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Vodou in New York City
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Vodou is a significant part of Haitian folk and national culture and the Haitian diaspora. The study of any diaspora involves the study of the survival or adaption of the diasporic culture in the geographic and cultural space of the adopted land. Vodou is already a religion of the African slave diaspora in Haiti. However, it underwent a second migration with the travel of Haitians to other countries. Hebblethwaite (2012: 9-10) defines Vodou as a religion that is non-apostolic and is not prescriptive. This means that Vodou will probably have a similar, although unique, form outside of Haiti. This paper will address the presence, form, and status of Vodou in the Haitian diaspora located in New York City.

The ethnographic book by Karen Brown (1991), Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn, discusses the larger Haitian community of Brooklyn, New York, the presence and nature of Vodou, and the response to it by members of both the Haitian and non-Haitian communities in the area. Mama Lola’s status is important in maintaining the survival of Haitian Vodou. As a manbo (Vodou priestess), Mama Lola serves the lwa and is the leader of a group of Vodouists in the area. Her gatherings are small and intimate; there are around 30 people that attend her ceremonies and rituals and most of these people are family members or close friends (1991: 4). Her altar room and ritual space is in her basement, which is a contrast to the mostly outdoor space where Vodou is practiced in the Haitian countryside. Additionally, Mama Lola’s work predominately deals with consulting with clients and serving them as a healer rather than as a priestess. To highlight the differences of Vodou practiced within the state of New York, Brown also discusses the different temples of other New York Vodou practitioners. Even though there are some who rent out large spaces to conduct ceremonies, most of the Vodou practitioners practice within their homes and have rather conservative ceremonies (1991: 4). Drums are a significant part of a Vodou ceremony, but in Brooklyn, drums are expensive and draw attention — which Mama Lola tries to avoid because of the negative images of Vodou held by many in the United States (1991: 4). This illustrates how the negative perceptions of Vodou complicate Haitians’ ability to fully follow and practice their religion in the United States.

The image of Vodou in New York City is an important issue because it affects the way that Haitians can practice their religion. Bettina Schmidt (2003) addresses the presence of Vodou in New York and how it has adapted to the area. Haitian Vodou has a similar history of migration and creolization to that of the people who practice it. Schmidt (2003) writes that the regime of Francois Duvalier and his son caused many Haitians to flee Haiti for political asylum in the United States. However because of a complicated history with the United States, many Americans viewed Haitians in a suspicious and negative light (Schmidt 2003). Vodou seems to have survived the acculturation into American culture. Schmidt mentions that Haitians of “first, second, and third migrant generation practice Vodou in New York…” meaning that even those who are American-born still serve the lwa. As mentioned before, Vodou is a not a prescriptive religion and as Schmidt also mentions, it is a religion that is fluid in adapting to its new surroundings. An example of this is Mama Lola. She practices out of her basement without the drums traditionally used in ceremonies. Within the Haitian community, Vodou seems to be a significant part of their lives in New York. Outside of the Haitian community, it is viewed as a curiosity, negative or positive. Sometimes it is a serious curiosity which attracts outsiders who are in need of help, such as African-Americans who have taken to Ifa healing practices for
mental health problems (Ashby 2011). Ifa is of Yoruba origin and is associated with divination and healing within Vodou, where it is known as Fa (Hebblethwaite, 2012: 235). Despite the positive aspects of Vodou, such as healing, Vodou is still seen as a malevolent religion in the American cultural mindset (Schmidt 2003).

Kate Ramsey gives us a possible origin of this negative viewpoint that stems from the book *Voodoo Fire in Haiti* by Richard Loederer and was distributed in Europe and North America (2002: 11). Literature like this and other sources of media have constantly depicted Vodou as being a religion of “fetish dolls, zombies, and diabolic practices” as described by Schmidt (2003).

However, Schmidt believes that this image is slowly changing as evidenced by the “Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou” exhibition in the American Museum of Natural History in New York. The exhibition was a success. It educated the audience about what Vodou truly is; challenging the often “exotic” ideas that many speculators had (Schmidt 2003). However, Schmidt critiques the exhibition claiming that even though it did a lot of good, it still had its faults in its presentation. The presentation mostly ignored the fact that there are many Vodou practitioners in New York and chose to import a priest from Haiti rather than having one from Brooklyn. The marginalization of Haitians and Vodou within New York is highlighted. However, there may be other reasons for this oversight, such as communication issues between the museum and the Haitian community. Even though Vodou is still widely practiced within the Haitian diaspora in New York and there have been efforts to educate people about the true nature and form of Vodou, it is still viewed with xenophobia in America.
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Dancing, along with singing and drumming, is a fundamental part of Haitian Vodou ritual ceremonies. Just as how the songs and the drums have a spiritual function and reflect a creolized heritage, dance holds a similar value in Vodou. As a religion that is kinesthetic in nature, dance is part of the physical manifestation of serving the lwa. Dance is not only an important part of Haitian Vodou but also of Haitian culture, in which there are two types of dance: secular and sacred (Dunham 1947: 15). For the purpose of this paper, the sacred dance will be addressed.

Many anthropologists have studied ritual dances in the African diaspora of the Caribbean. Through the studies of dance in Haitian Vodou, the connection to spirituality and memory provided to the community through dance and music in Vodou ceremonies is evident. The community is a key element in Vodou ceremonies. Hebblethwaite argues that Vodou songs are important because they are the “living memory of a Vodou community” (2012: 2). Dance holds the same importance in preserving this “living memory.” Vodou songs educate about the lwa and the philosophy of Vodou and they signal the transitions between phases of the ceremony. Dance in Vodou also educates about the lwa and philosophy and through careful study of the different dances, one may also understand how dances change in the different phases of the ceremony.

Before getting into the study of dances, the importance of drums must be addressed. Wilcken (2005) describes the drums as providing the fuel and guidance to the dance participants. The different rhythms of the drums, not only signal the song that is being sung but also the dance that should be done at that moment in time (Wilcken 2005: 195).

Dunham’s ethnographic work on Vodou dance gives us an excellent account as to the organization and form of dance in ceremonies. A Vodou ceremony has two parts in chronological order: a Rada rite and a Petwo-Kongo rite. Dunham (1947) observes that the Rada-Dahomey service begins with a danza zépaules, which purifies and prepares for the arrival of the lwa. This dance is usually accompanied by songs sung to Legba and then to the other lwa. The rest of the dances in the ceremony are determined by the type of lwa that are to be worshipped that night. These dances are called rele lwa which mean to call or summon a lwa. These dances are different than other dances because they are dances of possession. They symbolically reflect the lwa possessing the individual. (Dunham 1947: 49-50).

Yanvalou is one such dance. Dunham (1947: 50) describes yanvalou as the dance for a general group of lwa that include Ayida Wèdo, Èzili, Saint Jacques, and Gede. However, both Daniel and Wilcken describe the yanvalou dance as a dance that mimics a snake’s movement and is thus dedicated to “Papa Danbala” (Daniel 2005: 8-9; Wilcken 2005: 195). Dunham does make a distinction for “Danbala” having his own dance that is stylized after him as the “snake god” (2005: 50). However, after viewing videos of yanvalou dances on the internet, it may easily be determined that the yanvalou dance is really for Danbala due to the movements of the body and arms that mimic a snake (UFlibraries). Dunham gives us another example with Agwe whose dances are in flowing movements: half-swimming, half-waves (1947: 51). These examples demonstrate, as Daniel (2005) argues, that the purpose of ritual dance is to transform the community in such a way that the spirits will appear.

Not only is it important for the lwa to appear at the ceremony, it is also a reflection of the “living memory” mentioned before. Daniel (2005) also goes into detail about “embodied
knowledge” which is comparable. Daniel’s example of embodied knowledge is in the dance for the lwa Ogou. Ogou’s dance involves “aggressive warrior stances, rigorous travelling movement sequences, and an emphasis on slicing or cutting with a sword or some sort of metal.” (2005: 63). Through the dance of Ogou, the audience is reminded as to who Ogou is; his representation as a warrior, and his association with iron. Brown also describes the possession of Mama Lola by Ogou and the dance that was performed (2001: 95). She describes his gestures as elegant, which speaks to the power that he embodied as the warrior.

The ideas of “living memory” and “embodied memory” are reflected even within the cultural history and structure of the dances. Wilcken translates Moreau’s description of the dances as being from Africa in their characteristics (2005: 197). As mentioned before, Rada and Petwo-Kongo are the two main parts of a Vodou ceremony. Rada is the remembrance and worshipping of the lwa originating in the Dahomian region. Petwo-Kongo includes the lwa originating from Africa in the Kongo and Angola regions. It is different from Rada because some of the lwa it includes also originate in Haiti. (Hebblethwaite 2012: 278, 282).

Three different dance styles make up the dances of Rada. The zèpòl which means “shoulders” is a move featuring fast pushing of the shoulders back and forth. The mayi is a fast paced three step pattern dance with agricultural influences. These two dances, along with the yanvaloulou addressed earlier, make up the Rada dances (Daniel 2005: 111-112).

The Petwo dances are considered more powerful than Rada. The steps are violent and include the thrusting of the chest and the high lifting of legs to create tense stances and fast-paced running and jumping (Daniel 2005: 114). Dunham describes the Petwo ceremony to be more violent and negative while the Rada ceremonies are beneficent and positive (1947: 66-57). Though her descriptions may be extreme in calling one negative and the other positive, she does highlight the difference between the ceremonies and the dances: the Rada dances are more calm and orderly than the fiery Petwo dances.

Dance is an integral part of the Vodou ritual ceremony. By studying the nuances of the dances involved in a ceremony, one may understand how the dances, drums, and songs are interrelated. With all of these components, it becomes clear that Vodou is a layered religion in terms of its complex history and culture.
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The Religion to Beat: A Look at the Importance of Drums in Vodou
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In Vodou ceremonies the reverberating beats of the drums help those present to let their bodies go to the rhythms and make their bodies and minds receptive to the lwa. To an outsider the powerful drums might appear to cause people to dance insensibly (Wilcken 2005: 193). But to a Vodouist, ritual dancing is integral to life and to be without it would be insensible. Vodouists exalt ounto in all meanings of the word: the drums, the drummer and the lwa that represent the drums (Hebblethwaite 2012: 34).

Drums are not necessary for possession but they do provide music to dance to and “get down with the spirits” (Wilcken 2005: 194). Traditionally Vodou music includes percussion but for example in pop Vodou music, otherwise known as rasin or “roots”, uses other instruments as well (Hebblethwaite 2012: 31). A lot of energy is necessary to bring forth the lwa and to allow the chwal to enter trance and the drums can help to instill some of this energy in the crowd (Wilcken 2005: 195). In Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn, Mama Lola tries to keep her ceremonies quiet so clapping is used for rhythm keeping (Brown 2001: 136). This in no way diminishes the power of the ceremonies. The author, Brown (2001: 61), describes a certain ceremony where Mama Lola was “playing on our energies as if we were her musical instrument.”

Vodou rites take place at night and can include nine hours of non-stop drumming, dancing and singing in order to serve the spirits (Landry 2008: 54). The drummers pound away and the dancers dance around the potomitan in the hopes one of them will be chosen as a chwal and mounted by the lwa (Hebblethwaite 2012:24). Each Vodou rhythm produces an “anti-rhythm” called a kase, or “break” in Creole. At some point during the rite, the lead drummer will begin a beat that goes against the current beat. This under cutting beat can physically disorient the dancer for a moment, which can lead to mounting by the lwa (Wilcken 2005: 195). This break in rhythm is called a break instead of a pause because dancing continues on through the kase as the dancers reorient themselves. These moments of rupture in rhythm are actually more representative of a change in the direction of the music and the dancer, which is why the songs seem to flow smoothly despite the breaks in rhythm. The songs progress forward in phases in a zig-zag moving toward possession as the people dance in a circular motion around the potomitan (Laroche 1992:800-801). The rhythm may cease but it is in these moments when human and spiritual activities intensify.

