

American Horror Story

COVEN:

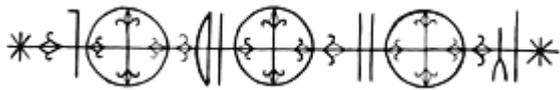
Will the Real

PAPA LEGBA

PLEASE STAND UP?

Since the beginning of the season, American Horror Story Coven's presentation of New Orleans Voodoo was a hot mess. From stereotypes of black folks and fried chicken, to the misogynistic treatment of women and mischaracterization of the Mother of New Orleans Voodoo, the show took all the advantage at their disposal to cash in on "for entertainment only." The general public saw no problem with portraying Papa Legba as a pimped out, red-eyed black man with dreadlocks who snorts cocaine, wears a top

hat and escorts children and “innocents” to the other side of the veil. They wouldn’t know the difference anyway, right? And, we all know the devil is willing to do anything in exchange for a soul. There’s just one problem, however, Papa Legba is not the devil. In fact, there is no devil in New Orleans Voudou.

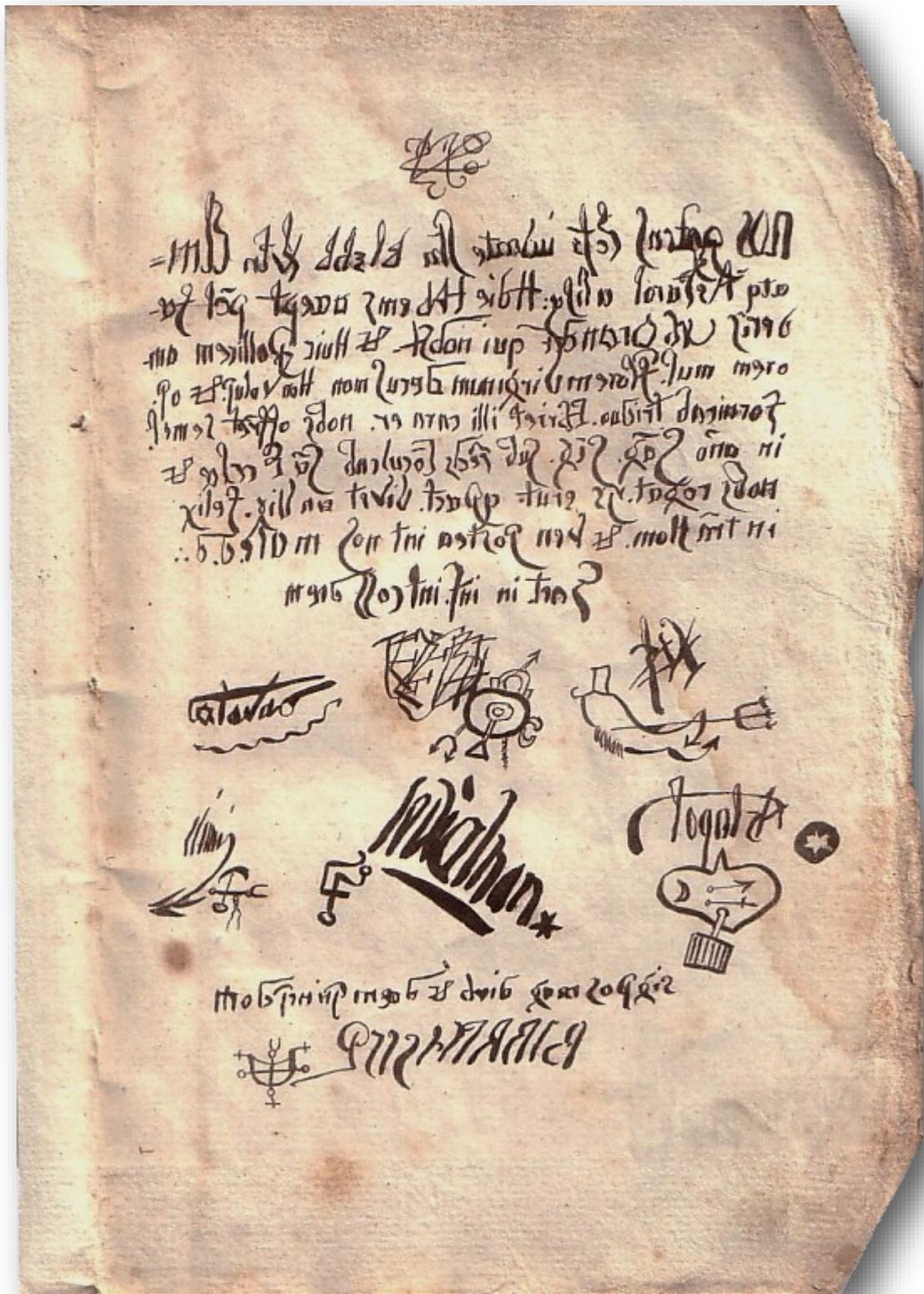


The infamous legend of the “Black Man at the Crossroads” is one that ignites much curiosity across cultures and throughout time. References to folks making deals with devils and demons are found as early as the fifth century in the writings of St. Jerome, and in the sixth century, we find the legend of Theofilus. Numerous instructions for conjuring demons exist in the old grimoires, and of course, we cannot ignore the infamous deal with the devil made by legendary bluesman Robert Johnson. It is said Johnson went to a crossroads at midnight and summoned Satan who appeared as a large Black Man. Johnson gave his guitar to him, and the “Devil” tuned the guitar, played a few songs and gave the guitar back to him and with it, mastery of the instrument. In exchange for Johnson’s soul, it is

said the Devil gave Johnson the skill to play the legendary blues for which he is famous.

Although Voudou is often associated with Satanism, Satan is an Abrahamic belief and is not found in the New Orleans Voudou religion. When Mississippi Delta folk songs mix references to Voudou and Hoodoo with Satan and the devil, it is suggested by some to be a metaphorical expression of social pain resulting from the oppressive environment of racism and poverty, couched in Christian terms