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 mindset 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 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).
Bibliography