At every ceremony individual spirits are beckoned for by performing a series of three or seven songs in strict order based on what rhythms would normally go along with that spirit (Brown 2001: 55). The song both calls forth the specific lwa and also expresses what is desired of the lwa (Hebblethwaite 2012:31). There are different rhythms associated with Rada, Kongo-Petwo rites but all of them demonstrate unique complex rhythms played simultaneously. Yanvalou (which can be associated with a group of spirits), twarigol mayi and zepòl are all Rada rhythms typified by regular ongoing rhythms. Typical Rada drums are made from hard wood, with cow skin tops tied down by stakes. They include the big ount or manman tanbou (the mother drum), the medium ounto or segon (second), and the small ountoki or boula played with a curved stick and a straight stick. The deep tones of the mother drum ease tensions and allow for submission to the lwa but it is the kase that literally breaks the rhythm open so that the lwa may enter.
Kongo-Petwo drums are made from soft wood and goatskin and the rhythms are more fierce and stirring and consist of *kita*, *sech*, *kita mouve*, *boumba* and *kingo sosyete*. In Petwo rites two drums are used: the *ti baka* or little goblin and the *gwo baka* or big goblin. In Kongo and Rada rites there are typically three drums used, but for ceremonies of mass proportions several drums may be used (Hebblethwaite 2012: 33).

The drums create entrancing rhythms that give the dancer the opportunity to give into the rhythms and separate from the physical body while the noise of the shaking *ason* is meant to persuade the spirits into taking over the physical bodies (Brown 2001: 69). The *ason* is a rhythm instrument that when shaken by an *oungan* or *manbo* appeases the *lwa* through the sound of the porcelain beads and snake vertebrae strung together clashing against a calabash gourd (Hebblethwaite 2012: 32). In this way, the drums create an environment of dancers lost in the music, receptive to possession; an offer a *lwa* can hardly refuse (Hebblethwaite 2012: 31). The drums and the *ason* are both mediums utilized by practitioners, priests, and priestesses to speak to and learn from the lwa.

At a ritual, Landry (2008: 54) observed the vigor of the drummers and the complexity of the rhythms they created. He describes how the throbbing drums eventually reverberated throughout every person and item in the temple until they all moved as one being with the drums beating as the heart (Landry 2008:55). But it is not necessary for all to move as one, there is no set way to dance (Laroche 1992: 800). In Vodou, traditions are not set in stone, they are just now being put into writing. Vodou is a religion that is open to interpretation and creolization so the number of drums, the type of drums, and other various details vary as much as the drummers who play them. But, the tradition of drum playing and the use of the *kase* as a way to trigger possession are traditions that will not easily be broken.
Bibliography


Vodou: A Religion that words cannot describe?
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Vodou is a non-prescriptive religion without a written moral code or strict definition. There is no complete written history of Vodou practitioners. Several reasons serve to explain the scarcity of religious texts in Vodou. This quality has not always benefitted the reputation of Vodou but writing about Vodou in a way that accurately depicts the culture and history is no easy task.

The histories of Haiti and Vodou are inextricably linked and as such, both contain periods of silence (Dubois 2001:95). When slaves were brought to Haiti from Africa they were forbidden from writing or documenting and so their history was not recorded in the way Western thinking believes it should have been. This reflects a substantial difference between the oppressor and the oppressed: white Euro-American culture is concerned with the accuracy of the record Vodouists are more concerned with the vitality and retention of their history (Brown 2001: 19). Over time, the elders have passed on the practice of Vodou to their children (Hebblethwaite 2012: 1). The histories have been passed down orally through stories, memorized songs and revelation through the lwa. Dayan (1995:35) describes possessions as “rituals of history.” Another way to retain memories is through association with a landmark like a found altar that will remain and serve as a reminder of the past (Dayan 1994:13). Through serving the spirits, a history and morality has been created that cannot be found in books (Dayan 1994: 12). However, it is specifically because of this unique history that the silence about Vodou and Haiti should be broken (Dubois 2001: 95).

Because there wasn’t a codified text associated with the religion until Max Beauvoir’s book in 2008, it has been easier for writers and directors to embellish, exaggerate and even fabricate customs of Vodou. For example, one of the contributions to the negative stigma attached to Vodou is Wade Davis’s book-turned-horror movie directed by Wes Craven: “The Serpent and the Rainbow” which shows practitioners engaging in black magic to turn people into zombies (Dubois 2001: 93). Things like voodoo dolls and black magic give the false impression of knowledge (Cosentino 1996: 8). Scholars since the 1990’s have attempted to dismiss the reputation that has haunted Vodou. Such is the case with the term “Vodou” itself. New scholarship spurred the change from the negatively associated term “voodoo” to “Vodou” which is more similar to the Creole pronunciation (Dubois 2001: 93).

This is not to say that complete disclosure of Vodou customs would settle any disapproval people have with the culture. Certain customs, rituals, or practices of Vodou could certainly make some people cringe. Donald Cosentino (1996) writes of his experience with opening up “Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou” in UCLA’s Fowler museum. The painting Mardigras at Fort Dimanche by Edouard Duval-Carrie depicts the Duvailer family and their attendants in the torture chamber dressed in black with black sunglasses: the markers of the tonton makout. Baby Doc dons a frilly dress and bears a pistol in his left hand. But most shocking are three bleeding hands nailed to the wall and a fourth hand clearly sticking out of Mama Simone’s (Papa Doc’s widow) basket (Cosentino 1996: 8). This painting sparked debate because it might contribute to the stereotype of human sacrifice. Mama Lola, a well-known and highly respected Vodou healer and expert said the painting must be included because it showed it “just the way it was” (Cosentino 1996: 8, 10).

One way of trying to represent Vodou is through the lyrics of the songs of the religion. The volume and diversity of the songs of Vodou offer a great look into the past and present of Vodou because the songs change as the people and circumstances change and they tell the story in the voices of the
practitioners themselves (Hebblethwaite 2012:3). Even though some of these songs have been written down and translated, the songs are constantly being composed, altered and forgotten as the community in which they are sung evolves. (Hebblethwaite 2012:2) But even once these songs are put into writing they do not convey the powerful drums or the intensity of a possession (Hebblethwaite 2012:5). Perhaps it is because the spirits of Vodou cannot be understood in and confined to literary form (Dayan 1994:18). Possession must be experienced for full understanding and cannot be adequately captured by merely observing and recording.

In *Mama Lola: A Priestess in Brooklyn* Karen McCarthy Brown tells the stories of five generations of Mama Lola’s family of healers. In this book Brown allows herself to become personally involved in Vodou to gain the full “depth of understanding” despite conventional ideas about remaining objective as an anthropologist. However even this understanding can only speak to her own experiences and interactions with Vodou (Brown 2001: 11). She goes on further to say that being able to blend and interact with a culture is different from being able to write about that culture (Brown 2001: 13). Even after 35 years of friendship with Alourdes Brown still knows that the stories Alourdes has told her cannot be replicated in written text (Brown 2001: 17).

Even though scholars have made great strides in the documentation of the history of Vodou, the record will never be fixed entirely because as a revelatory religion things change at a quick pace (Dayan 1994: 16). Any Vodou writings can only be understood in their context. The religion is not codified so the religion adapts to the people and circumstances that surround and interact with it to maintain harmony. Vodou is constantly changing as the people who serve the spirits and the spirits themselves continue to develop. Vodou is a way of life and is lived differently by each and every practitioner and only through personal involvement in the Vodou culture through possession, ritual, and song can scholars hope to shed light on the mysteries of Vodou.
Bibliography


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 mét têt 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 mét têt 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 mét têt 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 mét têt 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 mét têt 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 mét têt 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


Possession
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One of the most intriguing aspects of Haitian Vodou is the role that possession plays in both the Haitian culture and in the Vodou religion. This paper will discuss the differences between how Haitians view possession and how many people in the American culture view it. A good place to begin is exploring how possession is brought on in the Vodou context and why it takes place. The last thing to cover will be the effects that possession events have on the well-being of not only the individual being possessed but also on the community.

What is most interesting about how possession is viewed is the difference between American and Haitian cultural views. To practitioners of Vodou, ceremonial possession is a desired event. In American culture, especially that of Hollywood's Catholicism, possession is most often seen as a highly negative event requiring exorcism of some force, which is often labeled as a demon. Although possession is not always appropriate in Vodou, one example being the possession of children mentioned by Brown (1991: 252), it is usually not harmful to the person and is easily handled by the oungan or manbo who sends the lwa away with a shake of their ason (rattle) (Hebblethwaite 2012: 32). This is much different from the Hollywood presentation of someone being forcefully taken over by a demon that refuses to leave. There are ideas related to good possessions, such as having the Holy Spirit come to reside inside of a person, but for the most part, the two cultures have an almost opposite view of possession.

The act of becoming possessed in Haitian Vodou culture can be a time consuming process due to the need to echofe or to “heat things up” (Brown 1991: 362). The act of heating up is very important to get the people in the ceremony into the correct mind set to be able to receive the lwa. There are two main methods of reaching this state of mind, sensory deprivation and overload.

Sensory overload is most common in Vodou and involves the use of music and rhythm to induce trance (Lewis 2003: 5). Several items play an important part for this in Haiti, the decorations, the ason, the drums, and the songs. The first step is to set the ceremonial area with the proper decorations. The appropriate colors must be hung up around the ceremonial area, the appropriate foods that the lwa to be celebrated enjoys most must be placed on the altar, and the vèvè or the artistic symbol which represents a lwa, must be traced, which is most commonly done on the ground with cornmeal or other powdered foods. This preparation contributes to possession by putting the lwa being served into the minds of the people there. This is when the Vodou leader begins the Vodou ceremony with a shake of the ason, the mystical rattle of the oungan or manbo. After Legba, the guardian of gates and crossroads, is celebrated, the music of the lwa that is being celebrated begins. The practitioners sing, dance, and provide libations to the lwa.

This is where the ason, the drums and the songs come into play. Vodou music features a repetitive beat composed of a mix of the drums, the ason, and the kloch (cowbell). This
reinforces the cyclical nature of the Vodou songs and is very important to reaching a dissociative state of mind. This is a state of detachment in which two streams of consciousness can occur simultaneously and it is required for possession. Dissociation is an altered state of consciousness in which the identity of one's self is altered and now represents that of another (Bourguignon 2004: 3). After a while, the repetition of the music, songs and dancing will create a state of mind where one is highly susceptible to possession by spirits. The whole ceremony works together to create an atmosphere in which possession is not only acceptable, but is desired.

In Haitian culture, possession can serve many purposes which lead to an enhancement of the physical well-being of the individual and the community. The act of holding a ceremony, becoming possessed, and sharing this experience with others of the same community leads to social bonding in which the participants unite as a family. This family works to take care of each other in hard times, leading to a collectively higher emotional and physical well-being. This has several health implications including lowering stress, something that is highly prevalent in Haiti and often exhibited in women who don't have much power in their lives (Bourguignon 2004: 1).