and blamed on “the devil.” Other scholars suggest that it is not the devil at all who is referenced; rather, it is Legba, known as a trickster God of African origin (Hyatt, 1973; Sharma, 1997). Not unlike syncretism, which in this context is the cloaking of the Voudou spirits with Catholic saints, speaking of the devil is more acceptable than referencing an African deity. Syncretism functions to perpetuate African traditions on the downlow.

It really is not surprising that the depiction of the Marie Laveaux and Papa Legba characters were so one-dimensional in American Horror Story Coven; it’s the same old song and dance Hollywood



Second page of a pact allegedly signed between Urbain Grandier and the Devil. This half is also signed by Satan, Leviathan, Astaroth, and a number of other demons. This image is from *Dictionnaire infernal ou Bibliothèque universelle* by Collin de Plancy (1826), p.d.

and the media have been promoting since the inception of commercial film and media. Instead of acknowledging Voodoo as the legitimate religion it is, it is portrayed as bad, akin to black magic at best and downright Satanic at worst. And, the Queen of this evil religion is depicted as the devil woman herself, capable of committing heinous acts against other human beings along the lines of Jeffrey Dahmer.

When a talented actress such as Angela Bassett portrays the Queen of New Orleans Voodoo, however, there is a small glimmer of hope. Bassett is undeniably a stunning and strong woman visually and looks believable as Marie Laveaux. In spite of the storyline, it was possible for Bassett to give viewers a look at Madame Laveaux's gentler, nurturing side. After all, the Voodoo Queen is known for her humanitarian efforts, spending time with people others wanted nothing to do with. She worked alongside Catholic priest Father Antoine tending to the sick and ministering to people in prison who were condemned to death. And yes, she embraced the traditions of her African ancestry. She was well-known as a practitioner of Voodoo and equally known as a devout Catholic. She danced with the snake and prayed with the rosary. She successfully integrated the two traditions, greatly influencing the New Orleans Voodoo religion we know today.

