

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

1996

The Reproduction and Ceremonial Offering of Sacred Textiles and Apparel in Ise Jingu's Shikinen Sengu

Rosemarie Bernard
Harvard University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>

Bernard, Rosemarie, "The Reproduction and Ceremonial Offering of Sacred Textiles and Apparel in Ise Jingu's Shikinen Sengu" (1996). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 852.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/852>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The Reproduction and Ceremonial Offering of Sacred Textiles and Apparel in Ise Jingû's Shikinen Sengû

by
Rosemarie Bernard

This paper addresses the reproduction and ceremonial offering of sacred textiles and apparel on the occasion of the vicennial transfer rituals (Shikinen Sengû), which take place once in twenty years in Ise Jingû. The most recent performance of the 1300-year old ritual tradition took place in 1993. The ritual climax of the Shikinen Sengû consists of the ceremonial transfer of the "body" of the deity Amaterasu Omikami (a sacred mirror) from the 20-year old sanctum to an identical structure constructed in an adjacent area. Along with the body of the deity, thousands of magnificent treasures, textiles and apparel are ceremonially carried to the new sanctuary, where they remain alongside the deity for twenty years.

There is a total of 1085 textiles and apparel, in 525 categories, which are offered to the deities on the occasion of the Shikinen Sengû. Their production is characterized by the effort to reproduce exactly the objects produced twenty years before. This paper examines the production of some of the most important textiles and apparel offered in the Sengû, notably the *ake no nishiki no mizo* (scarlet brocade), and *aokôkechiwata no mizo* (blue cotton wool clothing dyed according to the binding technique called *kyôkechizome*). Attention is drawn to the importance of historical continuity in the production and the ceremonial offering of these and other textiles and apparel, as well as to change and innovative recreations of ancient production techniques.

Rosemarie Bernard is a Ph.D. Candidate in Social Anthropology at Harvard University. She conducted field research in Ise, Japan from April 1991 to September 1994, on the topic of the vicennial rites of the Shikinen Sengû (transfer rites) in Ise Jingû. While in Ise, she was affiliated with a Shinto divinity school, Kôgakkan University, and was an employee of the Office of Information and Public Relations of Ise Jingû, in which capacity she was involved in the preparations towards the performance of the 1993 performance of the Sengû. The rituals of the Sengû are the focus of her dissertation. She is also writing about the architectural and artistic traditions which are important aspects of the Shikinen Sengû.

Haitian Drapo Vodou: Imagery, Ritual and Perception

Susan Elizabeth Tselos

During the last decade, boutiques and galleries from New York to Los Angeles have been displaying sparkling works of art depicting images of Catholic Saints and mystical symbols created with thousands of tiny sequins and beads.¹ These textiles, made in Haiti as part of a cottage industry of "art flags" are a widely celebrated derivation of the traditional ritual flags known as drapo *Vodou* which have been used by the Haitian people during their religious ceremonies since they were brought to the new world as slaves.

Perhaps more than any other of the ritual objects used by Haitians to honor the spirits of Ginen, known to them as "*Iwa*", the consecrated drapo document the deeply syncretized cultural elements which are the foundation of this misunderstood religion.

The shapes, colors, materials, and symbols incorporated into these drapo reflect many fragmented origins, including Fon, Yoruba and Kongo religious beliefs and aesthetics, 18th Century European mysticism, French Catholicism, Freemasonry, French military regimental colors, Rosiancrucianism, and Muslim influences.² They are not only witness to

Haiti's tortuous past, they are living mediations; shimmering, visual boundaries between the old world and the new, the spiritual world, and the world of mortals. Each drapo has one meaning projected onto its surface, while a second meaning lies in shadow below, simultaneously concealing and unveiling the spiritual power held within their borders.

The roots of Haitian Vodou lie in Africa primarily among the Fon and Yoruba, where the pantheon of spirits who oversee the well being of humans are honored and appeased through ceremony and sacrifice; and who manifest themselves through spirit possession of chosen devotees.³ Music, dance, visual images and sacred objects work together in unison to create an environment in which the spirit will arrive on earth to give advice and heal ills.