Possession also seems to be utilized as a coping mechanism and a way to express and understand the chaos in their lives (Wallace 1995: 5). This is an important aspect for many Haitians because of the poverty and hardship that they have to deal with every day. One example, is the occurrence of possession in children who were taken away from their parents while attempting to enter the United States. In this situation, possessions occurred as a means of emotionally coping with the children’s fear and powerlessness (Brown 1991: 252). Also important are the characteristics associated with the lwa. These characteristics are highly applicable to people of Haiti because they represent diverse emotions, help to explain things that are happening to them, and provide a social reference point. The lwa help the people make decisions in their everyday lives and work to bring out the better attributes of the individual (Brown 1991: 254).


Applications of Scapegoat Theory to Haitian Vodou
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Throughout human history, differences in cultures and appearances have been attributed to intrinsic spiritual evil and more recently to genetic inferiority. These prejudices often lead to the creation of scapegoats, people or groups of people that bear the blame for the plights of others and for society’s problems. Haitian Vodou and its practitioners are no exception to this pattern. Followers of Vodou have suffered frequent persecution since the Haitian Revolution in 1791. This paper will explore the disapprobation of Haitian Vodou through the lens of Scapegoat Theory.

Scapegoat Theory

The term scapegoat originated in the Old Testament; it refers to a goat that received a symbolic transfer of the sins of the Jewish people, and was then used as a sacrifice to gain atonement (Scapegoat, 2012). Scapegoat theory, also called the frustration-aggression theory of prejudice, encompasses a similar pattern of human behavior in which a minority group, falsely held responsible for some individual or societal problem, is mistreated and ostracized. Scapegoat theory posits that prejudiced individuals harbor aggression that is not, or cannot be, directed at the appropriate source, and instead redirect it toward a weaker minority group (Lindzey 1950: 296).

Scapegoat theory has some conceptual roots in Freudian defense mechanisms, which are cognitive methods utilized to defend an individual from anxiety caused by internal or external events that conflict with positive self-view (Cramer 1987: 597-598 ). For example, a person who views himself or herself as superior in intelligence may resolve the dissonance caused by failing an exam by judging the exam to be unfair. Displacement is a defense mechanism that occurs when an individual changes the target of an emotion or impulse because the original target is inappropriate or threatening to self-perception (Baumeister 1998: 1093). In the previous example, when the test-taker chooses to blame their failure on the quality of the exam, rather than their own study methods, they are displacing blame onto the test-writer and thus protecting their self-image. Scapegoat creation is a direct implication of this mechanism; the person or group shouldered with blame is weaker or less threatening than the actual cause.

Prejudice and scapegoat creation are found and studied in groups as large as countries and as small as families. A family, like any society, organizes itself around overarching expectations and defined roles for members. A child who deviates from the norm or reminds family members of their shortcomings may become a scapegoat (Wright 1988: 35). Vogel and Bell (1964), utilize the example of a set of parents with unresolved issues concerning their own level of intellectual ability who then spurn their least intellectual child. The parents neglect or reject this child because he or she is a reminder to the parents of their own intellectual uncertainty. The practice of scapegoating also occurs in much larger groups; some common conflicts being those between cultures or countries.

Hovland and Sears (1940) wrote a seminal paper on the relationship between economic troubles and the lynching of African-American males in the American South. They found a predictive relationship, indicating that the fall of cotton prices correlated with a rise in the number of lynchings between the years of 1882 and 1930. The results of this study display a clear example of scapegoating; when cotton prices fell, farmers experienced frustration and aggression that they channeled toward black males (Baumeister 1998: 1094). An example of a scapegoat utilized by
societies across time is the Jewish people; ironically, the creators of the term are one of the
groups most frequently persecuted. From the evil collector of the European Middle Ages, to the
genetic plight of Jewish people in World War II-era Germany, the history of the Jewish
scapegoat is both varied and tragic.
Haitian Vodou shares some similar history with Judaism; they both have suffered harsh
castigation and censorship by Christian powers. The subjugation of the Jewish in Spain under
Ferdinand and Isabella, and the concealment of Jewish rituals during and after the Spanish
Inquisition are very similar to the history of Vodou in Haiti. Upon their arrival in the French
colony of Saint-Domingue, which would later become Haiti, African slaves underwent forced
conversion to Catholicism. However, through subversion and camouflage behind the names and
iconography of Catholic Saints, the slaves were able to continue the practice of their native
religion under the guise of Catholic worship (Hebblethwaite 2012: 8). It is important to note, that
Vodou is unique from most western religions in that it is malleable and rules are rarely set in
stone. The rituals and practices of Vodou change with the needs of its followers, so the slaves
were able to shift the religion to cope with their new environment and servitude (Brown 1991:
100). The religion survives and remains relevant across shifts in power and circumstance because
each generation fits Vodou to their unique needs.

Scapegoat Theory and Haitian Vodou

Since the Haitian Revolution, beginning in 1791, Haiti has seen many occupations and misuses
of governmental power. Frequently, Vodou has served as a scapegoat for the problems that have
plagued Haitian society. Vodou practitioners have served as the “whipping boys” for everything
from natural disasters to the spread of diseases. The Haitian government, Catholic Church,
United States Marines, and more recently Protestant televangelists and missionary workers have
enforced the status of Vodouists as pariahs.
The government of Haiti officially sanctioned the vilification of Vodou beginning in 1835 with
the passage of a ban in the Code Pénal of any type of sortilège, or spell making (Ramsey 2005:
167). Article 405 of the Code Pénal states that spell or charm making was punishable by up to
six months in jail and a fine of 16-25 gourds. Article 406 made the selling of fortune telling,
reading cards, or interpreting dreams punishable by six days to one month in jail and a fine of
16-25 gourds. Article 407 legalized the confiscation of all tools and garments used in the acts
forbidden in the preceding acts (Ramsey 2011: 58-59). The enforcement of these laws by Haitian
governments fluctuated. However, during the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915-1934, the
Marines strictly enforced the bans. Following the passage of these laws, self-appointed “saints”
violeantly enforced the laws in the name of Catholicism and morality (Ramsey 2011: 74). The
1835 laws, made stronger and more restrictive by an 1864 revision, remained in the Code Pénal
for over 150 years (Ramsey 2011: 1). Haiti recognized Vodou as an official religion in 2003;
however, this has not put an end to prejudice against Vodouists. The influx of missionary groups
into Haiti, particularly after the earthquake in 2010, has once again increased tensions.

Protestantism in Haiti

Protestant missionaries have been present in Haiti for the last 100 years (Germain 2011: 250).
Missionary workers are the subjects of controversy within Haiti and in other struggling nations.
The presence of Protestant missions brings many short-term benefits: monetary aid, food and
supplies, and volunteers to build schools and hospitals. However, controversy stems from the missionaries’ religious motivations and intentions of conversion. The systems of healthcare and education that missionaries build and manage often follow ethical principles that differ greatly from the society in which these structures exist (Germain 2011: 258-259). While the importance of aid should not be underplayed, the consequences of Christian mission work warrants examination as well. An example of a dispute about the value of mission work is the curriculum in mission schools. Schools established by Protestant groups undoubtedly serve the vital purpose of increasing literacy in developing nations, however, substantial resources and hours are devoted to Bible study (Germain 2011: 253). Much debate takes place about whether it is appropriate to cause impoverished parents to choose between sending their children to school and respecting their ancestral beliefs.

Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestantism have enjoyed growing popularity in Haiti since the 1970’s (McAlister 2005: 252). In the past, Haitians did not consider the growth of Protestantism threatening because Vodou is a xenophilic religion, as demonstrated by the common saying that all Haitians are 85 percent Catholic, 15 percent Protestant, and 100 percent Vodou (Germain 2011: 251). This is changing. Now, the growth of evangelical movements accompanies increasing tensions between the two religious groups. Many Protestants believe that there is a “spiritual war” being fought in Haiti, pitting Christians against Vodou (Butler 2008: 26). Protestant leaders characterize Vodou as a depraved and satanic religion. According to these leaders, the Devil uses the lwa, or “false gods”, to possess Vodouists in order to corrupt and control communities (McAlister 2005: 252).

As the size of the missionary presence in Haiti has grown, so too has the population of Haitians who identify solely as Christians and sever ties with Vodou. This may have long-reaching cultural consequences, as Vodou is deeply rooted in Haitian life and identity. Vodou priests and priestesses provide small, rural societies as spiritual and community leaders. Haitian women also utilize Vodou to gain opportunities for fiscal independence and community leadership in male-dominated Haiti (Brown 1991: 156-157). Many women in Haiti make their living as readers of fortunes and dreams, healers, and manbo (priestesses). Thus, increased missionary presence, and the resultant move from Vodou to Christianity may disrupt the female paths to empowerment found in Vodou.

Protestant aid organizations view the troubles that Haiti has experienced both past and present as the result of Vodou’s connection with the Devil. They believe that rejection of the Devil and conversion to Christianity can set Haiti on a righteous path toward prosperity (McAlister 2005: 253-254). The recognition of Vodou as one of Haiti’s official religions in 2003 has not reversed this perception of Vodou as dangerous or prevented its denigration. In recent years, Vodou become a scapegoat for many natural disasters in Haiti, especially for the earthquake in January 2010.

Haitian Vodou as Scapegoat for Natural Disasters

The strife caused by natural disasters often leads to increased religious activity and conversion, and such was the case in Haiti after many of the tragedies suffered during the first decade of the new century (Germain 2011: 255). During 2008 alone, Haiti endured Hurricanes Fay, Gustav, Hanna, and Ike, and then an earthquake on January 12, 2010. The earthquake destroyed many cities, including the capital, Port-au-Prince; over 200,000 people died and about 1.3 million people were displaced. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (2011) illuminates the true
magnitude of these numbers by placing them in proportion with the United States population, similar numbers in the U.S. would be over 600,000 deaths and 110 million people displaced. The emotional trauma caused by such rampant destruction led many to turn to religion for both aid and explanation.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, blame for the disaster fell upon Vodou and its followers. Televangelist Pat Robertson commented that Haiti brought the earthquake upon itself because of a pact made with the Devil (Bellegarde-Smith 2011: 267). Robertson referred to the famous Vodou ceremony, Bwa Kayiman, held on August 14, 1791, at which Boukman Duty summoned the lwa to help fight the Haitian Revolution. (Hebblethwaite 2012: 47). Robertson claimed that those present made a pact with the devil to liberate the slaves from their French holders (Bellegarde-Smith 2011: 267). Robertson has gained some infamy for blaming disasters upon “sinners.” In 1998, he warned participants in a Gay Pride Festival in Orlando, Florida, that they might be in the path of hurricanes sent by God. Similarly, after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, Robertson blamed the storm upon legalized abortion (Friedman 2011). His remarks about Haiti’s pact with the devil were echoed on Protestant media outlets; even secular journalists wrote about Vodou in a sensationalized manner. (Bellegarde-Smith 2011: 267-268).

Scapegoat theory and defense mechanisms are directly applicable to situations such as these. Placing the blame for natural phenomenon on chance is more threatening to an individual’s perception of an orderly world than shifting fault to an unfamiliar religion or a minority group. Protestant Haitians also engaged in the scapegoating of Vodou. After the earthquake, Vodou practitioners suffered physical and verbal abuse, the destruction of ritual items, and disruption of ceremonies. Many Vodouists converted to Christianity because of fears that religious organizations would deny practitioners of Vodou aid (Dodd 2010). On February 23, 2010, crowds threw stones at Vodouists who were holding a ceremony for those killed by the earthquake (Dodd 2010). The crowd also urinated on Vodou symbols, destroyed food offerings, and dismantled an altar.

