beginning flagmaking has been an expression of Bazile's gift for communication with the spirits. A year or so following his formal initiation as a oungan, he made his first pair of flags after dreaming that the lwa wanted two for his temple and receiving instruction on how to design them, just as he had learned to draw the vèvè (figural and abstract emblems for the lwa) and make remedies in dreams during the early stages of working as a healer. Transmission of vocation in Haitian oral traditions, especially those which involve transformative activities and objects (Brown, 1991; Tessonneau, 1983), is often experienced initially in dreams involving the lwa or other spiritual agents. In his dreams, Bazile saw the flags he was to make for his temple -one for Sen Jak with the warrior from the chromolithograph of St. James the Elder, commonly used to represent this chief of the Haitian Ogou, and one for Danbala Wèdo, the benevolent serpent spirit, with a heart for Ezili Freda between two uncoiled snakes representing the spirit and his wife, Ayida Wèdo. Together the flags for these two spirits would represent all the lwa of the major Rada pantheon, known as the flower of Ginen, for ritual purposes.

Associating dream transmission with preparation for ritual vocation, I later asked Bazile if dreams played a more significant role in his creative process in the initial (not yet commercial) phase of his career as a flagmaker. "No", he replied, "the lwa continue to come to tell me what to do, who is going to buy, what kind of flag to make for people to buy." It was primarily the peasant lwa Kouzen Zaka who began to help him during the commercial phase of his development as a flagmaker because, as he explained, this spirit is "nan biznis" (in business). Discussing his ability to innovate in his artistic work, Bazile described the pragmatic thrust of Zaka's guidance in dreams:

Yes, it is the spirit who guides you to change the work. For example, he says you shouldn't do the work that way today, don't divide the squares into eight triangles (for the border), just divide them into two triangles, cut it like that, using two colors, it's another idea. (See Figure 1) A person may appear, he or she likes that style, now I say good. If too many people like (copy) that style, I use another one, I do something different. I make it bigger, I make it smaller, it's your ideas which direct you. If you don't have ideas, things won't work out.

In addition to generating artistic, and commercially viable, ideas, dreams may also serve as a medium for the needs of a lwa when they are not being adequately met through ritual obligations. Ordinarily, in order to sustain his relationships with the spirits and to benefit from their

advice, inspiration, and forewarnings, Bazile performs a cycle of annual ceremonies to honor and feed them according to their ritual requirements. When he first started to make flags systematically for sale, however, Bazile was told in a dream that he must escalate his ritual commitments now that he was beginning to reap substantial profits from his business. It was Zaka, already actively helping him in the development of his flagmaking enterprise, who insisted that a large service be organized in his honor in 1975. Bazile acted on the dream communication immediately and began to organize a big ceremony for Zaka in his temple where he eventually brought three truckloads of poor people to be fed from the large ritual meal prepared for the spirit.

Dreams, in Bazile's accounts, are not just gratuitous, spontaneous events in the life of an artist predisposed toward mystical sources of inspiration but serve as conduits of transmission and exchange in a creative process which must be nourished by ongoing reciprocal acts towards the lwa with whom he is allied. What was initially given in dreams by the lwa, the vision and impetus to create a pair of flags for his temple in order to serve them properly, led eventually to Bazile's development as a commercial artist, his systematic transformation of the ritual flag into a marketable art object. Although spirit mediated dream in this phase of his artistic career were directed toward helping him to change and perfect the flag aesthetically for art markets, they also served to remind him to integrate his commercial project into the ritual cycle by which he sustains his relationships with the lwa in order to receive their support in his other, more ostensibly "sacred" activities as a oungan, such as healing and creating spirit invoking objects for ceremonies and for

