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The Vodou *Kase*:

The Drum Break in New York Temples and Dance Classes

BY LOIS E. WILCKEN

Editor's note: Ethnomusicologist Lois Wilcken manages La Troupe Makandal, a Haitian drum and dance troupe, and shares an apartment with drummer Frisner Augustin. For four days after a devastating earthquake struck Haiti on January 12, she could get no news from Frisner's family, and her colleagues at City Lore and across the field of folk arts in New York worried with her. When her call finally got through to Haiti, and she heard the voice of her friend Diabolo telling her that they all survived, she said that it sounded just like music.

Lois recommends that readers interested in aiding the relief effort in Haiti support Partners in Health (www.standwithhaiti.org). Partners in Health has worked in Haiti for more than twenty years and today is one of the largest nongovernmental health care providers in the country. Those interested in focusing their help on a community in need may make tax-deductible contributions to La Troupe Makandal (www.makandal.org, click on "Earthquake Relief"). Since January, La Troupe Makandal has aided a neighborhood organization of women by delivering tents, tarps, light medical supplies, and much-needed financial contributions.



Pat Hall dances the *kongo* at a Makandal performance in Tokyo, July 2007.
Photo: Koichiro Saito

This article draws from experiences of the Pat Hall Dance and Movement Class, which meets Saturday afternoons at the Mark Morris Dance Center in downtown Brooklyn and attracts approximately sixty devotees, both professional dancers and amateurs. Instructor Pat Hall describes her classes on her web site as an “environment and dance community that nurtures, heals, renews, and inspires the body and spirit through the joy of dance.” She frequently engages the ensemble of master drummer Frisner Augustin to accompany classes.

Focusing inquiry on the *kase*, a drum pattern strongly associated with spirit possession, I compare episodes of transcendence that occur in Hall’s class with possessions that occur during the rites of Afro-Haitian Vodou, during acoustically similar if not identical performances. Reflections derive

from documentation of classes; interviews with the instructor, lead drummer, and selected students; and my participation in classes. I argue that various experiences of transcendence in the class occupy points on a continuum, that the same may be true in the temple, and that an area of overlap may pertain. These statements challenge the divide between sacred and profane and bring nuance to notions of music and spirituality.

The Vodou Kase

Vodou, a sacred practice that came to Haiti through the Middle Passage, serves *vodun* (spiritual entities in *fongbe*, a language of the Gulf of Guinea region). As Vodou evolved across the generations after Haiti proclaimed its independence in 1804, it refined a cosmology that places spirits on one side of a metaphoric mirror and the

living on its other side. An axis intersects the divide, so that spirits may cross over into the abode of the living. *Vèvè* (sacred diagrams) that feature the point of intersection and the *poto mitan* (a post implanted in the center of a temple’s sacred ground) consciously represent this structure. The *kase*, a distinct and prominent drumming pattern in Haitian Vodou, takes its name from the French verb *casser* (to break). One immediately hears the suitability of the metaphor, because the *kase* dramatically ruptures the flow of the drum ensemble’s music. Vodouists do not call the *kase* a metaphor for the cosmic axis that binds the visible and invisible worlds, but they solidly associate the drum break with possession, which occurs when a spirit emerges from its side of the mirror to communicate through a human medium.



The sacred dance *yanvalou* as interpreted by Pat Hall and Smith Destin, Tokyo, July 2007. Photo: Koichiro Saito



Hall and Destin explore the dimensions of yanvalou at the Tokyo performance, July 2007. Photo: Koichiro Saito

Through my long experience of Vodou music as listener, performer, and analyst, I have notated a number of kase, and I have proposed that a principle of contrast or opposition to the main pattern from which the kase departs distinguishes and identifies it structurally (Wilcken 1992, 3–4; Wilcken 2005, 195–6). In brief, an ensemble—three full-sized drums, one or more frame drums, one bell or gong, and one rattle—with each instrument performing its own pattern in increasing degrees of ornamentation, produces what I am calling the “main pattern.” The lead drummer initiates the kase. The second and third drummers fall in as rapidly as possible with supporting patterns; bell and rattle maintain their previous patterns, and the bass foundation of the frame drum falls silent for the duration of the kase. Several types of structural opposi-

tion serve to distinguish the kase. One type throws off the phrasing by breaking halfway into the main pattern. Another utilizes timbral opposition: for example, slaps in lieu of open tones. Not least is the kase that has the lead drum emphasizing offbeats, and it seems that both listeners and performers experience this type as the most dramatic.