No one can deny the fact that character development in general was not among the strong suits of AHS Coven. Neither was the plot, which was all over the place and peppered with promising subplots that ultimately went nowhere. Sigh, as Maureen Ryan, TV critic for the Huffington Post wrote, "Even top-notch actresses can't save shoddy material." Never were truer words spoken.

Despite Voodoo truth being much stranger and more interesting than fiction, AHS Coven's Marie Laveaux was depicted as a mean, angry black woman who relished torturing people and hating witches. She sent her Minotaur lover to hunt down Madame LaLaurie and instead of hitting her target, he

attacks Queenie, the human voodoo doll of the Coven. Not only did she behead Delphine LaLaurie, she hanged LaLaurie's entire family. She sent a witch hunter to murder all of the witches in the Coven. She stole babies each year in order to have eternal life. To fulfill a deal she made with the devil—a devil called *Papa Legba*—she presented the newborns to him as payment for his favor.

Still, the Marie Laveaux character was not all bad. We like the idea of a powerful Black female leader getting justice for crimes against Black people. We root for her when she summons her army of zombies to exact revenge on a group of White men who had lynched a Black child in the 1960s. We like it when she buries Delphine for all eternity. Horror freaks probably even enjoy LaLaurie's beheading. And, we like seeing two powerful women,

Marie Laveaux and Fiona Goode (played by Jessica Lang), align the Voodoos and the Witches and work towards the common good of eliminating their oppressors.

Just like the disappointing portrayal of Marie Laveaux, however, it wasn't surprising to find that same, boring, stereotypical

approach to Papa Legba (played by Lance Reddick), who was represented as ole Satan himself. Announcements by the show's producers prior to his first appearance on the show indicated their plan was to depict Papa Legba as a "Voodoo Satan." Well, no one can say they didn't live up to that intention.

Nevertheless, in spite of being depicted as Voodoo's Satan, Papa Legba was not all bad. In fact, his character was riveting in some respects. While he is a soul collector, he is not seen tormenting the souls he has taken, unless of course, they deserve it and he has escorted them to Hell. He is upfront and honest about his expectations and intentions with the deals he makes; albeit, at the same time delighting in the psychological torment caused by such deals on the individual. "Welcome to Hell!" he says to Delphine upon her death, and when Fiona dies and enters her personal Hell, he laughs at her suffering. Nonetheless, AHS Coven's Papa Legba

Everybody pays, everybody suffers.

Papa Legba in AHS Coven



neither looks like the actual Papa Legba, nor is his depiction as the God of life and death accurate. But, the argument is not that Lance Reddick didn't do a good job of acting; on the contrary, he did a fabulous job. Unfortunately, he was acting out the distorted legend and myth instead of the real Papa Legba of the New Orleans Voodoo tradition. It is not his fault he looked a fool dressed up like Baron Samedi and acting like a cocaine-snorting soul pimp from the hood.

A sloppy storyline and lack of character development notwithstanding, the utter bastardization of an African-derived religion and not-so-subtle racist depic-



tions of black men and women was couched in extreme violence against women—domestic and otherwise. Invariably, the women, who at the onset were hyped up as strong and empowered, perpetrated violence upon each other, burned each other at the stake and ultimately succumbed to violence at the hands of men. Madison, the witch played by Emma Roberts, was gang-raped by a bunch of frat boys in the first episode; but, she got immediate revenge through her magickal skills, killing all of her perpetrators with a wave of her hand. Throughout the series, Madison was portrayed as an extremely powerful witch bitch who perpetrated against her coven sisters, and was consumed by a predictable cat fight with Misty Day, played by Lily Rabe. Despite seeming impervious to the magick of others and being raised from the Dead, Madison was killed by a sorry excuse for a zombie, the reanimated frat boy named Kyle played by Evan Peters. Suddenly, her awesome powers of teleportation and telekinesis didn't work—all of her superhuman witchy abilities were lost and she laid helpless while being strangled to death. Madison's ultimate fate fell into the hands of the butler Spalding, played by Dennis O'Hare, who kept her corpse as a plaything, reducing her to a doll in his collection. In addition, Fiona, the Supreme Witch with unlimited abilities, ended up a victim of the Axe Man in more ways than one. She was ultimately chopped to death and sent to her own private Hell,