These religious elements made their voyage to the New World by way of the brutal migration of the slave trade. Forced onto the sugar plantations of San Domingue, the slaves sought to reassemble their traditional beliefs and methods of worship.



Fig. 1. Image of St. James Major representing Sen Jak, on the wall of a Vodou temple in Port-au-Prince.

By the time of their arrival, many of the Africans, especially those from Dahomey and Kongo were already familiar with Catholicism, due to the presence of Portuguese explorers who had established outposts along the west coast of Africa as early as the 14th Century. For those Africans not already familiar with Catholicism, French priests were ready with images and instruction in the lives of the saints in preparation for converting the slaves' souls for eternal salvation.

However, religious instruction in Catholicism proved to be an intermittent affair, since the Africans had been brought to San Domingue to work, not savor the lives of the saints. In fact, the slaves were worked so brutally, that they died within several years of arriving. As a result, there was a constant supply of new slaves, each bringing their religious beliefs with them.⁴

The consequence of this was that the European Catholic saints proved to be fertile ground for identification of these African deities. Many of the Africans, especially the Fon, were already used to assimilating spiritual imagery and beliefs from neighboring groups in their homelands, and they found in the images of the Catholic saints, familiar visual icons with which they could identify their own *lwa*.

It is most likely that the first Catholic saint to be syncretized with an African *lwa* was St. James Major, the patron saint of Spain; and it has been documented that this syncretization commenced in Africa. In 1491, the year before Columbus landed in the Americas, the Portuguese gave the king of Kongo a banner embroidered with the image of St. James Major, who then went on to become the patron saint of Kongo.⁵

To the Haitian Vodouisants, the image of St. James Major, whom they call Sen Jak, symbolizes the head figure of the group of warrior *lwa* known as Ogou. (Fig.1) In Dahomey and western Nigeria, Ogun is the patron of warriors, iron smiths and other metal workers. The symbols in the image of St. James Major which have come to represent Ogou



Fig.2. Image of Danbala Wedo as represented by the image of St. Patrick on the wall of a Vodou temple in Carrefour - du-Fort, Haiti

in Haiti are the central image of a triumphant warrior, and the iron sword held in his hand. As a warrior, he is believed to have played a major role in the successful slave rebellion in which the slaves won their independence in 1804. Today, he represents power, not only military, but in politics as well. And as the patron of metal, he is honored by taxi drivers, who hang a strip of cloth in his traditional color red on their rear view mirrors.

The Catholic image of St. Patrick was adopted as the visual representation of the Vodou *lwa* Danbala. (Fig.2) St. Patrick, as he drives the snakes out of Ireland, appears as a venerable elder, standing at the edge of a watery abyss with snakes writhing at his feet. These symbols became creolized representations of DanWedo, the benevolent serpent spirit of the Fon. Danbala is one of the most ancient, venerable of the Haitian *lwa*, and he is believed to inhabit streams and pools. The watery abyss in the picture of St. Patrick is identified as Ginen, the home of the ancestral Vodou spirits, and is simultaneously believed to be the place where the souls of the deceased go for a year and a day before they are reclaimed in a ceremony in preparation for their union with other ancestors.

The Virgin Mary, in her incarnation as the suffering Madonna syncretized with Ezili Freda Dahomey, who, as her name suggests, was a Vodou *lwa* from Ouidah, Dahomey. (Fig.3) She is the *lwa* of love, the Vodou Aphrodite, who demands perfumes and riches, but who also weeps for the suffering of the world. She is syncretized with the image of the Madonna through the image of a beautiful woman who is surrounded by riches and jewels, but whose heart is pierced by a sword. The colors which represent her are pale colors, pink, blue, and white. During ceremonies honoring her, cakes iced in pink and blue will be offered, along with large amounts of champagne. During colonial times she represented the luxury and grandeur of the privileged, European woman. Today, every Haitian woman identifies with Ezili, as the personification of love and beauty.