The defense mechanism called displacement may partially explain the scapegoating of Vodou after the earthquake. An earthquake is not something that can be blamed in any way that would be cathartic for its victims. The pervasive use of scapegoats, like Judaism and Vodou, across time demonstrates a darker side of human nature. Although discriminatory and erroneous, punishing Vodouists and assigning them with fault for Haiti’s tribulations provides emotional relief and a feeling of control to the majority of a country struggling with unfathomable loss.
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Status of Twins in Yorùbá and Haitian Society and Religion

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The existence of twins has provoked curiosity and interest across numerous societies and cultures. From the twin Greek gods Artemis and Apollo, to the Old Testament twin brothers Jacob and Esau, it often falls to religion to explain the twins relationship to each other and the rest of society. Among African religions, this explanation has varied throughout different periods, and continues to be a focus in rituals today. Haitian Vodou is a cultural descendant of many traditional African societies, including the Dahomian and Yorùbá peoples. This paper will examine beliefs about twins in Yorùbá and Haitian society and religion. I have juxtaposed these societies to demonstrate how traditional African beliefs have evolved both within Africa and upon transport to the New World. Acknowledgement of the continued influence of African culture on the Caribbean culture is important for placing Caribbean traditions in their appropriate context. The status of twins is a good demonstration of this enduring connection, as Haitian, Yorùbá, and Fon societies share a similar appreciation for twins. Academics have characterized Yorùbá enthusiasm for twins as a “cult of twins,” and Vodouists consider twins a sacred gift. Comparison of the ritual and mythology surrounding twins in both societies reveals the role of Yorùbá traditions in modern Haitian Vodou.

The Yorùbá are one of the largest ethnolinguistic groups in Nigeria, with a population of about 20 million people residing in the Southwest (Yoruba, 2012). During the forced removal of African slaves and their subsequent dispersion, the culture and religion of the Yorùbá people spread to regions of South America and the Caribbean. This influence, while strong in Cuban Santeria, is also visible in Haitian Vodou (Fandrich 2007: 775-776). Nago is an identification used by slave traders to denote slaves from the Yorùbá region of Africa and the Nago family of spirits derives from the Yorùbá (Hebblethwaite 2012: 269).

The perception of twins in Yorùbá society has vacillated across time from hatred and prohibition to adulation. While most information about this shift comes from oral histories, the general account begins with an ancient prohibition in the Yorùbá region of Oyo against twins that resulted in the common practice of infanticide, most frequently by exposure to the elements (Renne 2001: 64). In the neighboring kingdom on Dahomey, a once rising economic and political power, the community gave gifts to the parents of twins, which eventually made them very rich. Yorùbá immigrants to Dahomey gained exposure to this belief in the luck of twins and subsequent economic benefits for the parents (Chappel 1974: 252-253). Gradually, the Dahomian twin traditions spread, the prohibition against the birth of twins ended, and the “cult of twins” developed. This shift likely occurred between 1650 and 1800, a peak time for the Atlantic Slave trade, when Yorùbá people brought their beliefs and traditions to Haiti and Cuba (Chappel 1974: 256).

Many academic fields study Yorùbá beliefs about twins because the Yorùbá people possess the highest birthrate of fraternal twins in the world (Leroy 2002: 132). According to Yorùbá mythology, twins share a soul and the death of one twin greatly endangers the other; as a result, the care of twins requires a great deal of attention (Leroy 2002: 134). It is widely believed that having twins will bring a family happiness and good fortune; however, the mercurial nature of twins can cause a family great strife. This powerful dichotomy results in leniency with twins and the displays of great reverence and respect for twins.
There are a complex set of rituals observed upon the birth of twins and throughout their lifecycle. These ceremonies include the naming ceremony, which occurs seven days after birth. During the naming ceremony, twins are dressed in matching clothes, and all of the twins in the community and their families are invited (Renne 2001: 68-69). Twin ceremonies, like Vodou ceremonies, require certain foods and clothes. The twins will also be dedicated to the god, Orisha, who will provide special protection. (Leroy 2002: 134) Twins marry on the same day, and at the ceremony they wear the same clothes and eat the same foods. All of these rituals serve the purpose of emphasizing the shared soul of twins (Renne 2001: 68-69).

Similarly, in Haitian Vodou twins possess a special relationship with the divine. The Marasa, or Divine Twins, are *lwa* connected with human twins and more broadly children (Brown 1991: 405). In Vodou ceremonies, practitioners summon Papa Legba, followed by the Marasa, Loko, and Ayizan (Clark 2009: 12). The Marasa are volatile and demanding *lwa* to serve, as twin children are difficult to parent. However, Vodouisants feel that twin children, while difficult to care for, will bring luck and good fortune, in the same way that serving the temperamental Marasa can confer great benefit.

The *vèvè*, or mystical diagram, that represents the Marasa has three distinct parts. Worship and rituals for the Marasa often involve groupings of three, despite them being divine twins. The ritual importance of groups of three may relate to the special status given to a child born after a set of twins. This child, called a *dossu*, if male, or a *dossa*, if female, completes the trio of the Marasa (Clark 2009: 12). An example of a Marasa ritual is the *plat Marasa*, in which the parents of twins offer food to the Marasa in a wooden bowl separated into three parts (Hebblethwaite 2012: 279).

The similar status enjoyed by twins in traditional Yorùbá religion and Haitian Vodou is an indicator of their shared heritage. Upon their transport to Haiti, Yorùbá slaves integrated their religious practices with those of slaves from other areas in Africa. The resulting religion, Vodou, possesses a vast pantheon of spirits that is representative of its complex heritage. Yorùbá influence is apparent in some of the names of the *lwa* in Haitian Vodou and in their admiration for twins. The “cult of twins” that is so well documented amongst the Yorùbá people clearly links with the veneration of twins in Haiti. Tracing the roots of Haitian Vodou to their origins in Africa illuminates the influence of a continent often neglected.
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This song refers to the presence of the lwa inside the head of a Vodouist during a possession ritual. The first line, “I have something in my head,” is alluding to the belief that when a lwa chooses to possess a Vodouist, it “mounts” the chwal (horse) and is said to danse nan tét or “dance in the head” of the possessed individual. The next lines speak of the lwa being able to see the trouble in the speaker’s mind. Practitioners of Vodou view the lwa as protectors, healers, and providers of insight. This section of the song is an expression of confidence that the lwa will see the speaker’s problems and provide assistance. The next statement, “I’m going to see what’s in my head,” makes a transition from the lwa seeing into the speaker’s mind to the speaker engaging in internal reflection. This calls to mind a passage from Vodou Songs that explains that the lwa do not provide examples of behavior for humans to follow, but “hold up mirrors that clarify certain aspects of the lives of those who serve them” (Hebblethwaite 2012: 7). Possession by a lwa is not just a performative action for the benefit of the community, it may also provide the possessed with an opportunity for introspection. The song concludes with, “But when I’m in trouble, my mother’s lwa are unchained,” the song circles back to protection by lwa, which is the primary focus of a Vodou ritual, and the central motivation for hereditary passage of lwa from parent to child.
Possession is a central aspect and of high importance in Haitian Vodou. Ceremonies provide a chance for specific, or for multiple lwa to visit. Possession is a display of the existence of the lwa and a way for those who practice Vodou to communicate directly with the spirits. In some cases, a chwal (one who is “riden” by the spirit) will drink pepper infused rum, touch or stand on fire or broken glass, and even eat glass to prove that they are a lwa.

The phenomenon of possession has intrigued many psychologists, especially those who study dissociative disorders. Dissociation describes disconnection or lack of connection between things usually associated with each other. An example pertaining to Vodou would be the mind being “disconnected” from the body during possession. Dissociation of psychological processes involves changes in the way a person experiences living: depersonalization, derealization, amnesia, identity confusion, and identity alteration are the main ways that dissociation changes the way a person experiences reality. Because Vodou is a religion, and dissociation appears to be present in the practice of possession, it positions “dissociation” in an interesting context: it is not completely psychological, but it is also spiritual, and a thing to be desired.

In Vodou, there is a belief explaining how possession works. There is a ti bonnanj and a gwo bonnanj. The ti bonnanj is the part of the mind linked to memory, awareness, and thought. The counterpart gwo bonnanj is the “breath of life” within all humans, it is what connects us to each other; the more physical side of existence. During possession, it is the ti bonnanj that leaves, and the gwo bonnanj remains intact. For possession to work properly, a Vodouist must master the art of releasing and retrieving the ti bonnanj.

Additionally, the ti bonnanj is said to leave the body when one is sleeping. Because this concept is part of Vodou, it is interesting to consider this construction of the mind as an entity capable of independent wandering. In the United States and in the context of other religions, the mind is not necessarily considered to have the power to wander away and out of the body. Because those who practice Vodou accept the concept of the ti bonnanj, do they have the ability to dissociate more easily?

Episodes of possession in Vodou and dissociation both feature memory loss, or amnesia. Following a possession, the chwal is unable to recall what happened while they were possessed. The same thing happens when an individual dissociates. In Vodou ceremonies, possession is tightly controlled by the oungan or manbo and the chwal wants to be possessed and ceremonies

1 http://www.isst-d.org/education/faq-dissociation.htm
2 Hebblethwaite, p. 295
3 Hebblethwaite, p.242
4 Hebblethwaite, p.295
are held to try to invoke possession.\textsuperscript{5} When an individual with a dissociative disorder dissociates, it is not necessarily desired. This can become maladaptive because one can dissociate between different personalities or aspects of the self and not remember where they are or even who they are when they come out of it.\textsuperscript{6} Most often, Vodouists remember who they are after they come out of a possession.

Dissociative disorders stem from severe abuse or neglect in very early childhood, occurring before age 5. On the other hand, possession occurs throughout the world and is a function of many religions. People who participate in religious ceremonies involving possession are able to release themselves. In Vodou, one’s \textit{ti bonnanj} can “dissociate,” without impacting one’s ability to still live a psychologically healthy life free from distress or impairment. This is explained by the two different types of possession.

Ritual possession, referring to a “temporary, generally voluntary and usually reversible form of trance exhibited in religious ceremonies”\textsuperscript{7} is the kind invoked during Vodou ceremonies. The other type of possession, considered in some cultures to be demon possession, is a relatively long term state in which the “individual believes he is unwillingly possessed by one or more intruding spirits and exhibits contingent behavioral responses which he attributes to the spirit’s influence”.\textsuperscript{8} This possession becomes maladaptive and hinders functioning in daily life. Some studies in Ghana have shown that people who are likely to be possessed by a spirit have had more traumatic incidents happen to them, either in the recent or distant past than those who are not able to be possessed by a spirit.\textsuperscript{9} While this is an interesting observance, not much is known about the sample size of the people who were interviewed in Ghana, and if these findings generalize to other religions that involve possession. It seems that most people have the ability to access some type of dissociative experience on the “continuum of dissociation”, but that traumatic experiences foster the ability to dissociate.\textsuperscript{10}

A question that is important to consider here is how much of the way that people dissociate is defined by cultural context. Anthropologists have recorded children attending Vodou ceremonies dancing and mimicking the adults who are possessed.\textsuperscript{11} Christian children have been observed in much the same way, mimicking parents worshipping and speaking in tongues. Recent psychological research has suggested that each type of trance or possession is an

\textsuperscript{5} McCarthy Brown, p.58-68  
\textsuperscript{6} Dell, p. 172  
\textsuperscript{7} Ward, Beaubrun, p. 201  
\textsuperscript{8} Ward, Beaubrun, p.202  
\textsuperscript{9} Beattie and Middleton, p.18  
\textsuperscript{10} http://www.isst-d.org/education/faq-dissociation.htm  
\textsuperscript{11} Dell, p. 173
expression on a sort of continuum of dissociation, that there is no single “subject,” that the self can fragment, and that there are many different ways reality or life experiences are perceived.\textsuperscript{12}

Vodou is a fascinating mechanism for studying dissociation because possession is central to the religion. Worshippers who live otherwise psychologically healthy lives can still dissociate. Additionally, it is interesting to note that releasing and retrieving the \textit{ti bonnanj} is a skill that one works to master. This implies that it is not something that initially comes naturally to the Vodouists, but is a skill that they have cultivated. Because dissociation is something that is known to stem from a traumatic past, the spiritual use of possession in Vodou is insightful because it indicates that more people may be able to tap into the powers of our minds than previously thought. It also indicates that dissociation does not always signal that something bad has happened or is completely uncontrollable. In the case of Vodou, it may bring insightful news to a community or an individual and serve them beneficially.