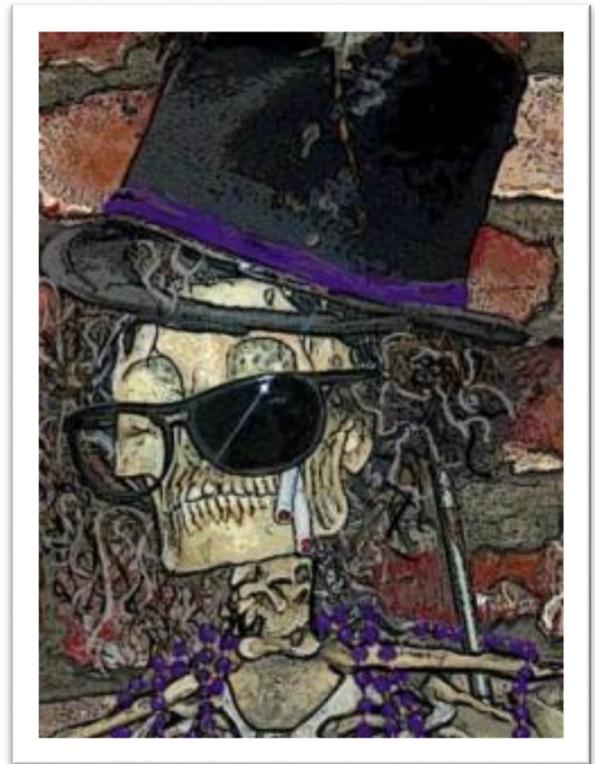
doomed to live the life of the Axe Man's dreams as a stay-at-home wife who cannot escape and someone he can smack around at will. Finally, Marie Laveaux, who, despite selling her soul to the non-existent devil in real Voodoo, stood helpless in front of the witch hunter who killed her. When the strongest women in the series end up being victims of violence in the most demeaning of ways, we move beyond mere violence into the realm of misogyny.

PAPA LEGBA, BARON SAMEDI, OR THE DEVIL?

AHS Coven's Papa Legba was both a confused and confusing character to those in the know. He looked like a completely different Voodoo Spirit, Baron Samedi, and was even given the same role as the spirit of life and death. He is shown snorting cocaine, like all black men wearing top hats stereotypically do. He delights in the pain and suffering of others. He takes souls before their time. Knowing there were actual New Orleans Voodoo practitioners on set who appeared several times in ritual scenes, as well as an actual Voodoo/spiritual consultant present, and given the short promotional video produced to promote the show where several New Orleans practitioners were interviewed about real New Orleans Voodoo, the fact that Papa Legba was so incorrectly portrayed doesn't make sense. In fact, it is inexcusable.

If we start with the general appearance of Papa Legba, we can say the entire AHS depiction should be scratched. The character looked more like Baron Samedi, Guardian of the Cemetery and head of the family of Ghede spirits. It is the Baron who wears a top hat, paints his face white, and who is associated with skulls. It is he who determines who lives and who dies. The Baron fights black magic and loves children. But, he doesn't love children for their innocent souls as is suggested in AHS Coven, nor does he snort cocaine (though he loves to party). Baron Samedi protects children, and does not allow children to die before their time.