One hears the kase throughout a Vodou *dans* (dance), the nightlong rites that celebrate the various spiritual nations. Salutations to the most powerful *lwa* (spirits), conducted by a team of initiated personnel, include the orientation of sacred artifacts, pirouettes, genuflections, and the pouring of libations before the drum ensemble, the center post, and the

The path to transcendence follows a loop created by the interaction between the dancer and the drums. One feeds off the other, and this holds true in both temple and dance class.



Smith Destin and Pat Hall capture the *joie de vivre* of the dance kongo, Tokyo, July 2007. Photo: Koichiro Saito

altar. The master drummer performs the kase during salutations, and particularly the *vire* (pirouette). Although Laënnec Hurbon tells us that the *vire* functions to establish equilibrium (1993, 110), we often see the onset of possession in that moment. Whether or not the salutation routine brings down a spirit, drumming continues through three songs, after which the priest signals the ensemble to stop. Possession may occur during these periods, as well as during salutations. The master drummer launches the kase when he feels the spirit or when he notes its subtle signs in another.

The drum kase signals servants to perform the dance kase. The latter typically breaks away from the centered dance pattern toward either a pitching from side to side or a *vire*. During possession performances, the *lwa* often submits a

non-possessed person to the *vire* in the manner of a male dancer turning his partner, but with such great force that the non-possessed gets the spirit.

The Pat Hall Dance and Movement Class

Pat Hall has distinguished herself both on the New York stage and internationally since the 1970s. She won a New York Foundation for the Arts artist fellowship and a Dance Theater Workshop National Performance Suitcase Fund Award, which took her on dance research expeditions to Haiti, Martinique, Jamaica, Nigeria, and Benin. Her work as a performer has brought her from stages in New York City to festivals across both of the Americas, Africa, Europe, and Asia, and she has choreographed new work for the Spoleto

Festival and venues in New York City. Hall has taught dance at Cornell University, Brooklyn Academy of Music, and New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, but her longest-term and most devoted student following converges in the Pat Hall Dance and Movement Class, launched in Manhattan in the early 1980s and currently held at the Mark Morris Dance Center in Brooklyn.

The dance and movement class meets from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. on Saturdays in a studio large enough to accommodate the approximately fifty to sixty people who attend. The drummers sit along a short side of the rectangular space. Pat Hall's partner, musician and storyteller Pam Patrick, plays percussion and provides a constant presence in the ensemble. Two drummers alternately lead the instrument ensemble:



Before an improvised Vodou altar, Pat Hall strikes a kongo pose, Tokyo, July 2007. Photo: Koichiro Saito

James “Tiga” Jean-Baptiste, a key artist in the band of his father, Gaston “Bonga” Jean Baptiste; and Frisner Augustin, artistic director of La Troupe Makandal. Both lead drummers were born in Haiti, and both play for Vodou rituals in New York, but generational differences mark their styles, with Jean-Baptiste (the younger) more prone to fuse foreign musical elements with traditional Haitian drumming. When he plays for the class, Hall teaches African and African-derived dances not from Haiti; when Augustin plays, the dances are traditional Haitian.

The class has a two-part structure. During its first hour, students face a mirror on a long side of the room. Hall faces the students and leads them through warm-up exercises. After several opening stretches she stops to welcome the students and share her thoughts on how best to enjoy the class—for example, by focusing less on perfect body movement and more on the

drums, letting them guide your feet. In this brief yet crucial orientation, she establishes feelings of community and mutual nurturing. The warm-up resumes and builds in intensity until it closes in the first drum circle of the class, with the formation of an arc facing the drums. Students so inspired take the opportunity to solo freestyle before the drums. During the second half of the class, students move across the length of the space toward the drums in rows of four, following the lead of Hall, who begins with single steps, then develops them into routines. This second hour of the class culminates in a second drum circle.

Since 1981 I have participated in Haitian dance classes either as instrumentalist or student dancer, and I have witnessed countless episodes of transcendence—loss of ego or consciousness—in the drum circles. The questions that drive this paper have lived in the back of my mind all along. What elements of Haitian drumming

inspire a dancer to let go in class? Can the kase possibly play a role? Pat Hall’s class is notably rich in these episodes, so I began to dance in the class in May 2008 in order to gain insight into how dancers, particularly those who transcend consciousness, experience the drumming. I’ll share with you the thoughts of three dancers who experience transcendence during the class.

Sarah Dupuy was born in White Plains, New York, to Haitian parents. Her parents separated, and she grew up with her father, the publisher of a progressive Haitian newspaper. She traveled to Haiti and experienced her first ritual at the age of nine. Dupuy’s mother was a *manbo* (female priest), but it was only after her mother passed away that Dupuy “caught the spirit”—and that occurred in Pat Hall’s class, while Frisner Augustin was accompanying. She hears a layering and texturing in Haitian drumming that leaves room for spontaneity. “Come on,” the drums tell her.



