"Nan dòmi, le récit d'une initiation vodou." Mimerose P. Beaubrun. La Roque d'Anthéron: Vents d'Ailleurs, 2010. 287 pp. (Paper €21.00)

The study of Haitian Vodou historically covers three major stages: bosal, kanzo, and pridèzye, corresponding to three progressive levels in understanding the mysteries of Vodou. At the bosal level, a person entering the system wrestles with the myths and superstitions about Vodou to find one’s way. One who has undergone the kanzo initiation, opened to deeper knowledge, begins to function adequately in the lakou or the Vodou community, learns to separate facts from fiction, and is prepared to embark on the lifelong learning process of observation and communion with nature. Those who have been called to minister to the people progress to the pridèzye level. Such persons then develop the ability to see into the unknown and to divine. Clark (1982) and Fleurant (1996) have further observed that not only have the study, writing, and research about Vodou gone through those three stages, but 90 percent of the voluminous literature on Vodou falls within the bosal category, which explains a great deal of the prejudice about Haiti and its traditional culture.

Vodou originated in West Africa, amalgamating the rituals and practices of 21 ethnic groups or “nanchon” (some say 101 nations). As an initiatory rite, it usually subjects an adept to a period of seclusion varying from three to seven days, followed by a longer period of reclusion lasting 48 days. The initiate goes through a lave tèt or washing of the head (a cleansing process) and a kanzo or fire ritual to learn to manage gallantly the difficulties of life. Under the guidance of a tutor and with the blessings of the lakou community, the person emerges as an ounsi kanzo. While the details of initiation have remained largely secret, initiates like Milo Rigaud, Maya Deren, and Katherine Dunham, and academic groups like KOSANBA (the scholarly association for the study of Haitian culture and Vodou) have revealed a fair amount of the surface information. Thus, the fascination with secrecy in Vodou has been considered a settled matter. Then came Mimerose P. Beaubrun’s, Nan dòmi, le recit d’une initiation vodou (Dreaming: the account of a Vodou initiation), an earth shattering work that recenters the study of Haitian Vodou and heralds a new era in our understanding of Haitian culture, for here details and essence of initiation are the subject matter.

First, using a reflexive anthropological approach, Beaubrun establishes that initiation into Vodou is a lifelong learning process, and that no one
enters that route through a mere ceremony aimed at conferring upon a person the power to do wonders. Her journey, along with her husband Lolo (co-founder of the famous rasin or roots music band Boukman Eksperyans), began with visits to many well-known lakou, such as Souvenance in Gonaives, and Lamatrie near the town of Ouanaminthe in the northeast. A lakou, with its three major functions of conservation, protection, and renewal, she tells us, is a living space, a multidimensional living area where an extended family shares all aspects of life—spiritual, economic, and cultural. Under the tutelage of her spiritual guide, Tante Tansia, a danti (elder) who summarizes the essence of the lakou, her narrative takes us into the deepest reaches of the teaching of Vodou, and eases us out of the superstitions that have been associated with it for so long. Yet no one can teach another person the road to Ginen, the spirits of Vodou, she learns from Tante Tansia. A person receives the call to service and takes one’s place in the lakou. Dreams became an essential part of Beaubrun’s journey, for the Ginen are manifest in her dreams. An academic who takes nothing for granted and questions everything, Beaubrun’s experience of dreaming overreached her logical and mental capacity. Dreaming has become for her an art that often propels her to another dimension, where the Ginen resides. One needs to learn to distinguish between dreaming and the imaginary, for in this context, the dream as a state of the unknown world is real. The learning process, in this regard, is like a marathon where one competes against oneself, and though one is alone in the struggle, one is still connected to the chain of “101 nanchons” (ethnic groups), the seven pillars of the lakou, and the three supporting stones of the hearth, the cooking pot. The Ginen is The Spirit. It cannot be captured and put at one’s service. Vodou, like all religions, has its magic, but “Ginen pa Bizango”—Ginen is not Bizango, the secret societies whose roguish members often deviate from Vodou moral values. Those who use Vodou for material and selfish ends have neither formation nor information.

The information in Nan dòmi is not new to the initiate who has chosen to walk on the road of Ginen. But it brings us—academics and the larger public—further along in demystifying Vodou and Haitian culture, and confirms the word often heard that “there are no secrets in Vodou, except for the secrets of the ason” (symbol of priesthood). And for Beaubrun, the secrets of the ason, indeed a mother lode, are there for all to learn, to practice, and to dream. In this regard, she brings us to a new level by changing
the landscape of research on Vodou, and unwittingly challenging many in the academic community to transcend their limitations, as *bosal*, and to approach with respect the study of the Haitian *lakou*. *Nan dòmi*, a *pridézye* primer for the initiate, academics, and the general public, will take its place among the great classics of Haitian Vodou and culture. *Ayibobo!*

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