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 are held to try to invoke possession. 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. Most often, Vodouists remember who they are after they come out of a possession.

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2. Hebblethwaite, p. 295
3. Hebblethwaite, p.242
4. Hebblethwaite, p.295
5. McCarthy Brown, p.58-68
6. Dell, p. 172
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 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” 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.” 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. 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.

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. 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 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.

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 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.

7 Ward, Beaubrun, p. 201
8 Ward, Beaubrun, p.202
9 Beattie and Middleton, p.18
10 http://www.isst-d.org/education/faq-dissociation.htm
11 Dell, p. 173
12 Dell, p.176
In the case of Vodou, it may bring insightful news to a community or an individual and serve them beneficially.
Bibliography