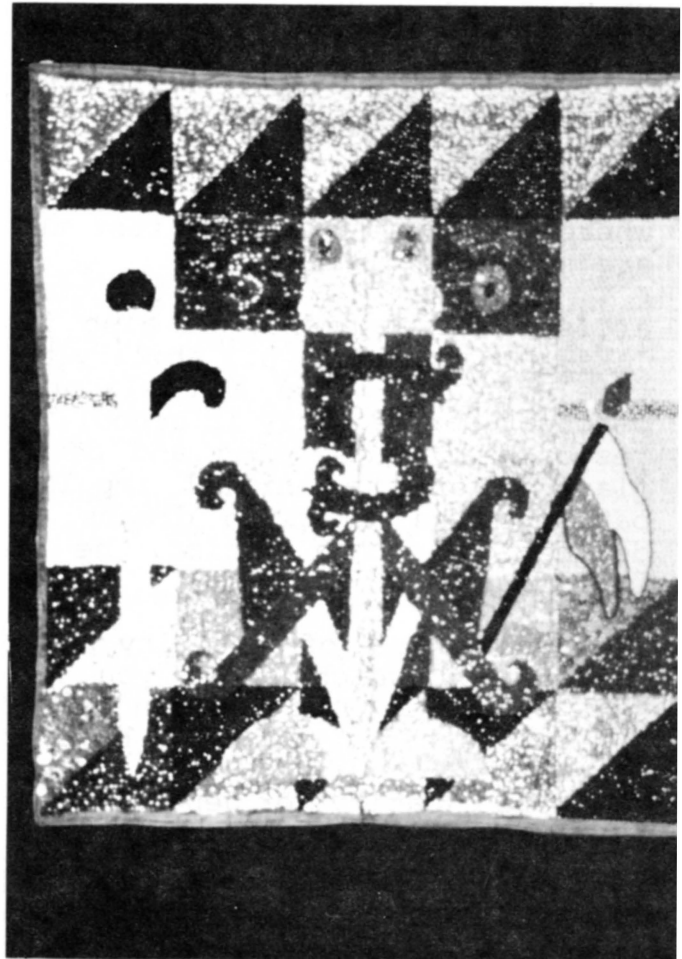


Figure 1: Flag for the military spirit, Sobo, one of the patrons of the flags, with squares divided into two triangles in the border design. Photo: Virgil Young.

private treatments. In the course of our discussions of this dimension of his creativity as a commercial flagmaker, I began to understand why he told me when we first met that he had no conflicts about making Vodou flags for profit - profit which goes back into serving the lwa who guide and inspire Bazile in the business which generates the money to feed them, his family and members of his sosyete and maintain the temple where the spirits dance after the tables on which the flags are sewn are cleared away.

While Bazile honors the contribution of the lwa to his artistic development, he also insists on the importance of "aksyon" or action, his ability to act on what he receives, to give tangible form and elaboration to his vision. His penchant for geometry in school, for example, was an important resource for designing and developing the borders for his flags after the initial impulse to use precise geometric patterns was given in dreams. When I asked him for his definition of an artist, he gave the most emphasis to implementation:

What kind of activity is art ... it's action, action which shows you what you like, what is possible, what you can produce. If you don't have production, you don't have art.

The capacity for generative action is also fundamental to his conception of the role of the oungan, a major principle which shapes the practice of his spiritual vocation and which he carried over into the construction of his artistic career and the aesthetic development of the Vodou flag. In terms of his work as a oungan, he links the importance of action to the demands which he faces as a healer who must invoke and materialize the spiritual energies necessary for dealing with frequently critical situations. When ill people come to his house for healing, he explained, he has to perform a "gwo aksyon" (big action) - sometimes involving intense, dramatic elements like fire associated with the fast acting Petwo spirits - so that his clients will not die and the lwa, whose reputations also depend on the effectiveness of his treatments, will not desert him.

Bazile's emphasis on akson as effective response to the intense demands which he faces as a healer is closely linked to his conception of konsantrasyon or concentration. Remembering and executing ritual detail correctly is critical to summoning and controlling the lwa whose energies he must channel constructively for his healing work. The consequences of negligence are grave. To be careless about rendering a vèvè, he explained, is to potentially disrupt a ceremony because the spirit being called may not recognize the pattern and other less welcome lwa may arrive. People may die as a result of failure to concentrate or "mete tèt ou anplas" (put your head in place) to carry out a ritual service according to

the requirements of tradition. Forgetting a single, apparently insignificant detail can invite serious problems:

To serve the spirits, it's like an egg, it's like an egg you hold, if you forget it's an egg in your hand, you let it drop to the ground ... but if you do everything with honor, respect, you are not going to have difficulty.

During the course of my fieldwork in Miami and Port-au-Prince, I observed Bazile's flair for detail in the myriad ritual preparations and domestic labors involved in his healing practice. Cooking and cleaning, whether connected to a specific ritual occasion or the general well-being of the house, were carried out with the same concentration brought to other more dramatic ritual work. Whether serving coffee to clients waiting to see him, sweeping the yard, or washing the enamelled tin cups and bowls with which the lwa are served, Bazile worked with a meticulous attention which was never precious or rigid; it energized those around him and lent each task a visible aura of finesse.

The same focus on executing detail correctly is also reflected in the technical excellence of his flags. According to the Vodou flag collector, the late Virgil Young, he was the first flagmaker to achieve a consistently high level of craftsmanship in his work.⁶ After Bazile designs the flag and designates its colors on pieces of satin stretched on a frame, each sequin is sewn on with a tiny seed bead in an extremely labor intensive process. Bazile insists that every sequin be sewn down tightly, evenly overlapping the one before it, that all lines in his pieces are straight, and that the vèvè or image of the saint be perfectly centered within the geometric borders that usually enclose the sacred form.