\textsuperscript{12} Dell, p.176
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From Mothers to “Little Mary”: Depictions of Women in J.L.’s songs
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Vodou songs are an important art form in Haitian culture, and an essential part of Vodou ceremonies. Some families pass down collections of songs that honor lwa, and some Vodouists even write their own. While Haitian immigrants are not afraid to incorporate aspects of other cultures into their lives, songs are significant to Haitian refugees and immigrants because they help keep the roots of their religion and culture alive. The collection of songs by J.L., a seventeen-year old Haitian refuge living in the United States, is not only a remarkable collection of personal and familial Vodou songs. These songs also possess a psychological aspect; the reader is provided with insight into this young male’s perspective of the world, and we are given a more individualistic view of Vodou. J.L.’s commentary and portrayal of women is also incredibly diverse, and adds an intriguing splash of color to the portrait of his religion and life provided by these songs. J.L. speaks of great compassion for his mother, yet also makes uncouth sexual references, and doesn’t speak so highly of other women. The Virgin Mary is praised and Ëzili (mostly Ëzili Dantò), a female lwa who takes many forms, is spoken of as strong, powerful and awe-inspiring, but also portrayed as dangerous and unpredictable. These songs about the female influence in J.L.’s world seem to display conflicting feelings. In some, women are everything, and in others, women are not to be trusted.

One theme consistent throughout J.L.’s songs seems to be feelings of loss and love for his mother. In J.L.’s collection, “mother” has a higher, almost saintly overtone and appears to be separate from “women”. There are nine songs that mention J.L.’s mother, and even more that recognize “mother” as a sort of status, but may be referring to the Virgin Mary, or mothers of the world. The huge impact of the loss of his mother on J.L.’s life is expressed in these songs. “What you did for me, mother, I am unfortunately never going to finish repaying you for that.” As made evident in this line, J.L. is incredibly grateful that his mother brought him into this world, but these songs express that J.L. is not done dealing with the loss of his parents, especially his mother. “Oh mother, you put me on the Earth and you left me.” Lines like this display the grief and strife J.L. has faced since his mother’s death. “Wherever you are, you can hear my groaning, I feel as though I can’t stand it.” The torment of surviving while your parents have been taken by death is a difficult issue for anyone to comprehend, especially a young person. Through these songs, insight is brought to us about this teen’s grieving process and emotional trials.

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13 Wilcken, p.195
14 McCarthy-Brown, p.13
15 East Georgia Gazette
16 Hebblethwaite, p. 159 #62
17 Hebblethwaite, p. 158 #59
In contrast to the praise, love, and heartache J.L. displays when discussing his mother, in other songs, J.L. refers to women only as “slut.” In another, J.L. warns young men to never take a woman and “make a habit of it,” that young boys must be careful in “the company of these women.”

There is one song where J.L. mixes Vodou, women, and sex. He is speaking to “Little Mary”, in a sexually explicit way. He declares that it is Gede, the lwa whom he acquired from his mother, that taught him his sexual ways. He then asks Mary where her sexual ancestors are. It is curious to note that even when discussing sex very frankly, and quite vulgarly, J.L. still mentions his mother. We must keep in mind that J.L. is only seventeen. These songs allude to J.L.’s inexperience with the opposite sex. This is a young man who is still developing his opinions and has much to learn about the world and his commentary on these issues brings us descriptions from the eyes of a youth. On the same page as the somewhat derogatory songs, J.L. tells young men not to mistreat women because they are “more than our mothers.” It is interesting that J.L. does not want to mistreat women, but does not make the connection that referring to someone as a “slut” could be considered mistreatment. The mystery of J.L.’s collection is his use of keen philosophical statements and high praise for his mother juxtaposed with songs where he refers to women in derogatory ways or as sexual objects.

Èzili, is the female lwa who takes many forms and embodies not just femininity, but creativity, maternity, sexuality and pleasure. A significant portion of J.L.’s song collection is about Èzili, specifically Èzili Dantò. Èzili Dantò is the side of the feminine ideal that is the mother. She is a mother who has lost her child and had her tongue removed; she has suffered. It is interesting that J.L. praises Èzili Dantò, the more intense Èzili, as opposed to Èzili Freda, the flirtier lwa of beauty and love. The fact that J.L. praises Èzili Dantò, the hurt mother, may be because he identifies with her because of his own pain, and possibly because she can be his own “spiritual mother” even though his earthly mother is gone. It is in the songs about Èzili that the dichotomy between “woman” and “mother” is pronounced. J.L. initially speaks of a woman being his lucky woman, and then refers to her as the “mother of his woman.” “Woman” takes on an earthly tone in these songs, and by referring to Èzili as “the mother,” her status is elevated. She is “number one.”

In one song, Èzili Dantò is portrayed as a bit dangerous. There is reference to her eating people and that she is “a woman who is criminal” and a woman who “is all lit up.” Although

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18 Hebblethwaite, p. 152 #25
19 Hebblethwaite, p. 152 #24
20 Hebblethwaite, p.161 #73
21 Hebblethwaite, p.152 #23
22 Tinsley, p.1
23 Hebblethwaite, p. 180 #74
24 Hebblethwaite, p.180 #74
25 Hebblethwaite, p. 170 #117
J.L. speaks of her intense side, there seems to be respect and admiration for Èzili Dantò, and it may be in part because J.L. identifies with her and envisions her as his lwa mother.

The collections of J.L.’s songs portray a complicated young man dealing with personal strife. J.L. appears to be quite inexperienced in dealing with women other than his mother, and is not yet prepared and able to understand the complications of romance. J.L. makes the connection between mothers and women in some songs, but in general, the word mother is given a high status; “mother” is above all else in J.L.’s literature. J.L. speaks of masculine lwa, but his father is relatively absent in his songs. He praises the male lwa, as a good Vodouist would, but there is more of an emotional connection displayed with Èzili, mostly Èzili Dantò, the pained mother. There are moments when J.L. connects Èzili, mother, and women all as one, but the dichotomy between being a woman and being his mother is quite intact and is very real in J.L.’s world.

26 Hebblethwaite, p. 169 #115, p.170 #117
Bibliography


The Healing Lwa
Kahlil Harrison, University of Florida

Milo Marcelin’s Song 159 (pp. 106)

Oh Osanj, you gave me the eye
for me to see them!
They hate Osanj, they love his charms!
Oh Osanj! Lend me your rattle!
Oh Osanj! Lend me you altar!
The rattle is not mine, it is Balindjo’s rattle!
The altar is not mine, it is Balindjo’s altar!
Who says this? It is mister Osanj!
The money for you acres of land is here.

This song is a statement about how Vodouists feel about some other Vodouists, or perhaps outsiders, and about the Vodou practitioners’ dependence on Osanj, a lwa. The song says that Osanj is hated, but his charms are loved. Though it is unlikely that a non-follower would witness the effects of possessions, this statement could be aimed straight at them. After all, a non-follower would undoubtedly not like the idea of lwa and chwal but greatly enjoy the healing afforded to them. The same can be said of Vodouists who, for whatever reason, do not sing to Osanj but welcome his healings. Without Osanj, one would not be able perform part of his or her duty as an oun gan or mambo. The priest or priestess needs Osanj’s eye for vision, his rattle to summon and ward off lwa, and his altar to use as a platform for healing rituals and to honor the lwa.

The song also paints a positive picture of Osanj. For example, the Vodouist says that Osanj gave him an eye, allowing him to predict the future. Osanj only has one eye, making him a generous lwa to not only give up his only eye but also give up his power to predict the future. Using his rattle, Osanj is a healing lwa unlike his Ogou brothers who are known for metallurgy, war, fire, energy, and force. This rattle and the altar from which healings are done are lent to Vodouists to aid in their healings. The singer takes care to mention that neither the rattle nor the altar is his; both belong to Balindjo, the medic.
Oral History through Song
Samantha Howcroft, University of Florida

If there weren’t lwa, as for us, we’d all drown!
If there weren’t lwa, as for us, oh we’d all perish
In foreign countries.
We come from Ginen,
Hand bound to hand, foot bound to foot!
We’ll go to a place, when we arrive, we’ll own it!
In the hold of the slave ship, we’re going
Somewhere,
All bathed and powdered with the Great Lwa,
We’re sailing!

Referring to the origins of Haitian Vodou, this song praises the lwa and the protection they offered on the slave ships from Africa. Haitian Vodou is rooted in western Africa (the former Dahomey region) and the Kongo; both regions combined when slaves from these areas were brought to Haiti and were subjugated by the French. The Vodouists vividly sing of their ancestors’ voyage from “foreign countries” in the “hold of the slave ship,” their arms and feet bound together. This voyage was immensely dangerous, and this song praises the lwa for keeping the people from drowning and dying. They believe that their ancestors arrived in the colony because the “Great Lwa” guarded them.

The structure of the song is vital, as it stresses the importance of the lwa to Vodouists and makes the song easier to remember. The first two lines are parallel, praising the lwa; the final phrase sings of the presence of the “Great Lwa.” Starting and finishing the song with reference to the lwa keeps the lwa in the participant’s minds during the song and after the song has been sung. The history of the ancestors is explained in a series of short phrases, sometimes parallel in structure (lines 1, 2 and 5) allowing for easy memorization and repetition of the song as a group. Having an easily remembered song ripe with history allows Vodou practitioners to praise the lwa and pass on their history simultaneously.
Dancing, Hereditary Lwa
Samantha Howcroft, University of Florida

I have something in my head,
it’s when I’m in trouble.
They will see what’s in my head.
I’m going to see what’s in my head.
But when I’m in trouble,
my mother’s lwa are unchained.

Lwa in Haitian Vodou have a hereditary nature: they can be passed on to children from both the mother’s side and the father’s side. If the family performs in-home ceremonies, the child grows up seeing certain family members possessed by certain spirits, which can lead to an association of a lwa with that family member. The speaker refers to his “mother’s lwa” becoming “unchained” when he is in trouble, referring to the lwa of his mother’s family coming to his aid when he is in trouble. This could also refer to the lwa who would possess his mother coming to his aid; having a spirit associated with one’s mother come in a time of need offers an empowerment and is a sign of the emphasis in Vodou on family heritage.

The repetition of “in my head” at the end of half of the song’s lines is significant in that it repeatedly refers to the possession of a Vodouist by a lwa. Danse nan tèt refers to the notion that the lwa dance in the head of the possessed after sending away the Vodouist’s ti bonnanj, or consciousness. The lwa possess the Vodouist and have access to “what’s in [their] head”, which can be both comforting and concerning depending on the situation. The lwa can provide reassurance to the possessed “when [they are] in trouble” by entering their bodies and minds. This reassurance can be intensified if the lwa brings the positive connotation of a beloved family member.
The Elderly Guardian of Vodou
Samantha Howcroft, University of Florida

Marcelin’s Song 1

Atibon Legba, arrives at the gate,
you are so old!
Papa Legba is in the crossroads,
don’t you see how old you are, phew!
Atibon arrives on the path,
you’re so old!