On the other hand, Papa Legba is commonly depicted in Voodoo iconography as an old black man who wears a straw hat, smokes a corn cob pipe and



Baron Samedi, image by Denise Alvarado.

sports a crooked cane. He can also take the form of a young child who is fascinated with toys, or a strong young man who can guide the way. He is associated with keys, not skulls, and is likened to St. Peter of Catholicism. Just as St. Peter holds the keys to the gates of Heaven, Papa Legba holds the keys to the Spirit World; he is the Gatekeeper to the World of Invisibles. He likes rum and coffee, not cocaine, and does not make deals with anyone for their souls. He is among the first to be called in Voodoo ceremonies because it is he who opens the roads through which the other Voodoo Spirits (loas) must travel in order to communicate and interact with humans.

Most importantly, there is no devil in Voodoo. True, there are spirits with less than stellar attributes in the Voodoo pantheon, but there is no Satan with legions of demons under his command whose sole purpose in life is the downfall of humanity. On the contrary, Papa Legba—as is the case with all the loas—is there to assist people with matters of daily living, to help when help is needed, to clear away obstacles in our path, and to provide oppor-

tunities for improving our lives. That's a far cry from the cocaine-crazed baby snatcher portrayed in AHS Coven.

ABOUT PAPA LEGBA

Papa Legba is an African God whose origins are with the Fon people of Dahomey (Benin) Africa. He came to the Americas with the slave trade and has a prominent and essential place in New Orleans Voodoo. In fact, he is arguably the most important loa in the New Orleans Voodoo pantheon. All ceremonies begin and end with Papa Legba, and there can be no communication with any of the other loas without consulting him first. Papa Legba is the master linguist, the trickster, warrior, guardian of crossroads and entrances, and the personal messenger of destiny. His gift for linguistics enables him to translate the requests of humans into the languages of the Spirits. He goes by several names in New Orleans: Papa Legba, Papa Alegba, Papa Labas, Papa Limba and Papa Lebat. During Mardi Gras season, a popular shout by revelers is "A Labas!" Papa Legba is one of the most loved and revered of the Voodoo loas.

In Africa, Legba is often depicted as a fertility God with a huge, erect penis. Sometimes, Legba is depicted as male and female, sometimes as a healer, and sometimes as a protector. In one form, he is depicted as an "apologetic Legba," petitioned for forgiveness when a person has insulted the gods through awful behaviors like rape and burglary.

According to one legend, Papa Legba is the youngest son of Mawu and Liza, the creators of the world. Mawu and Liza are portrayed as twins but are one in Spirit. Mawu is the female aspect, and is associated with the East, the night moon, fertility, motherhood and night. Liza is the male aspect, and is associated with the West, the daytime sun, heat, work and strength. In another legend, Legba is the son of Oshun.

CHARACTERISTICS

For folks interested in developing a relationship with Papa Legba, you can start with learning about who he is and getting familiar with his characteristics. Papa Legba is the one loa that anyone can

serve; initiation is not necessary. He is accessible to all, the kind Father who is happy with a cup of black coffee and a handful of peanuts in exchange for his help and wisdom.

Papa Legba is also the master trickster. A trickster's primary objective is to teach; it is not malevolence. Thus, many times when he is petitioned for something he has fun with the manner in which he helps it manifest. He is a happy loa, and brings humor and unexpected blessings into the lives of those who serve him.

Areas of influence. This refers to the domains of human life that Legba is best suited to help: removing obstacles, providing opportunities, communicating, opening and closing doorways (physical and spiritual), opening roads, children, protection, and finding lost things.

Colors. All of the Voodoo Spirits have colors associated with them. In New Orleans Voodoo, Legba's colors are red, black and sometimes white.

Number. As with colors, each Spirit has a particular number or numbers that corresponds to them. These numbers are important for knowing how many of a particular item or object is placed on an altar, how many times something may be repeated, and has significance in magical workings, as well. Papa Legba's number is 3.

Day of the week. As with colors and numbers, each Spirit has a day of the week that is dedicated to them. This is the best day for you to show your devotion; although, serving the Spirits can be done at any time. Papa Legba's days are Monday and the third day of each month.