Early Drapo

The drapo have undergone a metamorphoses throughout their history. Unfortunately, there are virtually no drapo remaining which existed prior to the late 1930's, due in part to Haiti's hot, humid climate, but primarily due to several anti superstition campaigns waged by the Catholic church in which almost all Vodou artifacts were destroyed. Although there is written documentation of drapo being used in Vodou ceremonies during the colonial period, visual documentation dates only to the early



Fig.3. Ezili Freda Dahomey as represented by Mater Dolorosa on the wall of a Vodou temple in Martissant, Haiti.

decades of the 20th century.⁶

Photographs from that period show drapo which are basically unembellished, but if the color codes which exist today have remained constant, one can speculate that the fabric from which the drapo were made contained the colors appropriate to the *lwa* being served. There is evidence remaining that some of the older drapo had metal sequins sewn onto them. And it is possible that these may have been more common than thought, although the heaviness of the metal, and the fact that the threads that held them would fray easily, was possibly a deterrent to using them in great numbers. By the 1940's, plastic sequins had become readily available, and their lightweight quality made it easier to more highly embellish the drapo.

The early drapo show the images of the *lwa* in subtle polychrome sequins on background fabric of appropriate colors. (Fig.4) The images from this period appear delicate, and not as well defined as the later drapo. The images are executed in the style of "*simen grenn*" which translates to "scattering seeds", in which the sequins are used sparingly, and great amounts of background fabric is unadorned. Robert Farris Thompson believes that the pattern of dotting that this type of sequin design produces is related to the Kongo concept of ritual dotting as a mediation of the secrets and power of the dead.⁷



Fig. 4. Vodou flag for Ogou, circa 1940. Note the image of St. James who represents Ogou. The early iconography is monochromatic in appearance.

In the early drapo, the iconography is done entirely in sequins using "*veve*" symbols. *Veve* are lacy, symbolic lines drawn on the floor of the temple by the Vodou priest (*oungan*) during the ceremonies to honor the *lwa*. Each *lwa* has specific symbols with which they are identified. The *veve*'s purpose is to help summon the *lwa* into the temple. By simply creating the lines of the *veve* on the ground in flour or cornmeal within the ritual context, the *lwa* is pressured to make an appearance.

Like the pictorial representations of the *lwa*, much of the *veve* iconography originates in the imagery of the Catholic Saints as well. The *veve* for Sen Jak is adapted from his pictorial representation. The sword and flags are removed from their background and placed together as a spiritual unit. Danbala's snake has been lifted from the feet of St. Patrick and entwines himself in heavenly rapture with his wife Aida Wedo. Together they encircle the palm tree representing Aizan, the venerable Dahomean spirit who oversees initiation. (Fig.5)

Often, the *veve* for Danbala and Aida Wedo share space with the *veve* for Ezili Freda Dahomey, whose symbolic heart with the letter "M" has been borrowed from the Catholic imagery of Mater Dolorosa. Often the heart of Ezili is divided in to squares, and sometimes it is pierced with the sword which is also borrowed from her pictorial imagery. (Fig.6)

In addition to the iconography just discussed, often there are other symbols depicted in sequins as well. The Masonic crossed compasses are used frequently, especially for Ogou and Danbala, who are both considered to be Masons, like many of the *oungans* who serve them, and there are star like motifs called *pwe* which are points in which potent spiritual power may be caught within the drapo.

The drapo have traditionally been made directly within the Vodou temples, often by the *oungan* himself who receives a request from the *lwa* he serves. If he is not adept at fabricating the drapo himself, he may purchase it from another *oungan* who has more artistic talent. When the drapo are completed, they are consecrated on the day of the week reserved for honoring the *lwa* for whom the drapo has been made.

Each temple has at least two drapo which are essential elements for the ceremonies honoring the cool, benevolent, branch of *lwa*. Almost without exception, these drapo usually represent Ogou, and Danbala. If additional drapo are owned by the temple, they will represent other *lwa* important within the specific societie. For example, there are many drapo for Baron Samedi, head of the graveyard *lwa* known as Guede, who are honored November 1st & 2nd. (Fig.7) Temples near the sea may have a drapo for Agoue, the patron of sailors and fishermen; and those in the countryside may own drapo dedicated to Azaka, *lwa* of agriculture.