Guarding gates, watching crossroads, and protecting homes, Legba oversees many important aspects of Vodou ceremonies and everyday life. Atibon Legba, the elderly manifestation of Legba, is the first *lwa* honored with song at ceremonies; this shows his importance to the Vodouists and serves a practical ceremonial purpose. As the keeper of keys and the guardian of gates, Legba can “arrive at the gate” and open it to “[arrive] on the path,” metaphorically opening the path to the ceremony for the other *lwa*. The “path” he opens for the *lwa* is the *poto mitan*, the symbolic center-post around which temple ceremonies occur and *lwa* enter. Marcelin’s song illustrates Legba’s role: first opening the gate so the ceremony can begin, then in the crossroads entering the human realm, and finally on the pathway into the ceremony towards the Vodouists present.

Atibon Legba’s extreme old age does not negatively affect the way he is viewed by Vodouists; if anything, it adds to their respect for him. The song repeatedly exclaims about Atibon Legba’s age, but then asks him if he “[sees] how old [he is].” This question demonstrates that Atibon Legba’s actions do not match his elderly appearance. Atibon Legba progresses from the gate, to the crossroads, and to the path in the song in rapid progression. He displays incredible power though he appears weak, which creates an awe-inspired respect amongst practitioners and viewers alike.
Explanation of a Song: Boneless-ness in Haitian Vodou
Athéna C. Patterson-Orazem, University of Florida

Oh old bones! Oh old bones! Papa Legba!
Don’t you see we’re without bones?²⁷

The above is an intriguing song: boneless-ness in Haitian Vodou is a characteristic commonly attributed to very old lwa, but why should humans describe themselves as without bones? A close exploration of the use of bones in Haitian Creole is required in order to resolve the quandary caused by this and other songs.

Bones play an important role in Haitian Vodou; they constitute a link with ancestors and the past.²⁸ Bones are associated with Bawon Samdi and the Gede, who preside over life and death. This family of lwa is associated with cemeteries, the dead, and the interface of life and death.²⁹ In fact, Papa Gede is commonly referred to as “Mister Bones”.³⁰ Bones commonly appear on altars, and are used in ceremonies and in the fabrication of remedies. One of the most effective ways to capture the soul of a recently deceased person is through bones, and especially skulls. These souls can then be conscripted into labor for evil, or to help a client without harming other people.³¹ Altar skulls are sometimes called Ginén, a term which pertains to Vodou cultural objects; this underlines the importance of bones as a link to the past, to the ancestors and to Vodou heritage.

In Vodou mythology, lwa characterized as very old people are often described as being “without bones”. This is true for Grann (granny) Ézili and Badè. Legba, ruler of the crossroads and guardian of entries, is said to be so old that his bones are “virtually nonexistent” and he requires crutches to walk. However, Grann Ézili’s lack of bones leaves her bedridden, making it hard for her to manifest herself in ceremonies; this makes sense since she is less powerful than Legba.³³ Marcelin’s song 197 illustrates a similar characterization of Badè: “But it is unfortunate! He is a brave man, but he is without bones.”³⁴

During Haiti’s colonial period, Vodouisants were forced to convert to Catholicism. Due to this historical influence, it is appropriate to consider Catholic beliefs regarding bones. While bodies were thought best left whole in preparation for the Last Judgment, the veneration of saints’ tissues including bones became very popular: these scraps of flesh or bone became relics, and miraculous powers were attributed to them. Their importance was such that at one point all Catholic churches were expected to possess at least one relic.³⁵ After the emergence of Protestantism, the importance of relics declined. However there remains to this day a certain reverence for these relics, likely for reasons of history and religious ancestry which run parallel to the importance of ancestry in Vodou. A solitary reference to Christian boneless-ness occurs in a relatively modern quote from a Christian Science healer maintaining that people are not made

²⁷ Hebblethwaite, Vodou Songs, Chapter 4: Milo Marcelin’s Songs, p75
²⁸ Brice, Nou La, Chapter 4: At the Vodou Altar, p168
²⁹ Hebblethwaite, Vodou Songs, Appendix A: Dictionary of Vodou Terms, p217, 237
³⁰ McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola, Introduction, p13
³¹ Brice, Nou La, Chapter 4: At the Vodou Altar, p167
³² Hebblethwaite, Vodou Songs, Appendix A: Dictionary of Vodou Terms, p239
³³ Hebblethwaite, Vodou Songs, Appendix A: Dictionary of Vodou Terms, p241, 254-255
³⁴ Hebblethwaite, Vodou Songs, Chapter 4: Milo Marcelin’s Songs, p114
³⁵ Calvin, “A Treatise on Relics”, p1-28, 130-137, 244, 279-281
of flesh and bones but rather of spirit. This is of no consequence to the topic of Haitian Vodou, but it does bring to mind a more spiritual interpretation. Perhaps the lack of bones referred to in these songs is associated with a human loss of ancestry, a dilemma more spiritual than physical.

Such a dilemma might well be illustrated by an enigmatic reference to Mawu-Lisa, the Dahomean creator-spirit who in Haiti, according to some scholars, has been largely deposed by Bondye as the high god. The song “Lisa gives bones” is a faded link to Dahomey, the earliest Vodou homeland. In fact, McCarthy Brown states that it seems the only reference to Mawu-Lisa retained in Alourdes’s community. This chant recalls the dual creative nature of the Mawu-Lisa. We might speculate that if the male Lisa gave people bones, perhaps the female Mawu gave them flesh or spirit; I have yet to find confirmation of this idea. However, this example in an abstract manner suggests a link between the loss of bones and the loss of heritage. According to McCarthy Brown, Vodouists in America seem to have in accepted this loss of heritage, but their acceptance is clearly incomplete insomuch as they maintain Vodou as a means of reconnecting with their ancestry. This song may as well be a reminder of the immateriality of the lwa who, despite their anthropomorphic depictions, are spirits and therefore not beings of flesh, blood and bone.

In J.L.’s song, “oh bones” is used as an exclamation which, in context, seems a reference to heritage rather than a reference to Ogou, the lwa of war and iron around who the song revolves. Marcelin’s song 66 – “Oh Èzili! Hey, I have no bones!” – immediately follows a song introducing Grann Èzili: it appears that the singer is embodying Grann Èzili, and therefore describing her by these words. This explanation does not seem adequate for Marcelin’s song 4 – “…Papa Legba! Don’t you see we’re without bones!” – as Legba, unlike Mawu-Lisa and the Marasa twins, is not a dual entity and so would not address himself with a plural pronoun. Legba is, however, referred to as “Old Bones” in a manner not unlike Papa Gede’s nickname “Mister Bones”; this reference alludes to his age rather than his occupation. Stylistically, by using this nickname, the bone-less people are identifying themselves with Legba; in a spiritual sense, they have become a part of his spiritual self.

Legba is the first lwa addressed during a ceremony. His songs are sung first because, as the ruler of the crossroads, he opens the ‘gate’ for the other lwa to enter a Vodou ceremony. Unlike some Vodou songs, Marcelin’s song 4 is not written in his perspective but rather addresses Legba directly. The exclamation “oh, old bones!” conveys his extreme old age, underlining his anthropomorphic characterization and emphasizing the fact that this song is addressed to Papa Legba. Given a context of close ties between bones, ancestry and religious heritage, it is evident that the second verse “Don’t you see we’re without bones!” refers to the Vodouists’ need to correspond with the lwa as a means of retrieving their historical and religious

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36 Gottschalk, *The Emergence of Christian Science (…)*, Chapter 3: The Tares and the Wheat, p121
37 Hebblethwait, for example, identifies the Marasa as a retention of the Mawou-Lisa (*Vodou Songs* Appendix A: “Mawou-Lisa” p. 266)
40 Hebblethwait, *Vodou Songs*, Chapter 6: J.L.’ Songs, p148
41 Hebblethwait, *Vodou Songs*, Chapter 4: Milo Marcelin’s Songs, p89
42 Hebblethwait, *Vodou Songs*, Chapter 4: Milo Marcelin’s Songs, p75
heritage. In this way Marcelin’s song 4 illustrates the vital importance of heritage and ancestry in Haitian Vodou.

**Songs including the word “bones”:**
Fond in *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*

Chapter 4: Milo Marcelin’s Songs

4.
Oh old bones! Oh old bones! Papa Legba!
Don’t you see we’re without bones!

66.
Oh Èzili! Hey, I have no bones!
Èzili I have no bones!
I have no bones in my entire body!
Oh Èzili! Hey, I have no bones!
I have no bones in my entire body!
Oh Èzili! I have no bones!

197.
Oh Badè! Oh Badè!
He is a brave man.
But it is unfortunate!
He is a brave man, but he is without bones.

Chapter 6: J.L.’s Songs

4.
Hey the Iwa who is your Iwa,
is a protective Iwa, hey, oh bones,
I say a Iwa who is your Iwa, yeah.
Oh papa Ogou is a protective Iwa.


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’ 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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43 Hebblethwaite, Vodou Songs, p258
44 Hebblethwaite, Vodou Songs, p36
45 Métraux, Voodoo in Haiti, p143
46 Hebblethwaite, Vodou Songs, p258
47 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.
48 Métraux Voodoo in Haiti, p143-144
49 McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola, p22-33
50 McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola, p123
51 McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola, p77
52 McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola, p205
53 McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola, p142-154
54 McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola, p245
giving in and agreeing to take up the ason⁵⁵; that very night, her mother dreamed of Gèdè and understood that her daughter, once on the brink of death, would survive.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ 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 existence⁵⁸.

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”⁵⁹. 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”.⁶⁰ 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 signals⁶¹. 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 system⁶². 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 Vodouists (but not Christians) as mytho-maniacs displaying “overwhelming psychic disturbance” and “widespread” racial pathology⁶³. Anthropologists have identified 360 out of 488 societies whose religious worship contains possession, including Christianity⁶⁴; 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.⁶⁵ By the Middle Ages a strong, basic mistrust of dreams was pervasive. In

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⁵⁵ 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.
⁵⁶ McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola, p160-170
⁵⁷ McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola, 173-176
⁵⁸ McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola, 204-206
⁵⁹ Métraux, Voodoo in Haiti, p144
⁶⁰ McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola, 209,210
⁶¹ “Modern Theories of Dreaming Superseded: Lecture by Joe Griffin.” Youtube Video
⁶² Davis, The Serpent and the Rainbow, p173-175
⁶³ Davis, The Serpent and the Rainbow, p177-179
⁶⁴ Davis, The Serpent and the Rainbow, p179
⁶⁵ Shoulman and Stroumsa, Dream Cultures, p189-206
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 beholden to common men and certainly not to women.  

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. 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.

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66 Shoulman and Stroumsa, *Dream Cultures*, p276
67 Shoulman and Stroumsa, *Dream Cultures*, p288
68 Hvidt, *Christian Prophecy – the Post-Biblical Tradition*, p5-30 and 455-466


An Investigation of the Perception of Left-Handedness in Haitian Vodou
Athéna C. Patterson-Orazem, University of Florida

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: *degren* 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 oun gan (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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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

69 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.
especially reluctant to awaken an ounan or a manbo since they are especially prone to 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 ounan 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\(^70\) and genetic inherited memory\(^71\), which has yet to be achieved by modern science.

