The Perception of Dreams in Haitian Vodou: 

A Comparative Analysis of Christian and Haitian Vodou Dream Traditions

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Whereas our modern scientific understanding of dreams remains largely incomplete, it is evident that dreaming is a universal phenomenon and, as such, is addressed within religion. Some religions, such as Christianity, undermine the power of dreams; others, such as Haitian Vodou, empower dreams. This tendency reflects fundamental cultural and religious differences in the perception of dreams.

In Vodou, dreams constitute an important means by which lwa communicate with humans; they convey warnings, blessings or offers of protection as well as songs and practical or medicinal knowledge. Lwa appear as familiar people or objects, but provide clues to their identity through colors, clothing, props or accessories. However, in retelling dreams, people most frequently describe the lwa by his or her name, with little or no regard towards the chwal adopted during the dream. In all of these characteristics, dreaming in Vodou is not unlike being possessed by the lwa.

The great importance of Vodou dreams is best exemplified in McCarthy-Brown’s Mama Lola by a plethora of relevant dreams experienced by manbo Alourdes herself, her family – past and present – and her clients. The legend of Alourdes’ ancestor Joseph Binbin Mauvant refers to his appearance to his wife in a dream in order to explain his sudden disappearance – he had returned to Africa. Of course, this could easily be dismissed as superstition, or as an explanation made to children. However, the importance of the dream is marked. When Alourdes dreams of her mother, she knows “everything going to be okay [sic]”. Once she had decided to become a manbo, the lwa continued her Vodou education through her dreams just as they had for her mother.

Just as Alourdes’ Vodou religious heritage, history and knowledge are predominantly matrilineal, many dreams described in Mama Lola link mother and daughter while they are separated. Alourdes’s mother, Philo, learned that her own mother, Sina, was dying through a dream. Similarly Maggie, Alourdes’ daughter, experienced an equally accurate dream that her mother was sick. When Maggie is ill, Alourdes thinks and dreams about her constantly. In a nightmare experienced while she is being operated upon, a cobra finally frightened Maggie into

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1 Hebblethwaite, Vodou Songs, p258
2 Hebblethwaite, Vodou Songs, p36
3 Métraux, Voodoo in Haiti, p143
4 Hebblethwaite, Vodou Songs, p258
5 Chwal – the person whom the lwa “rides” during possession; in this case the chwal is the human form adopted by the lwa during a dream.
6 Métraux Voodoo in Haiti, p143-144
7 McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola, p22-33
8 McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola, p123
9 McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola, p77
10 McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola, p205
11 McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola, p142-154
12 McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola, p245
giving in and agreeing to take up the *ason*\(^{13}\); that very night, her mother dreamed of Gèdè and understood that her daughter, once on the brink of death, would survive.\(^{14}\) Alourdes’ acceptance of the *lwa*’s desire that she become a *manbo* was in part triggered by a dream experienced by her aunt. Philo dreamt of her daughter’s return a month before her actual return to Haiti; her prior dreams had led her to know that all was not well with her daughter.\(^{15}\) However, such prophecy is not exclusively between relatives. Clement Rapelle sought Philo for her healing and card-reading because the *lwa* told him to consult her in a dream, even though prior to the dream he did not know of her existence\(^{16}\).

Just as not all dreams directly involve the *lwa*, not all dreams are true. Métraux differentiates between “mere simple fantasies of the imagination” and “genuine visions”\(^{17}\). When Philo dreams of an old woman who tells her she will feed and take care of her, Philo’s neighbor laughs and dismisses it as a byproduct of “sleeping hungry”.\(^{18}\) However, it is important to note that though the neighbor doubted that it was of divine origin, she did not doubt that the dream had a physical significance.

While dreams of encouragement can be explained as expressions of latent desires, hopes, and concerns turned over to the subconscious during sleep, premonitions are less easily dismissed. Currently there are three major competing theories regarding dreams: dreams occur as a part of memory consolidation, as expectation fulfillment, or due to random firing of brain signals\(^{19}\). None of these explain dreams to a satisfactory extent, perhaps because none of these truly reflect a culture that empowers dreams.

Davis states that the European cultures began to “breed scientists” four centuries ago, and philosophizes that the scientific perspective or “manner of thinking” can be just as limiting as any other faith-based system\(^{20}\). This reflects the unwillingness of “the scientists” to accept phenomena they cannot explain – phenomena that disturb them – such as prophesy or the existence of gods, ghosts, spirits and dreams. Just as they are disturbed by dreams, scientists are disturbed by possession. Psychologists are apt to diagnose Vodouisants (but not Christians) as mytho-maniacs displaying “overwhelming psychic disturbance” and “widespread” racial pathology\(^{21}\). Anthropologists have identified 360 out of 488 societies whose religious worship contains possession, including Christianity;\(^{22}\) however this ancestry is clearly rejected as archaic and primitive.

The wary Christian view of dreams is in part due to the monotheistic and “closed” nature of the gospel. The early-Christian belief that “true” dreams must come directly from God discouraged dreams.\(^{23}\) By the Middle Ages a strong, basic mistrust of dreams was pervasive. In addition to this, “true” God-sent dreams were considered the realm of exceptionally important persons such as saints, kings, monks and select members of the clergy. Dreams were not

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\(^{13}\) To take up the *ason* is to take up the sacred rattle used to direct *lwa* and Vodou ceremonies, i.e. to become Vodou priest or priestess, a *manbo* or *oungan*.

\(^{14}\) McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola*, p160-170

\(^{15}\) McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola*, 173-176

\(^{16}\) McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola*, 204-206

\(^{17}\) Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, p144

\(^{18}\) McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola*, 209,210

\(^{19}\) “Modern Theories of Dreaming Superseded: Lecture by Joe Griffin.” Youtube Video

\(^{20}\) Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, p173-175

\(^{21}\) Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, p177-179

\(^{22}\) Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, p179

\(^{23}\) Shoulman and Stroumsa, *Dream Cultures*, p189-206
beholden to common men and certainly not to women.\textsuperscript{24} The role of dreams in the Christian culture dwindled to the point that the belief of an alternate reality discovered in dreams was considered heretical.\textsuperscript{25} Even now, the view that God frequently communicates to individuals through dreams seems to be held only by a minority of Christians. Prophesy is said to have largely ceased with or before the closure of the New Testament canon, remaining as a minor artifact among those sects which believe that Christianity is not at a “perfect state” but continues to evolve through God’s intervention.\textsuperscript{26} In this way, dreams in the Christian tradition have largely become relegated to superstition, folk-tradition, or to a more bodily Freudian interpretation.

The important role of dreams in Haitian Vodou relative to Christianity reflects profound fundamental cultural differences between the two religions, displaying the fluid and open nature of Vodou as a note-worthy contrast to Christianity’s prescriptivism and monotheism.

\textsuperscript{24} Shoulman and Stroumsa, \textit{Dream Cultures}, p276
\textsuperscript{25} Shoulman and Stroumsa, \textit{Dream Cultures}, p288
\textsuperscript{26} Hvidt, \textit{Christian Prophecy – the Post-Biblical Tradition}, p5-30 and 455-466
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