Frisner Augustin drums for a Vodou spirit in a Brooklyn, New York, basement temple, 1998. Photo: Chantal Regnault

“You’re coming with us.” Vodou, Dupuy asserts, is universal. One simply has to be open to catch the spirit (Dupuy 2008).

Sheila Anozier, like Dupuy, was born in the United States, but her parents sent her to Haiti shortly after, and she lived with an Adventist aunt until she was eight, at which time she returned to New York. She became interested in African dance as a college student. Despite parental disapproval, she traveled to Haiti, where family associated her with her grandmother, a manbo. Back in New York, Anozier discovered Pat Hall’s class, which she has taken for thirteen years. The class, she says, attracts people who are yearning to be free. She has “issues” with organized religion and believes that what you’re supposed to feel in church actually happens in dance class. Of the music, she notes that Haitian drumming exerts a deep ancestral pull like no other. A dancer does not have to think about it, because something else takes over (Anozier 2008).

Charlotte Schiøler was born in Denmark to rigorous atheists. At the age of seventeen she left home for Paris, where she studied drama. Finding academics stifling, she joined the company of a Kenyan dancer and fell in love with African dance. She settled in New York after participating in a festival there, and she now divides her time between New York and Gabon, where a Pygmy spiritual community welcomed and initiated her. African drumming, Schiøler says, travels in the earth and comes into your body. You move as if something outside yourself were moving you. Freedom to express oneself draws her to Pat Hall’s class, and she finds Augustin’s drumming particularly powerful because of his effort to work with the dancer. The dancer, in turn, makes an effort to listen and to respect the structure of the music (Schiøler 2008).

For his part, Augustin concurs that the path to transcendence follows a loop created by the interaction between the dancer and the drums. One feeds off the other, and this holds true in both temple and dance class. While dance students might not understand the kase as a signal for the spirit the way Vodou initiates do, Augustin

can spin a new kase out of the nuances of a dancer’s moves, particularly those moves that suggest openness. According to Augustin, the important thing about the kase is that it is *gaye* (scattered or out of balance, in good Haitian Creole). Through the lead drummer’s intensification of elements that oppose his kase to the main pattern, the drumming becomes increasingly *gaye* as the dancer or the Vodou initiate moves away from everyday consciousness toward the spirit (Augustin 2008).

I would like to share an anecdote of my own. Augustin’s ensemble did not play for the class in August 2008, but one day his third drummer, Morgan Zwerlein, filled in for an absent drummer in Jean-Baptiste’s ensemble. Zwerlein took the whole room by surprise when he suddenly launched into a pattern that the third drum plays in support of the lead drummer’s kase. I wrote the following:

In the space of seconds, a flurry of thoughts swirled through my mind. *Morgan is doing a kase, without the customary lead of the master drum. Look at him. Eyes wide open, lips tensed, body pitched forward as if riding a stallion into battle, his timbale sticks transformed into reins. But isn’t he, the third drummer, stepping out of line? On the contrary, something from beyond is riding him, as if he were the horse, . . . the one possessed. I can feel the hands of Frisner, Morgan’s guru, on the reins, and deeper down, something beyond Frisner. This is indeed the beady moment of kase so cherished in Vodou, because all in the room feel it, not just me. Look at the sensations of surprise, delight, delirium rolling across the faces in the room.*

A Musical Moment of Transcendence

Skeptics might easily dismiss the dance-class episodes that I am describing as the overly excited reactions to exotic drumming of people who feel stressed, or perhaps even repressed, by the pressures and limits of modern life. I argue that we need to question the assumptions underlying such statements. First, they assume a break between the sacred and profane—that the drum ensemble pattern performed in sacred space becomes a formal shell when performed in a dance class, rendering the authenticity of the tran-

scendent experience questionable. Second, they assume a disconnect between medium and message. The Vodou kase is a cue, but it is not one of those symbols whose structure and meaning are related arbitrarily; rather it is a break in the music and therefore movement, and dancers both of and outside the originating culture experience it similarly. Finally, scholars have given much thought to whether music functions as a cultural or a physiological stimulus. Let us consider that these functions are not mutually exclusive.

The real experiences of dancers muddle our categories and dichotomies and suggest that we need new models for thinking about such dynamic and variable phenomena. I propose situating transcendence’s multiple forms on a continuum, with points of division between the old categories now wide and mobile. I make this proposal not out of a preoccupation with theory and method, but rather in the spirit of the Vodou kase, the musical moment when body and mind converge, transcend, and heal. ▼

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