\(^70\) For more information, see Strocchi’s “Symmetry breaking” 2nd edition (2008), compiled as a part of the SpringerLINK Lecture Notes in Physics.

\(^71\) For more information, see “Inheiritance 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 Con (1909).
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The day before yesterday,
I was doing a ceremony.
I have a good friend
who wanted to spoil the event.
I am a little bone
who is in the midst of fifty dogs.
For all their licking,
they cannot break me. 72

As with many of J. L.’s songs, this song feels very personal. Unlike its neighbors, this song consists of four statements, and no repetition. It reasserts an empowering mantra and it tells a complete story.

The song’s compact structure is in accordance with Freytag’s model for classic plot structure 73: introduction, rising action, climax, falling action and conclusion. The song’s first line serves as an introduction, establishing the setting. The rising action introduces suspense in the form of a problematic friend; the falling action partially resolves the problem by providing a philosophic assessment of the overall situation; the climax has merged with these. The conclusion of the story is a resolute reassertion of the speaker’s own power against adversity. The power cycle is also noteworthy: the speaker empowers himself by telling the story, weakens himself in revealing his ailment, then re-empowers himself by finding an explanation to the problem and reasserting his own will.

An overarching metaphor of dog and bone dominates the imagery. Licking is considered an affectionate action, though dogs will lick a hard bone to soften it before eating; this double-edged imagery is particularly appropriate to the subject of friendship. As “a small bone”, the speaker feels overwhelmed by outside obligations. The licking dogs represent his friends, yet on another level, they could also represent the lwa J.L. serves. Through this metaphor, the song vividly illustrates the difficulties of an adolescent trying to balance the inside and outside obligations of society, self-identity and religion.

72 Hebblethwaite, Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English, Chapter 6: J.L.’s Songs, p.178-179
73 Freytag, MacEwan trans., Freytag’s Technique of the Drama, Chapter 2: The Construction of the Drama, p. 114-140
Nurturing the Nurturer – Preparations for Èzili
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115.
Oh sweep the house, Èzili is on the way.
Oh water the house, Èzili is on the way.
Perfume the house, Èzili is on the way.
Manbo Èzili is a woman who’s all lit up.74

56.
Oh Èzili! Oh Èzili!
Your house needs to be sprinkled!
If it doesn’t have lotion,
We will sprinkle it with water.75

The rather touching song 115 from J.L.’s collection reflects preparations made for the arrival of Èzili. These attentions are reminiscent of alters made for Èzili as well as preparations traditionally made for women arriving at a house. Èzili’s alters often include nurturing and pretty objects that would appeal to a feminine woman: hearts, satin, colored feathers, flowers, dolls, decorated foods and toiletry items. Traditionally, preparations for women’s arrivals include cleaning, perfuming and filling the house with floral arrangements. Èzili is an important female lwa, as underlined by the title ‘Manbo,’ therefor she requires such respectful attentions as these.

Why is Manbo Èzili “all lit up”? Likely because she is excited to be visiting or returning home. Often when people are excited their eyes ‘shine’, their expressions become uplifted and their faces are described as ‘beaming’ or ‘lit up’. For women this joyous and energetic appearance is often enhanced with make-up that conceals tired shadows, adds ‘healthy’ color to pale cheeks, and even literally adds shimmer to the skin. This very human characterization is in keeping with the desires of the flirtatious, beautiful, pampered, make-up-loving Èzili.

A similar song appears in Marcelin’s collection – song 56. It also includes the sprinkling of a space with water, one type of libation offered to lwa. The mention of lotion, another generally-perfumed item most often used by women, supports the theme of song 115. Both songs relate Èzili to the house which, in the midst of a ceremony, may also refer to the Vodou temple. They indicate that Èzili requires nurturing offerings – perfume, cleanliness and lotion – as well as non-alcoholic libations.

Watering a house is an interesting symbol; it illustrates the fact that houses, people and the lwa all require tending, just like plants. As Èzili is generally portrayed as a nurturing and correcting influence, it makes sense that she would expect to be nurtured, and have her residence, whether alter or temple, ‘corrected’ by sweeping and perfuming. Thus these two songs, by enumerating activities done to please her, illustrate the nurturing and corrective side of Èzili’s character.

74 Hebblethwaite, Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English, Chapter 6: J.L.’s Songs, p.169
75 Hebblethwaite, Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English, Chapter 4: Milo Marcelin’s Songs, p.87
Ceremonial Lullaby? – A Proposed Explanation
Athéna C. Patterson-Orazem, University of Florida

26.

Sleep, sleep, sleep, my little child, her mama went to the river, her papa went to look for crabs. Sleep, sleep, little child, her mama, her mama went to the river. Her papa went to look for wood for her, to cook food for his child. Her mama went to the river, her papa went to town to look for a little cake for the little one to eat. Sleep, sleep, little child, her mama (says). Sleep, sleep, little child, sleep, sleep, little child, sleep, sleep, my child; the wild cat’s going to eat you. Sleep, sleep my child, sleep, sleep my child. Sleep, sleep my child; the sleep’s in your eyes. Sleep, sleep my child; in a moment I will give you food; sleep, sleep, sleep my child. Sleep, sleep, little child, sleep, sleep, my child; the wild cat’s going to eat you, sleep, sleep my child.76

This excerpt from Laura Boulton’s collection is unique: a lullaby amidst brief ceremonial songs. In fact, it is the only such song in this book. Why would a lullaby be part of the ceremonial repertory?

As with most Vodou songs, the lullaby’s structure is cyclic, heavily dependent upon repetition, and successively elaborates upon an introduced theme. In this manner the father’s role is elaborated so as to form a story: the father is looking for materials to cook food for his child. Oddly, the mother’s role is never clarified, begging questions: why did “her mama” go to the river? Did she also leave to complete ordinary tasks such as fetching water and washing clothes, or was there something unusual in her departure? Did she ever return? Many ceremonial songs feature a shifting focus between singer, chorus and the lwa being addressed. Here the focus shifts from the parents’ activities in the beginning to the child’s state in the end; the narrator appears briefly in line 18.

Line 14, repeated in line 21, forms a stark contrast from the loving, nurturing theme of the rest of the song. Perhaps it is a traditional threat, something like, ‘If you don’t fall asleep,

76 Hebblethwaite, *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English*, Chapter 5: Laura Boulton’s Songs, p.133
Santa won’t bring you Christmas presents.’ Line 18 is also striking: “In a moment I will give you food.” This line underlines the theme of food and hunger running through the song. But why send a child to sleep without food unless there was no food to be had? I propose that this lullaby, like many Vodou songs, is a historical song reflecting the deprivations faced by the poor, by the enslaved, and by Haitians struggling to create their country.
Powerful Priestesses: A Look at Equality in Leadership in Vodou
Megan Raitano, University of Florida

Women have taken on a variety of roles within Vodou. Though these roles have changed throughout history, their defining characteristics have not been lost. Beginning in the seventeenth century, with the influx of West African slaves being brought to Haiti, Vodou emerged from its African origin, Vodun. Additionally, creolization took another form in New Orleans, Louisiana, where Voodoo formed from the marriage of African Vodun and European and Native American elements. Vodou and Voodoo, both descendants of African Vodun, share a view of women as equal leaders to men. This view is exhibited in Cecile Fatiman in Haiti, Marie Laveaux in New Orleans, Mama Lola in Brooklyn, the status of women as priestesses, and the existence of powerful female lwa in Vodou.

Cecile Fatiman

Cecile Fatiman is one of the first Vodou priestesses, or manbo, to be documented in Haiti. As a manbo, she is theoretically equal in power and action to a male priest, or oun gan (Glassman 2000: 20). She served as a manbo at the Bwa Kayiman ceremony that helped spark the Haitian Revolution in 1791 (Hebblethwaite 2012: 223). During the ceremony, Fatiman was possessed by Èzili Kawoulo and slaughtered a hog. His blood was consumed by all present as a covenant to fight to the death for freedom from slavery (Hebblethwaite 2012: 223). Though Bwa Kayiman is normally attributed to the oungan, Boukman Dutty, Fatiman’s role in this Haitian Vodou ceremony is remembered vividly and has been passed down through oral tradition for centuries.

Marie Laveaux

Voodoo in New Orleans has not been responsible for any uprisings. However, it has been at least partially responsible for preserving the identity of the African peoples of New Orleans. Ina Fandrich (2005: 20) hypothesizes that New Orleans Voodoo evolved as a way to keep African traditions and values alive by merging them into their new environment in New Orleans. Fandrich (2005: 19) also observes that Marie Laveaux’s practice of African religion helped to preserve the African identity for people that had been torn away from their roots. Marie Laveaux is notable for a plethora of reasons, mainly because despite being an illiterate black woman practicing a relatively obscure religion in a land dominated by white, Catholic, well-educated males, Laveaux was widely known and respected as the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans (Glassman 2000: 53).

In the United States, queens are the priestesses of Voodoo and they are prevalent. According to Anthony Pinn (1998: 39) the majority of Voodoo practitioners in the United States are women. Pinn (1998: 40-41) also talks specifically about Laveaux’s abilities to secure clients, deal with opponents, create gris-gris (magical charms), and promote the survival of Voodoo under Colonial pressures. Glassman (2000: 53) and Fandrich (2005: 152) concur with Pinn on
Laveaux’s status as the most powerful and influential of all of the Voodoo queens of New Orleans.

Today, Laveaux’s spirit carries on as a lwa and a crucial component of New Orleans history. As a lwa, she can be called for healing or for empowerment in Vodou (Glassman 2000: 52) and her legend can be found in any of the old jazz clubs in New Orleans as song after song is sung about the great Voodoo Queen (Fandrich 2005: 181). Marie Laveaux was the most influential figure in Voodoo practice during her lifetime and she continues to be today.

Mama Lola

Mama Lola is one of the most prominent manbo living in the United States today. She has been the subject of a book, multiple articles, and has appeared on television. As Haitians continue to immigrate to the United States, many bring their religious beliefs with them. When Karen McCarthy Brown wrote her semi-biographical book of Mama Lola, 450,000 Haitian immigrants were living in New York City (Brown 1991: 4). Of all of the oungan and manbo practicing Vodou in the United States, oungan mainly hold large, grand ceremonies in contrast to Mama Lola’s intimate ones (Brown 1991: 4). Despite drawing a much smaller crowd, Mama Lola is well known for her honesty and skill, which has resulted in her being uniquely revered and internationally recognized (Brown 1991: 4). Of all of the Vodou practitioners in the United States, Mama Lola, a woman and a manbo, is the most widely recognized.

Most of what can be said about manbo and queens has already been established in the introductions to these women. Manbo have been around as long as oungan. Queens are more prevalent than kings in Voodoo. Manbo and oungan, queens and kings, are all equal. In Haiti, New Orleans, and Brooklyn, priestesses are perceived as being just as powerful as priests. In fact, throughout history, the Vodou and Voodoo leaders that have been widely known and respected have been just as frequently female as male.

This equality may be attributed to the mythology of Vodou spirits or lwa. Mawou-Lisa, the Bondye (God) of Vodou is a divine spirit pair that is both male and female (Hebblethwaite 2012: 266). Both parts are equal in strength and they complement each other. The lwa include both male and female spirits that may inhabit the bodies of practitioners of either gender. This equal treatment from the lwa complements gender equality structures for Vodou leaders.

