

An Investigation of the Perception of Left-Handedness in Haitian Vodou

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In many cultures, the left side has been given a bad reputation. Due to the predominance of right-handers, tools are generally perfected for right-handed use, and it becomes a tradition to use the left hand for menial tasks. In some communities, left-handers are violently persecuted. This preference is present in our vocabulary: the word ‘sinister’ comes from the Latin word meaning ‘on left hand’ (Stein, 1973). *Gauche* in French means ‘left’ but also ‘clumsy’ (Legrain, 2001). The Haitian Creole term *degrenngòch*, which is translated as “idiotic” or “half-assed”, enshrines this bias: *degrenn* means “disjointed” or “awkward”, and *gòch* means “left” (Freeman and Laguerre, 2002). Historically, left-handers have been forcibly ‘switched’ – made to write with and otherwise use their right hand as if it were their natural dominant hand. This practice continues to this day, including in the United States: a young friend of mine was ‘switched’ because her mother associated ‘left’ with the devil. Does Vodou share this repressive, ‘right-ist’ tradition, or does Vodou’s non-prescriptive nature also pertain to the perception of handedness?

In his diagram displaying the moral hierarchy between the various Vodou rites, Rigaud (1953: 161) clearly indicates the difference between ‘magic of the right hand’ or ‘good magic’, and ‘magic of the left hand’ or ‘bad magic’. This nomenclature has been carried on to the practitioners of this ‘magic’; Brown (1991: 403) defines the *bòkò* as “a sorcerer” or “one who works with both hands or the left hand”. Interestingly, *bòkò* are predominantly male. All *oungan* (and *manbo*) possess the knowledge to use mercenary spirits, but an “honest” and honorable *oungan* will not do so unless absolutely necessary for the protection of a threatened client or in dealing with criminals (Métraux, 1959: 267). *Oungan* who ‘work with both hands’ are considered suspicious and subjected to censure; such *bòkò* are believed to buy and sell mercenary spirits because the ‘good’ spirits have declined to become their patrons (Métraux, 1959: 65). Davis (1985: 96) does not consider the distinction between *oungan* and *bòkò* to be as sharp as portrayed above. In his argument, he emphasizes the importance of choice and the dichotomy inherent in Vodou ideology. Kerboul (1977: 202) points out that Haitian Vodou magic was strongly influenced by European magical traditions; if the practice of the magic bears a strong European influence, then why shouldn’t its naming?

One cannot assume the European origin of Haitian Vodou views on right and left without first considering Vodou’s African roots. In fact, as indicated by Wieschhoff (1938: 202-17), African associations on the surface are generally not unlike the European: the right side is preferred and generally associated with goodness and maleness, whereas the left is considered inferior and associated with badness and femaleness. Wieschhoff notes an exception found in the northern and eastern regions of Africa: in these places ‘left’ represents fortune, and ‘right’ misfortune. In these places as well, certain non-menial tasks are delegated to the left hand. For example, in the Congo one counts with the left hand. Wieschhoff also observes that the distribution of right-hand preferences likely reflects Islamic influence, which was established in Dahomey and the Congo approximately a thousand years before the slave-trade started. Since Islam is descended in part from the Judeo-Christian tradition, this could be considered evidence of the vast, conquering influence of Judeo-Christian ideology. However, the incompleteness of this ideological conquest mirrors the cumulative and non-prescriptive nature of Vodou. Just as the Vodou ceremony retains some Catholic prayers, some traces of earlier, more respectful and egalitarian beliefs still remain in Africa.

The Haitian Vodou perception of left-handedness should be most clearly demonstrated in its ritual and ceremonial practices. The negative symbolism of the left side may be illustrated in a conversation between Mama Lola and an African priest. Illustrating the comparative simplicity of “bad medicine”, the priest explains that one can cause intestinal pain by stepping on a wrapper from something someone ate; in his demonstration, he uses his left foot (Brown, 1991: 106). However, since *he* did not specify using the left, it may have been a gesture of convenience since even while sitting it is easier to move the non-dominant, less-supportive leg. Mama Lola performs a healing ritual in which she pumps her left leg up and down in a similar manner. Perhaps lifting the foot represents letting the illness escape from the body, but once more it is unclear whether the identity of the foot is due to anything more than convenience (Brown, 1991: 351). A much more definite example occurs during initiation: piping hot dumplings are pressed into an initiate’s left hand and foot, and they are told “Never say hot again, say strong!” (Brown, 1991: 351). This is reminiscent of a north-eastern African tribal custom for ‘curing’ a child displaying left-handedness by scalding its left hand in boiling water (Wieschhoff, 1938: 216), but without damaging effects and with a clear reference to ‘left-hand magic’.

Vodou dances clearly display a preference towards the right. In preparing to welcome Legba, the *oungan* (or *mambo*) directs the head of the family to turn around to the right, to the left, and then to the right again (Hebblethwaite, 2012: 255). Salutations also contain this right-left-right pattern (Brown, 1991:54). Dances start to the right, but may be reciprocal: in the *ibo* dance one takes two steps to the right, then two to the left (Hebblethwaite, 2012: 242-3). The *petwo* dance is characterized by outstretching the right arm while keeping the left hand on one’s hip (Hebblethwaite, 2012: 278). This may be a visual representation of phallus and annulus as the shapes made by each arm mirror in an egalitarian manner the male/female right/left association. Alternatively the right hand could be extended in greeting, demonstrating right-hand dominance – or, in exploration, in which case the left would be reserved in case of danger, indicating left-hand dominance. Beginning with rightward movements is common in dance classes throughout the world and caters to a right-handed majority who tend to feel more comfortable moving (and especially turning) towards the right. Contrastingly, the *manman tanbou* is played with the left hand and a horn stick, the *badyèt kon* in the right (2012: 164). This interesting combination requires significant coordination and, depending on the rhythm, likely gives the left hand the harder task due to the refined digital control required for manual drumming.

In general, Vodou practices seem to use a mixture of right-hand favoritism and ambidexterity, the former being more a matter of tradition and physical convenience than displaying a negative perception of ‘left’. Unfortunately, much of this data seems limited, speculative and inconclusive; further field-work on the specific topic of left-handedness in Vodou and Africa is required to form more decisive conclusions.

It remains clear that Haitian Vodou is influenced by overlapping European, Christian and Islamic views of ‘left.’ This ‘right-ist’ presence is especially evident in Vodou terminology regarding ‘good’ and ‘bad’ magic. The mixture of equality and right-hand preference in Haitian Vodou practices reflects the persistence of more-egalitarian African traditions while mirroring the practical and non-prescriptive nature of the Vodou religion.

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