Vodou Drapo in Ceremony

The following description is of an initiation ceremony (*canzo*) which was performed near Port-au-Prince in September of 1992. Most Vodou ceremonies begin with the *oungan* drawing a *veve* near the base of the *poteau mitan*, the centerpost of the temple, (the pathway for the spirits to enter from their watery home in *Guinen*). Taking a pinch of flour or cornmeal, the *oungan* will let it slip from between his fingers onto the ground, creating the thin, lacy, geometric motifs. Once the lines and symbols of the *veve* are complete they are consecrated by placing small plates of grilled maise, peanuts and other dried foods on them. They may also be sprinkled with rum. Finally, a lit candle is placed on top of the *veve*.

The *oungan* then begins his invocation to the *lwa*. As he sings, a choir of initiates, called *houns* begin to accompany him, clapping their hands in unison.



Fig. 5. Vodou drapo for Danbala Wedo, circa 1940. The snake representing Danbala is entwined with his wife Aida Wedo around the palm tree which represents Aizan.

The first *lwa* to be called in any Vodou ceremony is *Legba*, guardian of the threshold to the world of the invisibles. *Legba* must open the gates before any mortals can enter the world of the *lwa*.

*Papa Legba remove the barrier for me
Open the gate, Papa Legba
To let me pass through*

As *Legba* is being invoked, the *hounsis* approach the *oungan* with *paquet Kongo*, the charms which act as mediating material between the two worlds. With his *rattle* and a pitcher of water, the *oungan* salutes the *paquet*, then salutes the four cardinal points: north, south, east and west. He then turns to salute the drums with libations, and then salutes the visiting *oungans* and other dignitaries by shaking his rattle (*asson*) and pouring rum at their feet.

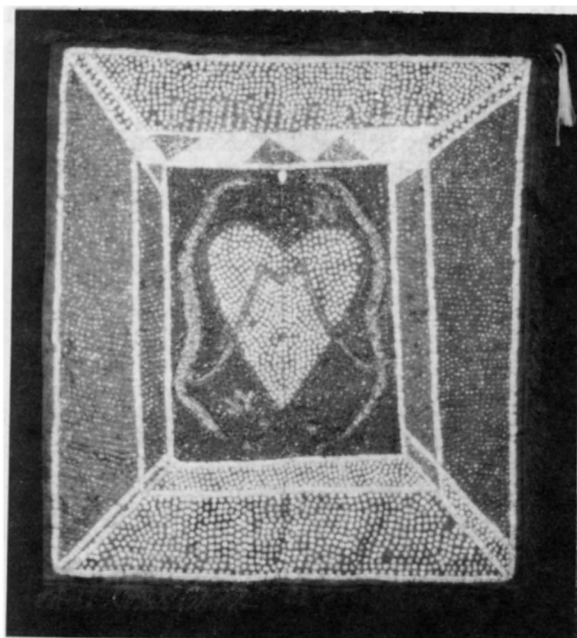


Fig.6. Vodou drapo for Danbala Wedo, circa 1970. Here, Danbala is paired with heart which represents Ezili Freda Dahomey.

During these salutations the temple is a cacophony of singing, handclapping and drumming. Suddenly the drums interrupt the noise with bursts of staccato which raises the level of energy even more, and, finally, the incessant rhythm of the drums gives order to the chaos. At this point the *hounsis* bring out the sacred *govi* pots from the altar room. The *govi* are the resting place for the spiritual essence of the ancestors. They are paraded into the temple, and to the four cardinal points. As the *hounsis* walk with them, the power of the spirits can be felt as the *hounsis* stagger with spiritual energy.

The singing continues with a song to the *lwa Sogbo*, protector of the flags.

*Papa Sobo who is in the
oumfo
he asks for the flags.
Papa Sobo who is in the
oumfo
he asks for the flags of the
lwa.*

The *La Place*, assistant to *oungan*, picks up a machete from the base of the *poteau mitan* and begins to circle it. He is entrusted with the care of the sacred machete, which is associated with the warrior *Ogou*. It symbolizes the combat through which spiritual authority is expressed. As he circles the *poteau mitan*, two female *hounsis* step forward to escort him into one of the altar rooms at the far side of the ceremonial area. As they come from the altar room, the two *hounsis* are wrapped in the breathtakingly beautiful drapo. They enter the ceremonial area with the drapo standards clutched in their right hands.