Saints. When the slaves were brought to the New World and subsequently exposed to Catholicism, they identified the Voodoo Spirits with Catholic saints who shared similar characteristics. Images of Catholic saints and a variety of artwork and statues are common on Voodoo altars. Saints associated with Papa Legba include St. Peter, St. Lazarus, Holy Child of Atoche, St. Michael the Archangel and St.

Anthony of Padua.

Feast days. At least once a year, the Voodoo Spirits are honored with a huge feast and celebration. Each Spirit has a specific day when the celebration occurs. Sometimes, people opt to celebrate the feast days of the associated patron saint as an additional way of honoring and serving them.

New Year's Day – Feast day of the Holy Child of Atoche

June 13 -Feast day of St. Anthony of Padua

June 21st & December 17th - Feast days of St. Lazarus

June 29th – Legba petro (feast day of St. Peter) bonfire lit in his honor

September 29 – Feast day of St. Michael the Archangel

November 1st – Bonfire lit in his honor for the coming New Year

Favorite place. Each Spirit resides in a particular place or places. For Papa Legba, these places include crossroads, cemetery gates, doorways, entryways, thresholds of homes, 4 corners, and any place where two roads intersect.

Favorite animals. Each Spirit has their favorite animals. You can place images or figures of these animals on your altars as a way of acknowledging their preferences. Papa Legba is partial to roosters, dogs, possums, and mice.

Favorite things. Three stones, crooked stick, pipe, keys, doors, marbles, small toys, straw bag, playing cards, red flowers, mixed flower bouquet, pictures of crossroads, cigars.

Sacrificial foods/offerings. Corn (toasted), candy, rum, palm oil, black coffee (you can add sugar but no cream), anything sweet, coconut, plantains, red



Papa Legba

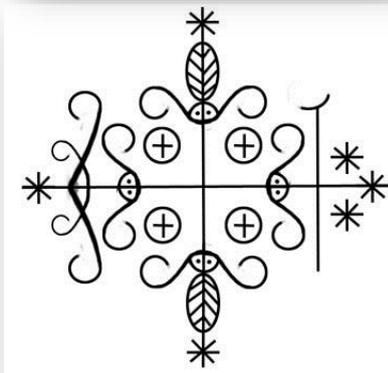
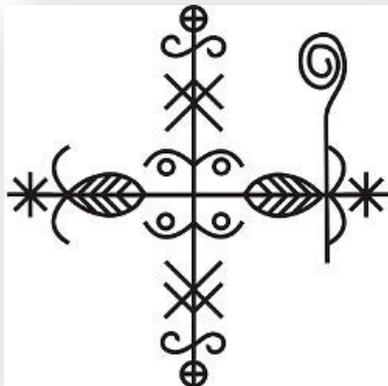
beans and rice, smoked fish, Louisiana hot sauce, cakes, yams, sugar cane, fruits, green grapes when asking for money, bananas and honey when asking for help with love. His food can be doused liberally with corajo butter and his water should be standing water.

Planet. Mercury, the Sun

Herbs. Each Voodoo spirit has herbs associated with them that are used when preparing healing baths, oils, powders, creating wanguages, and other

ritual and healing items. These herbs will vary according to tradition. Herbs associated with Papa Legba include anise, star anise, rue, sweet basil, tobacco, guava, avocado, Alligator pear, red pepper, camphor leaves, corn, wild peppergrass, peppermint, yellow thistle, Mexican thistle, Abre camino, Cuban spurge, Sargasso, wild convolvulus, foxtail, nettles, crowfoot, neat's tongue, white pine nuts, jack bean, spiny blite, nightshade, black eyed peas, ateje, (cordia collocea), heliotrope, pigeon peas, mastic tree, chili peppers, corn stalks, corn leaves, corn silk, avocado leaves, avocado roots, coconut husk, coconut palm stem, corajo, wild croton, cowage, dried rose buds, senna, soapberry tree and bitter bush.