Vodou and Voodoo do not discriminate against people. This has enabled women like Mama Lola and Marie Laveaux, who are normally disadvantaged in the United States for not only their race but their gender as well, to be equal to men in their religions. Fatiman showed that women have been powerful in Haitian Vodou from the beginning of its documentation. Laveaux’s legacy indicates her excellence as a queen and as a socialite in colonial New Orleans. Mama Lola’s popularity indicates the growth of Haitian Vodou within the United States. All of
these women’s stories show that women, manbo, and queens are just as powerful as their male counterparts. This formation supports Vodou mythology and mirrors the spiritual hierarchy of Vodou.
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A Brief Overview of the Origins and Practice of Zonbi in Vodou
Megan Raitano, University of Florida

Despite Hollywood’s perpetuation of zombies, or zonbi in Haitian Creole, as hordes of recently-deceased flesh eaters swarming together to knock down buildings and hunt the living, this concept has no basis in reality. Instead, many Vodouists live in fear of being turned into a soul-less shell of their former selves. Even within Haiti and the Haitian Vodou culture, beliefs on what zombies do, how they are made, and what happens to people who use them vary. The goal of this paper is to explore the origins of the zombie, discuss what a zombie is and why they exist, examine the relationship between zombies and the secret societies of Haiti, and hypothesize on why the zonbi story resonates so strongly with Haitians.

Nzambi in Kikongo, a language spoken in Central Africa, is related to the Haitian word zonbi (Hebblethwaite 2012: 303). According to Hebblethwaite (2012: 303) in Kikongo mythology, Nzambi is a detached supreme being who was angered by the acts of the first man he created. As a result, he buried him and raised another human in his place. The relationship between the Kikongo and Haitian terms indicates that the zonbi traditions originated in Central Africa. Central Africa melded with the Petro rite in the Haitian Vodou construct. Anthony Pinn (1998: 24) suggests that in general, Petwo lwa, or spirits, are more aggressive than their West African counterpart, the Rada lwa, and the Petwo rite is focused more on “hot magic.” Central African traditions are known to include more charms, spells, and sorcery than those from West Africa (Fandrich 2005: 41).

Central African tradition, specifically from Kongo, uses a container called nkisi that holds a spirit and allows humans to use it (McAlister 1995: 310). They are used to fulfill the desires of the maker, called nganga-nkisi (McAlister 1995: 311). Nkisi is comparable to one of the two types of zonbi used in Haiti. This type of zonbi is essentially a spirit in a bottle. It is called a zonbi astral. Zonbi astral are the spirits of people who have died at the hand of someone other than God and are then captured and used to do magical works and “heat up” (McAlister 1995: 314). These zombies are chosen by their occupation to achieve the wants of the person using them (Smith 2010: 147-148). Smith (2010: 149) writes about witnessing a prostitute having a zonbi astral placed in her vagina to make more money. The woman bathes herself in the ounfò (temple) to administer the spirit into her body.

In Haiti, priests called bòkò deal in both “hot” and “cool” magic that they sell to clients for both good and bad deeds (Hebblethwaite 2012: 220). These are the priests that one goes to for a zonbi. McAlister (1995: 305) was given a zonbi astal by a bòkò in Haiti that she describes as an “expert in supernatural matters.” Hebblethwaite (2012: 220) notes that bòkò are often criticized for their work. McAlister (1995: 320) explains that because bòkò work outside of the morality of the ancestors, they are subject to repercussions for their actions and sometimes that means death.

The second type of zonbi is a zonbi kadav. This is the type of zonbi that has been modified and made infamous by Hollywood. It is considered to be magic and outside of the realm of Vodou (Smith 2010: 152). These zombies are bodies without souls. In Wade Davis’s book The Serpent and the Rainbow (1985) he describes going to a cemetery with a bòkò to take a body that has received the zonbi poison. Davis’s research indicates that a combination of toxins is used topically to paralyze the victim into a state of near-death that is indiscernible from actual death. During this state of paralysis, the victim is declared dead although they are purportedly still fully conscious. After their burial, they are retrieved from the grave by the bòkò and given another dose of the poison. Many scientific critiques have been written in
response to Davis’s work. Most fail to account for the psychological components of this zonbi treatment. In Haiti, zombification is highly stigmatized and people will refuse to become involved once a family member or friend has turned into a zombie for fear of the bòkò.

Davis, McAlister, Smith, and Brown all reference secret societies in Haiti in their discussions of zonbi and Vodou. The biggest secret society in Haiti, Bizango, is thought to descend from the secret societies that originated in Benin (Hebblethwaite 2012: 219). The societies are rooted in Haitian folklore and are associated with zombies. They usually meet at night and because of the stories about the dastardly things they do to people that cross them, many Haitians do not go out at night for fear of running into the Bizango, or their sub-group the Sanpwèl (Hebblethwaite 2012: 288). McAlister (1995: 320) reports that the bòkò Saint Jean died from seeking a fast-acting Bizango spirit instead of waiting for a Ginen spirit. Smith (2010: 138) calls the priest she interacts with oungan, but she describes his work as dwelling in both “hot” and “cold” magic and she uses both bòkò and oungan to refer to him. In addition, she describes his ounfò (temple) as having “Bizango baroque” styled designs (Smith 2010: 142). According to Hebblethwaite (2012: 219) secret societies stand to protect Vodou, but this information indicates that the protectors of Vodou use powers outside of the realm of general Vodou practice to do so.

McAlister (1995: 314) asserts that zombies are a metaphor for slavery to Haitians. She suggests that this explains the prevalence of beliefs about zonbi to Haitians since the “lasting effects of slavery” are present. With the zonbi kadav, one risks having a zonbi regain consciousness and then revolting (McAlister 1995: 314). This illustrates the dual concerns of people who own zombies and people who are scared to become one. Smith (2010: 129) refers to zombies as a “virtual working class-of pure, abstract labor power” since they are helpless to obeying their master.

As evidenced here, there is much more to zonbi in Haiti than meets the stereotypes. Although this paper is only able to touch briefly of a general overview of the origins and practice of zonbi making, it has been shown that there is still much to be learned.
Bibliography


Nago is Coming! Nago is Coming!

Reflections on the Ancestors in Vodou
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Harold Courlander’s Song 30

Nago rive e!
Boulicha Nago rive e!
Nago rive e!
Boulicha Nago rive e!
Li lè, li tan, bata la!
Nago rive jodi a, o enhen!

Nago arrives hey!
Boulicha Nago arrives hey!
Nago arrives hey!
Boulicha Nago arrives hey!
It is the hour, it is the time, beat the drums!
Nago arrives today, oh yeah

Ansyen or ancestors are one of the most important pillars of Vodou. Ansyen connect Vodouists to their deceased family members and connect them to their African roots. Recognition of the ancestors is very prominent in this song through both the frequent mentioning of Nago and the references to Boulicha Nago.

In Vodou songs, it is common to hear people calling out to African countries, people, cultural practices, and regions. This can be seen in Harold Courlander’s songs 6, 10, 11, 12, 14, and 23, to name just a few. This practice is a method of reaching out to the roots of the religion and to the roots of the people. During the years of slavery in Haiti, many people were taken from the West Coast of Africa and brought to Haiti to work. This helps account for the prominence that Nago has in Haitian Vodou.

Nago is a word of Fon origin, which refers to the language and culture of Yorùbá. This song is part of the Rada rite, which is indicated by the references to Nago. The Rada rite is associated with West Africa, specifically with Benin, and with the Yorùbá religion. Boulicha Nago is a Yorùbá lwa. Calling on Boulicha Nago indicates that this song is part of the Rada rite.

The song’s directive to “beat the drums” at a certain hour indicates that this is a ceremony song used to call the lwa and start the ceremony.
Azaka and Kouzin
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Azaka, the lwa of agriculture and peasant farmers, is known to sport a blue ensemble of denim, a broad straw hat, and a jug of rum mixed with herbs (McCarthy Brown 1991: 36). His nicknames include Papa Zaka and Azaka Mede, but he is more commonly called Kouzen, or cousin, because he reminds the people of the importance of their family roots and the land from which those roots originated. Unlike the family definitions in the United States where a cousin is known as the daughter or son of an aunt or uncle, a cousin in Haiti is any person with whom another shares a family-like bond (McCarthy Brown 1991: 36). He is celebrated in the Djouba, Kongo, Matinik, and Rada rites. Days set aside for Azaka include Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday (Hebblethwaite 2012: 213). His female counterpart is Kouzin, a model of the merchant woman. Her characteristics are similar to that of a machann (merchant woman) who is known for her loud voice and bargaining skills.

Initiates of Vodou celebrate Azaka’s birthday around the date of May 26th each year. His altar for this celebration is decorated in his favorite colors, blue and red, and topped with his chromolithograph, an assortment of candles, various gifts, candy, cake, fruit, cassava bread, sugarcane, and countless other foods and drinks (Hebblethwaite 2012: 213). Furthermore, his vèvé may be drawn in cornmeal, one of his favorite foods (Hebblethwaite 2012: 213). Papa Zaka’s preference for these foods, specifically the cassava bread, sugarcane, and cornmeal, are a reflection of the common foods available and preferred by Haitian farmers. In many ways, he embodies the description of the everyday Haitian farmer through his amusement in gossip, intrusion in personal business, manner of speaking, attitude, and attire. This makes him relatable to the people and explains the family bond felt between himself and the people. He also loves to play bargaining games (McCarthy Brown 1991) and may spend hours at his birthday celebration selling his gifts from the altar to the crowd for money. The people know he can act very childish and even chastise him by singing, “Adults don’t fool around, it’s children who fool around here/Azaka Mede be more serious about your business” (Hebblethwaite 2012: 213).

Kouzin, Azaka’s female counterpart, is modeled after the women in the markets. In Haitian households, women are usually the ones who deal with money. In the case of Kouzin, she handles the money transactions for Azaka. At his birthday celebration, he will usually lend out money to the initiates and also collect the debts of those who borrowed the year before. While he drives a hard bargain with high interest rates, many people jump on the opportunity to borrow his money as it is said to be blessed and will bring benefits for those who use it (McCarthy Brown 1991: 67). Usually when this is done Kouzin will also ride a chwal (the person who is possessed) and keep track of these transactions.

The significance of this pair of lwa, Azaka and Kouzin, is that a parallel can be drawn between their relationship and the relationships of men and their wives as farmers and merchants. In the case of this pair of lwa, Azaka harvests the food, and Kouzin is in charge of selling it at the market. The predominant view in Haiti is that men are the center of the family unit and head of the household; however, women can gain some financial power depending on how they bargain in the marketplace. This is due to the fact that when woman are sent to the market with their products and money, whatever money is left over is considered their property. This is very important power for women since a man who may have several wives or mistresses could use the profits to support his other families and/or personal wants (Bond 1994: 48).
Therefore, if a woman can find a decent strategy for bargaining she can save up her money. Many of these women will sell wherever they go. If they are visiting a friend, they may bring the candy they had just made or the baby clothes they had just sewn in hopes of making a sale; these women possess both persistence and smart wit for bargaining (McCarthy Brown 2012: 37-38). A woman may carry other financial responsibilities as well. For example, in *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, McCarthy Brown (2012) states that usually when Azaka comes to collect his dues on the money he has lent out to the people, it is often handled by Kouzin rather than by Azaka. Although women in Haiti may be subjected to patriarchal households, they maintain a sense of financial independence: the embodiment of Kouzin.

Kouzen Azaka is, to many initiates, an extended family member and a *lwa* of hard work. He is the reminder of the family who came before and the land from which this family came. Both he and his female counterpart, Kouzin, model the relations of the common husband and wife of a farming class family. While Azaka depicts the everyday farmer in his denim and straw hat, Kouzin models the average market woman with her loud voice and smart bargaining skills. Both *lwa* represent the attitudes, speech, costumes, and will of the people.
Works Cited