The arrival of the drapo into the *peristyle* (temple) is an essential mediation between the worlds of spirits and mortals. The brilliant, shimmering beauty of the drapo reinforces the symbols created in the *veve*, and their arrival indicates that an appearance by the desired *lwa* is imminent.

The trio proceeds to the four cardinal points at the edges of the *peristyle*. The *La Place* follows them, pitcher of water in one hand, candles in the other. Here they perform more ritual salutations which are concluded by kneeling and kissing the ground three times.

The trio charges back to the *poteau mitan*, and circles it in a mock battle of flag waving and sword flashing. The salutations are repeated, and they quickly move on to the drums, and then approach the guests. As they do so, they join the tips of the flag standards and present them to the dignitaries in a sign of respect. The dignitaries return the respect by kissing the guard of the machete and the staff of the drapo.

After this mutual recognition, the trio retreats and circles the *poteau mitan* once again with numerous quick changes in direction. Finally the two *houns* lower the drapo, roll them loosely around the standards and lean them against the *poteau mitan* for the duration of the ceremony.

Within the frenzy of the drapo presentation, the *lwa* arrives and takes possession of the *oungan's* body. By this time the *veve*, which was so carefully drawn on the ground of the *peristyle* is obliterated by the feet of the dancing initiates. The spirit has arrived, the salutations have been a success.⁸

The function of the *veve* as well as the function of the drapo is now over. After the ceremony is complete, they will be carried back to the altar room where they will lean against the altar for the *lwa* to whom they are dedicated. Through this they will renew their spiritual strength in preparation for the next ceremony.

DESIGN METAMORPHOSES

Although the *veves* have been used throughout the decades as symbolic designs on the drapo, attention to the visual design of the drapo grew as the decades of this century progressed. In the 1940's the designs of the drapo were fairly simple; the image of the *lwa* centerfield, and there are usually no encompassing borders. Occasionally simple, partial, diagonal borders appear on the corners of the flags. Although the outer layer of fabric on the drapo is usually of expensive satin or velvet, generally a layer of recycled cotton lies below. This layer acts to stabilize the weight of the sequins so that the fabric does not sag when the flags are in use. The

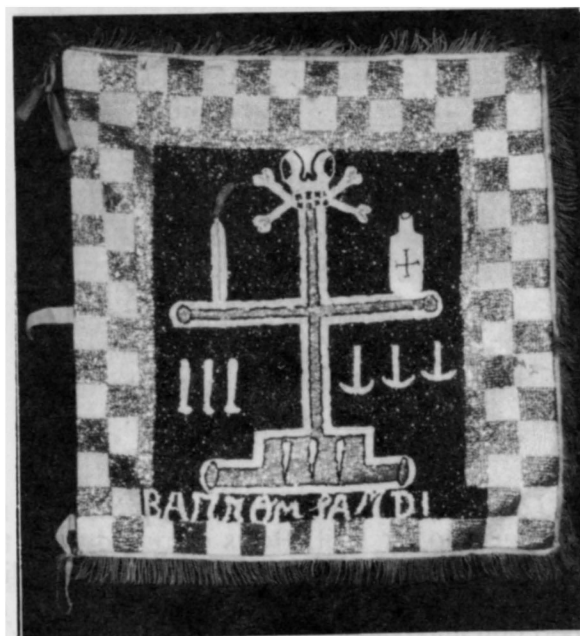


Fig.7. Vodou drapo for Baron Samedi, head of the Graveyard *lwa* known as the Guede. Circa 1970.

stabilizing layer of fabric generally was taken from cloth bags previously used for rice.

By the 1950's there was more attention to full color areas, which began to appear in more defined shapes. Color was used to fill the images, and by this time paper chromolithographs of the saints which represent the *lwa* began to be used in the designs as well. The paper images were laid down over the silk or velvet, and the sequin work was done over them. However, in a practice which is still honored today, the face and sometimes the hands of the *lwa* were left uncovered.