Symbols. These are the abstract and concrete representations of the particular loa. Papa Legba has many vévés or ritual symbols. Here are a couple:



Altar placement. This is the ideal place in the

home where you can build your altar to the particular Spirit. Voudou practitioners place representations of Papa Legba behind the front door of their homes in order to clear the path, accomplish goals, and to bring his protection.

LEGBA PURIFICATION BATH

In New Orleans Voudou, ritual baths are commonly used as prescriptive measures for a variety of conditions. The following ritual bath is a purification bath, and can be done whenever a cleansing is needed or when obstacles to your progress need to be removed.

Bath ingredients:

- 3 cans of coconut milk
- A handful of anise
- A handful of sweet basil
- A handful of peppermint
- 1 white candle

Directions:

Light the candle. Put all of the others items into a warm bath. Soak 15 minutes, turn to the left 3 times and say "I am clean". Dress in white and sleep on white sheets. In the morning, gather up all the seed stuffs and herbs from the bath along with the candle remains and discard at a crossroads along with three pennies. Thank Papa Legba for attending to your needs.

HOW TO CREATE AN ALTAR FOR PAPA LEGBA

To create a basic altar to Papa Legba, you will need the following:

- A small table or place on the floor
- Red and black cloth
- An image of Papa Legba (if you have a doll or statue, good, if not use a picture of him, one of his associated saints and/or his vévé)
- 3 red or white candles
- Three stones
- Some of his favorite things
- Fresh basil or sage

- Palm oil
- Maraca or bell
- Three pennies

Directions:

Place the black cloth over the table and the red cloth diagonally across the black cloth. Place the glass bowl in the center of the altar and fill it with water. You can add a splash of coconut rum if you have any on hand. Place the three stones around the bowl. Take the other objects and arrange them on your altar on a manner that is pleasing to you. Pin a photo of Papa Legba's vevé or patron saint to the front of your altar, or frame it and stand it up at the back. To bless the altar, take your sprig of basil or sage and dip it into the water and splash the items. Alternate ways to bless your altar would be to anoint it with palm oil, or burn some sage, cedar, frankincense, or sandalwood incense, and smudge it with the smoke.

HOW TO CALL ON PAPA LEGBA

Petition Papa Legba when you have people in your life who are sabotaging your relationships or efforts to get ahead, when you are facing an inordinate number of obstacles, when you are trying to accomplish a task or when you need new opportunities.

Make a coconut cake with fruit as an offering. Ideally, the cake should be made from scratch not purchased from a store. When you have the batter made, add a can of drained fruit cocktail and mix it into the batter and bake. Frost the cake and top with toasted shredded coconut. Set the cake on his altar.

Start by saying the Lord's Prayer and Hail Mary three times each. If you prefer, you may address the Creator in a prayer appropriate for you. Then light your candles and begin shaking the maraca or ringing the bell to get Legba's attention. Invoke Papa Legba by saying:

*Hey Papa Legba,
Hear me and Open the door!
Open the door and come through, Papa!*

Pour a little rum or water on the ground in front of your altar. Play some music with a lot of drumming or songs that are about the crossroads. *Widespread Panic*, *Elton John* and the *Talking Heads* all have songs called or about Papa Legba that can be used. Let the music move you into dance. When you are tired, sit quietly and meditate on the task you wish to accomplish. Acknowledge the barriers that get in your way. Once this is clear, ask Legba to exert his influence over the matter at hand. Make your request by simply talking to him as if he were a person in the room with you. When you are finished, take the cake and other offerings to a crossroads or leave by a nearby tree, if possible. Call to Legba, out loud if you can; if not, call him in your heart. Take the pennies and make a sign of the cross with each and leave with the offerings. Tell Legba he is paid. If you can't get to a crossroads, you can toss his offerings in the garbage as garbage is sacred to him.

In the days and weeks following, pay attention to the stories that come your way through your dreams, other people, books, or the media. Contemplate on the truth inherent in each. In this way, you will gain wisdom from Papa Legba on an ongoing basis in your everyday life. By doing so, you are allowing the doors to open and obstacles to vanish.

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