The Origin of Dreams from the Haitian Vodou Perspective
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As the two major means of communication between humans and the *lwa*, dreams and possessions play crucial roles in Vodou. But what causes these dreams? How are they related to possessions?

In Vodou, the soul consists of the *gwo bonnanj* and the *ti bonnanj*. The *ti bonnanj* is one’s “individual soul or essence” (Lewis, 1995: 256), while the *gwo bonnanj* is the life-giving “divine particle” (Hebblethwaite, 2012: 242). The *ti bonnanj* is the source of personality, character and willpower, while *gwo bonnanj* is the spiritual equivalent of the body (Délita, 1988: 199), the life-force which keeps “all sentient beings” alive (Davis, 1985: 181). During dreams and possessions the *ti bonnanj* travels outside of the body. This belief that the soul literally leaves the body and experiences another world during dreams is present in “most traditional cultures” (Lewis, 1995: 256).

Dreams and premonitions are scattered throughout *Mama Lola* in a matter-of-fact manner proportionate to the value of dreams in Vodou. The child Alourdes anticipated that a dog would bite her, even though it showed no signs of unfriendliness (Brown, 1991: 214). Joseph Binbin Mauvant’s sudden disappearance was explained to his relatives in a dream (Brown, 1991: 33). Clement Rapelle was informed that Philomise would heal his son and where to find her in a dream (Brown, 1991: 204-214). All of these dreams are connected to the *lwa*, though less directly than the vision in which Èzili Danto told Philo not to persist in her attempts to abort the child who would become Alourdes (1991: 207-214). Just as Alourdes would become her mother’s spiritual successor and Rappelle would prove to be a spirit-sent means of prosperity, Alourdes’ bitten leg and subsequent disappearance served as a reminder from the *lwa* of unpaid spiritual debts. Mauvant returned to Africa, his homeland but also the spiritual homeland of Vodou.

As introduced above, the role of dreams in Haitian Vodou is very similar to that of possessions. *Lwa* communicate with humans in dreams – offering warnings, blessings and protection (Hebblethwaite, 2012: 285). The *lwa* reveal songs (2012: 36) as well as religious instruction (Brown, 1991: 77), practical knowledge and medicinal remedies. As during possession, Vodouists are concerned with the *lwa* who is present, taking little or no notice of the identity of the *chwal* (Métraux, 1959: 143-144). The dreamer, unlike the *chwal*, has the capacity to remember the dreams; as such, a *lwa* may return to clarify a message conveyed in an earlier dream (1959: 144-145). Any *lwa* can come into an initiate’s dreams to sleep with them, even if the devotee has not reserved a particular day for the *lwa* (Lomax, 2009: 130). One can be possessed during sleep (Métraux, 1959: 144). However, dreams are not necessarily caused by *lwa*. Dreams serve as a medium for communication – an in-between world in which the human and the divine spirits can meet, much like the space around the *potomitan*.

Rigaud (1953: 289-301) draws an interesting comparison between possession and chemical chain-reactions: one prepares the reactants (the people) and the conditions (the environment), and when this is done the reactions start slowly, becoming increasingly frequent. It seems that dreams in this way are not unlike possession; if one is open to their presence, one is more likely to experience them. This is supported by Métraux’s observation that people are especially reluctant to awaken an *oungan* or a *manbo* since they are especially prone to

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1 The *chwal* (literally “horse”) is the person being possessed during a possession; the *lwa* enters the head, displacing the *ti bonnanj* so as to control or “ride” the human.
communicating with the *lwa* via dreams, just as they are more frequently possessed (1959: 134). However, just as anyone could be possessed, anyone can dream. Just as a person with medical training is asked to treat illnesses, a *manbo* or an *oungan* may be asked to aide in the interpretation of dreams (Métraux, 1959: 134-146).

It is important to note that dreams in Vodou are not solely divine. Métraux (1959: 144) differentiates between “mere simple fantasies of the imagination” and “genuine visions”. Brown (1991: 209-214) describes Philo’s dream of an old woman who tells her she will feed and take care of her. Philo’s neighbor laughs and dismisses it – not as meaningless – but as a byproduct of “sleeping hungry.” Philo later learns that the old woman was Èzili Danto.

These Vodou beliefs contrast sharply with Christian dream traditions. In the Christian tradition, “true” dreams come from God, but most dreams are diabolic in origin. Dreams and prophesies were mistrusted by “good Christians”, indulged-in by “heretics” such as the Gnostics (Shoulman, 1999: 196-199). These beliefs were rooted in a trend of “domesticating” dreams and visions such that they could reflect a connection with God without conflicting with the closed cannon of the Bible (Shoulman, 1999: 195). The heretical connotations of dreaming included the denial of an otherworld discovered through dreaming (Shoulman, 1999: 288). The limitation or avoidance of dreams in the mainstream Christian traditions might reflect a sentiment that it is not for humans to know what fate has in store for them; it also reflects a cultural trend towards “rational evolution” which discarded dreams as primitive, “irrelevant, misleading, and even dangerous” (1999: 289).

Davis discusses the manners in which the scientific perspective or “manner of thinking” can be just as limiting as any other faith-based system (1985: 173-175). There remains a tendency to ascribe prophesy to hysterics, and Vodouists are dismissed by psychologists as mytho-maniacs or groups of abnormal personalities displaying “overwhelming psychic disturbance”, dual-personalities and “widespread” racial pathology. (Davis, 1985, 177-179 and Dorsainvil, 1931: 111-119). In fact, scientists have yet to discover the origins of dreaming; most scientific research addresses the physical aspects of dreaming – such as the relation of bruxism, sleep-talking, somnambulism and terrors to REM and non-REM sleep – and possible evolutionary reasons for dreaming (Green et. al., 1968).

Vodou does not seem mutually exclusive to the three major competing dream theories (dreams occur as a part of memory consolidation, as expectation fulfillment, or due to random firing of brain signals) (Griffin, 2008). However, no combination of these separate theories suffices to explain premonitions, prophesy, or factual knowledge learned within dreams. Simply discounting such phenomena as “erroneous” human interpretation due to “wish fulfillment” without thorough and reasoned investigation is unscientific, reflecting a cultural mistrust and lack of understanding regarding dreams. From a Haitian Vodou perspective, dreams originate from “voyages” of the *ti bonnanj* in an otherworld – a time, atmosphere and space in which the *lwa* can interface with humans. It is my personal opinion that such an interface may have a quantum-physical explanation, possibly involving symmetry-breaking\(^2\) and genetic inherited memory\(^3\), which has yet to be achieved by modern science.

**Works Cited**

\(^2\) For more information, see Strocchi’s “Symmetry breaking” 2nd edition (2008), compiled as a part of the *SpringerLINK Lecture Notes in Physics*.

\(^3\) For more information, see “Inheritance Beyond DNA” (2010), an interview of Wolf Reik by Nicole LeBrasseur in the *Journal of Cell Biology*, and William Walker Atkinson’s *The Subconscious and the Super Conscious: Planes of Mind* (1909).