Simple borders had become popular by the early 1960's, but the borders themselves, as well as the central field remained sprinkled with sequins in the "*semin grenn*" style. By this time the muslin fabric backing the fancy outer fabric had been replaced by burlap. This was a heavier material, but it enabled the sequins to begin to be used in greater numbers without concern for sagging.



Fig.8. Vodou drapo for Ezili Freda, circa 1970. By this time the paper image of Mater Dolorosa is being used in the center field, and the borders are fairly sophisticated.



Fig. 9. Vodou drapo for St.Jak/Ogou, circa 1980. By this time the attention to multiple borders is well established, and the drapo is fully covered with sequins.

By the late 1960's and early 1970's burlap was used regularly to back the satin and velvet face fabric. (Fig.8) Sequins had become more plentiful in Haiti due to the presence of American owned companies which had their garment piecework assembly done at Haitian factories. By this time the attention to borders and imagery of the symbols had become sophisticated. The colors reflected not only those appropriate to the *lwa*, but the borders had become very important, possibly a reflection of the "op art" and graphic textile designs so popular in the United States and Europe at the time. (Fig.9) Although the heavy burlap

backing had enabled the drapo to carry the weight of more sequins, the combined weight made this style of drapo extremely heavy for ceremonial use.

Sophisticated designs and borders remained consistent elements of the drapo until the trade embargo of the mid 1990's, at which time the remaining factories left Haiti, and the supply of sequins ran out. The support fabric had changed again in the early 1990's to a lightweight, plastic burlap, resulting from a change in the fabric used for bags of imported rice.⁹ This was successful in reversing the problem of excessive weight, however, as the sequins became less available, the flagmakers, reverted to the "old style" of "*simen grenn*" designs, thereby decreasing the weight of the flags even more.¹⁰ Today, a few of the more successful artists who fabricate drapo for the art market are able to continue their art at increased prices. For the drapo fabricated to serve the *lwa*, the "*simen grenn*" style is an unexpected return to the traditional designs of the earlier decades of this century.

NOTES

¹ See Maggie Steber's article "Voodoo Flags" in Connoisseur, February, 1988, and Victoria Lautman's article "Into the Mystic: The New Folk Art" in Metropolitan Home, June 1989. pp. 78-79.

² See Donald J. Cosentino's chapter "Imagine Heaven" in The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou, Fowler Museum of Natural History, UCLA, 1995. pp. 25-55.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See Alfred Metraux's Voodoo in Haiti. Oxford University Press, New York, 1959. pp. 32- 34.

⁵ See Patrick Polk's chapter "Sacred Banners and the Divine Cavalry Charge" in The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou, Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, 1995. pp332.

⁶ See photographs following the text in William Seabrook's The Magic Island, Harcourt, Brace and Co., New York, 1929.

⁷ See Robert Farris Thompson's article "From the Isle Beneath the Sea: Haiti's Africanizing Vodou Art" in The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou, Fowler Museum of Natural History, UCLA, 1995. pp107.

⁸ The description of the Vodou ceremony is based on a *canzo* initiation ceremony I witnessed at Societie De Real in September, 1992.

⁹ Newfield Partners Ltd. of Miami, Florida started using these bags in 1991 to import their U.S. Long Grain rice into Haiti, Their name and phone number is printed on the plastic burlap bags recycled to line the Vodou flags.

¹⁰ Interview with *oungan* and flagmaker Pierrot Barra, April 1994.

PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

Figures 1,2,3, by Susan Elizabeth Tselos
Figures 4-9 by Sibila Savage

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cosentino, Donald J. ed. *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*. The Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, 1995.

Courlander, Harold. *The Drum and the Hoe*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960.

Deren, Maya. *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1953.

Metraux, Alfred. *Voodoo in Haiti*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.

Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit*. New York: Random House, 1983.

Yonker, Dolores. "Invitation to the Spirits." A Report, S.F. Craft & Folk Art Museum, Spring, 1985.