When he taught me his sewing techniques in Miami, Bazile emphasized that each time I added another sequin, I must bring the needle up through the fabric right against the edge of the tiny 5mm sequin preceding it so that they overlapped evenly in straight lines and there was no space between them. He pointed out any sign of carelessness in my sewing immediately as well as in my treatment of materials. The area outdoors where we were working was always swept clear of leaves and other debris, and if he found stray sequins on the ground, he would pick them up one by one and place them deliberately on the fabric to remind me of my negligence.

"Jis kenbe lin dwat" (just keep the line straight), he explained, is the central standard he maintains in flagmaking. This seemingly technical standard, one which could be seen simply as a pragmatic response to consumer demand for uniform craftsmanship, also expresses another major principle which guides his activities as a oungan - direction or orientation:

... if your line isn't straight you don't have direction. In whatever you do, if you don't have

direction, it isn't good ... If, for example, you are working as a oungan, you don't act with respect, if someone brings you money to do work, you take the money to resolve a personal problem, the lwa are angry also, because if it is the lwa who are working with you, you must do everything ... the spirit collaborates with you ... you don't see him or her, they stand near you to guide you, to make everything straight ...

Ritual orientation in Vodou is performed by saluting the four cardinal points with all the offerings, flags, and other objects used in the ceremony. The four points or directions are indicated by lines that intersect in the Vodou cross which represents the point of contact between the physical world and the domain of the lwa. Bazile insists that the basic cross of the vèvè be drawn on flat ground so that the lines provide the correct directions for ritual orientation; the lines on the flags must be drawn and sewn straight for the same reason. Directionality is not only a structural principle, but one which activates contact between human and spiritual beings, and also delineates the moral quality of that contact, as the above remarks by Bazile suggest.

Bazile describes his flags as "classical" referring to his sense of their continuity with the sacred form from which they evolved. This can be seen in his mastery and elaboration of certain design elements and techniques from embellished ritual flags, such as what Bazile and his entourage refer to as simen grenn (literally scattering seeds or dotting the background fabric with sequins or beads), borders with geometric patterning, a central vèvè, and the insertion of figures of saints from the Catholic chromolithographs used to



Figure 2: Perfectly executed flag for the lwa Bossou, a militant spirit Bazile describes as aggressive but not destructive. Photo: Virgil Young.

represent the lwa.⁷
Though developed for commercial markets, his flags exemplify an ethos of creativity which Maya Deren (1953) has described as committed to enhancing collective participation in ritual expressions directed toward the lwa rather than toward individualistic displays of genius, improvisation which serves tradition rather than virtuoso performance. In this sense, the aesthetic developments in Bazile's flags both recapitulate and transfigure the history of the form, moving the past into the present through improvisation which heightens the beauty and vitality of the ritual flag, still serving the flower of Ginen, the great lwa.



Figure 3: A portrait of the artist in front of his altar for the Rada spirits in Port-au-Prince. Photo: Susan Tselos.

NOTES

1. Portions of this paper are drawn from my essay, "I am going to see where my oungan is", forthcoming in *Sacred Possessions: Vodoun, Santería and Obeah in the Literatures and Cultures of the Caribbean* (Olmos, M. and Paravisini-Gebert, L., Eds.), Rutgers University Press. Many thanks to the late Virgil Young and Susan Tselos for visual contributions.
2. See the exhibit catalogue, *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Cosentino, 1995), for multiple examples of ritual and commercial flags.
3. According to the late Virgil Young, a well known collector of Vodou flags, Bazile was the first flagmaker to produce systematically for tourist markets in the early 1970's. Personal communication, 10/12/93.
4. Translated from the Kreyòl by author and Lionel Hogu. I gratefully acknowledge his help in translating this passage and the other quotations from Bazile which appear in the text.
5. The piles of leftover, glittering sequins which factory workers collected take on a bitterly ironic sheen when juxtaposed to the criminally low wages paid for their labor. The fact that the word sequin derives from the Arabic sikkah for coin further heightens the unintentionally instructive irony of their status as trash in the garment factories. (Thanks to LeGrace Benson for pointing out this derivation.)
6. Personal communication from Virgil Young, 10/12/93.
7. Of these features, only simen grenn appears to be a general characteristic of decorated ritual flags which predate commercialization (see *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Cosentino, 1995) for many examples). The other elements noted may or may not be present. For example, the collector and expert on the ritual flag, Susan Tselos, has indicated to me that on some of the embellished flags from the 1930's and 40's the yèyè is not framed and highlighted by distinct borders, color contrasts, and central positioning. A documented history of the evolution of the textile form has yet to be written.

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