

Maryaj: A Spiritual Bond

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A common practice in many cultures is marriage, or some similar form of bond made complete through a ritual ceremony. The Catholic ceremony is known well to most Americans, but what about in Haitian Vodou culture? In Vodou and Haitian culture, not only do people get married to other people, but they may marry a spirit or a *lwa*. To them, these marriages are taken as seriously as getting married to people and they have specific reasons for participating. Just as in a real relationship, there is a process that one must go through to figure out which *lwa* to marry and how to go about marrying the *lwa*. Once married to a *lwa*, there are specific rules that one must follow in order to properly serve his or her new companion.

People in Haiti often look at the rite of marriage very diplomatically. Not to say that they do not marry people because they love them, but the economic conditions in Haiti often have a large influence on the decision to marry or to become involved with someone. Haiti is a very poor country and sometimes it is important to have a male around who can help financially in a tough situation. Mama Lola talks about telling a man who was not the father of her child that she was pregnant because she wanted to gain some financial security for her unborn child (Brown 1991: 243). In one case Simone Duvalier strategically mystically married her son, Jean-Claude, to retain the power she got when her husband, Francois Duvalier passed in 1971 (Burnham 2006: 5). These reasons can also apply to marriage to the *lwa*, not because the *lwa* provides his or her spouse with physical things, such as money, but because the *lwa* provides emotional support.

These marriages between human and *lwa* are known in Haiti as *maryaj*, or a mystical union with the *lwa* (Hebblethwaite 2011: 265). When thinking about these unions it is important to remember that people don't marry just any *lwa*. People who practice Vodou usually have a *mèt tèt* or a master of the head, one *lwa* that the follower is mounted by most often, dances and sings to most often, and that protects the follower (Hebblethwaite 2011: 267). A person can come to realize who their *mèt tèt* is in many ways. It may be noticed when the person becomes possessed by that *lwa* before or during initiation or if he or she is possessed by that *lwa* often. One may also determine his or her *mèt tèt* is by means of card reading, which is what Mama Lola did for Karen Brown. Before having her cards read, Brown had been told by many others that her *mèt tèt* was Papa Ogou. There was even an instance where a woman came across a dance floor just to tell her that she saw Papa Ogou around her head (Brown 1991: 133). Besides card reading one can also have his or her *mèt tèt* told to you by one who has "the gift of the eyes," or who is able to directly see the spirits (Brown 1991: 134).

Once someone's *mèt tèt* is determined, they may begin the process of marrying the *lwa*. In the case of Karen Brown, she chose to marry two *lwa*, Danbala and Ogou because as Mama Lola explained, Karen "needed a cool *lwa* to balance out the heat of Ogou" (Brown 1991: 306). Many practitioners marry more than one *lwa*, such as Georges Rene, who married *lwa* (Dubois 2001: 4). Marrying a *lwa* can be an extremely costly ceremony for the individual throwing it and can lead to lengthy term of engagement to the *lwa* until the individual can afford the ceremony. The person has to buy the proper attire for the situation. If they are marrying more than one *lwa* they have to buy two sets of attire, one to match each *lwa*, a costly expenditure for a person living in rural Haiti. They must also buy rings for each of the *lwa* that they are marrying.

The next step is to have the actual marriage ceremony. It is quite similar to a Catholic marriage ceremony, most likely stemming from the French influence on the religion. Someone at the ceremony becomes possessed by the *lwa* that is to be married and is dressed in wedding garb. Vows are exchanged in a similar fashion to the Catholic wedding ceremony and the two are

declared married. There may even be official wedding certificates to denote the bond that has been formed (Lewis 2003: 11).

After the person is married to the *lwa*, he has to provide special treatment to that *lwa*. If the person isn't married to someone already he or she is not supposed to take a spouse after that, however, he or she is allowed to marry a *lwa* even if they have already taken a human spouse. A person must make sure to sleep alone on the particular nights dedicated to the *lwa* they have married. A common *lwa* to marry is Èzili who requires that the person married to her sleep alone and refrain from having sex on Tuesdays and Thursdays, while Papa Ogou's day is on Wednesday (Hebblethwaite 2011: 233, 271). A person who is married to a *lwa* must make sure to celebrate that birthday of that *lwa* as a special holiday, and in turn he or she will receive spiritual guidance and protection. These spiritual relationships can be extremely important for the emotional health of the individual, giving them help in areas where they are least proficient. In Karen Brown's case she was supported in finding the inner strength to fight for what she wanted (Brown 1991: 135).

Bibliography

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