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## Trance Possession and Vodou Ritual in Haiti

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LESLIE G. DESMANGLES & ETZEL CARDEÑA  
**Trance Possession and Vodou Ritual in Haiti**

### Summary

In this paper, we analyze trance possession in its cross-cultural, psychological and religious contexts, and describe its role specifically within Haitian Vodou and society. In contrast with the earlier analysis of spirit possession as a form of psychopathology, more recent scholarship has emphasized its import as a common and meaningful religious practice. Vodou is a syncretic religion that, for historical reasons, fused African traditions with Catholicism. In Haiti, the possessed individual plays a liminal function that bridges the sacred and the secular, and temporarily transcends the limitations imposed provided by social or economic status.

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#### I. Possession in context

In this paper we introduce the concept of trance possession, place it within the context of the relevant cross-cultural psychological and anthropological literature, and describe in detail the role and characteristics of spirit possession in Haitian Vodou.

Well before the current interest in dissociative trance disorder (erstwhile multiple personality disorder) and the ongoing postmodernist discourse of the culturally-created nature of the self, possession provided a radical challenge to the assumption that there is "one self per body". When possession is viewed through the distorting lenses of Western popular culture, it is assumed to be the mark of a devil entity, or the product of superstition or psychopathology. In actuality, even though some possessions are unwelcome, the vast majority are sought after and occur within a ritual context pregnant with meaning. The surrender of one's identity to that of a supernatural entity is, and has been throughout history, pursued by individuals willing to undergo a transcendent experience, a cathartic discharge of personal or social tensions, an embodiment of cultural mythology, a form of communal bonding, or some combination of the above.

The first modern scholarly study of possession, OESTERREICH's 1921 book on possession, described its widespread presence across time and geography, analyzed its phenomenology, and made an important distinction between "spontaneous" and "voluntary" cases. In a more recent series of publications, BOURGUIGNON (e.g., 1973: 31) demonstrated that spirit possession is not a rare occurrence. After conducting a systematic review of 488 societies across the globe, BOURGUIGNON found that 74% of them believe that spiritual forces can directly intrude into the personality or well-being of individuals. This assumption BOURGUIGNON labeled "possession belief". In contrast, she found a prevalence of 52% of cultures in her sample of "possession

"trance", defined not only as a belief but an altered state of consciousness in which the individual is assumed to be taken over by another entity. BOURGUIGNON argued that "trance" is a general alteration of consciousness that becomes "possession trance" when the local beliefs explain this event as involving an external, possessing entity.

In contrast, one of us has argued (CARDEÑA 1989) that there are a number of alterations of consciousness, only some of which give rise to an experience and belief of spirit possession. We distinguish possession, a "radical alteration of embodied identity" (CARDEÑA 1989: 2), from other alterations that either do not involve central alterations in identity (e.g., drug induced states), or in which the individual's identity becomes disembodied (e.g., the phenomenal self is experienced as existing in an imaginal reality different from the one occupied by the body). Cluster analyses of alterations of consciousness conducted by WINKELMAN (1986) show that a distinction at least between a mostly immobile, disembodied, imaginal state, and a state involving a radical alteration of identity involving changes in movements and vocalization, amnesia and other behaviors, has empirical support. A similar distinction was made by ROUGET (1985: 11) for what he called "ecstasy" (involving immobility, silence, recollection, hallucinations, etc.) and "trance" (involving movement, noise, crisis, amnesia, etc.) phenomena. In fact, within the same culture the traditional healer may practice both imaginal and possession alterations of consciousness (cf. STOLLER 1987; 1989). These categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive. One anthropologist has observed in fieldwork in Southeast Asia that very rarely a respondent will claim to have had simultaneous "possession" and "magical flight" states (HEINZE 1988).

Even when we restrict possession to a radical alteration in embodied identity, an analysis of various behavioral and experiential expressions suggests that the term subsumes at least three main modalities of alternate identity: "transitional possession", "alternate identity possession" and "transcendent possession" (CARDEÑA 1989). The first one involves various behaviors and phenomena indicative of a transition between "discrete" states of consciousness (TART 1975), and is represented by dizziness and other ongoing unstable and transitory changes in consciousness; the second involves the substitution of a clearly defined identity (that of the devotee) by another one (that of the *lwa* or spirit); finally, the third modality involves the experience of transcendence of a geographically and temporally discrete identity by full involvement in particular behaviors, experiences or impulses. While these three modalities are not conceived as mutually exclusive, they are partly consistent with an analysis of possession in Brazil along levels of "trance" involvement (FRIGERIO 1989).

## 2. Possession and psychopathology

Earlier in the century the imaginal reports by shamans were thought to express psychotic or hysterical traits, a view that is currently discredited (WALSH 1990). However, possession occurrences are still viewed with considerably more suspicion. Even authors generally sympathetic to human religious experience such as Eliade and Walsh have made a hierarchical distinction between the purported controllable phenomenon of "magical flight" (which is assumed to be true shamanism) and the supposedly uncontrollable phenomenon of "possession".

It is certainly more palatable for the Western observer to accept a manifestation that is mostly quiet and subdued than one involving unusual, unpredictable and seemingly bizarre behaviors. Further complicating this image is the fact that in the Judeo-Christian tradition possession has been almost exclusively considered demonic: witness, for instance, the exorcisms of Jesus Christ and the purported plague of possessions in Renaissance Europe (e.g. WALKER 1981). This limited view disregards the fact that radical alterations of identity including the "gift

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of tongues" or glossolalia have been common currency in a number of Western religious sects such as the Shakers and the Pentecostals. It also disregards the observation that a sense of being "taken over" by a character or an action is sometimes reported by actors, dancers and other performers who use their bodies as their main expressive vehicle (e.g., BATES 1987; CARDEÑA 1989).

Although deeply ingrained (e.g., WALSH 1990), the notion that the shamanic "magical flight" involves a command of the spiritual world whereas possession involves an uncontrolled surrender is an oversimplification. On the one hand, the "magical flight" includes imaginal events and sensations that occur spontaneously and to which the shaman reacts rather than totally controls; on the other, as practiced particularly by traditional experts, possession involves the ability to control how to engage and disengage an alternate identity of consciousness. In Haiti, for instance, the houngans and mambos (see below) may have initially experienced somewhat wild or uncontrollable *bosal* possessions, and then developed the ability to alter their consciousness when necessary while retaining the capacity to interact with individuals (for instance see the section below on Gede) at the same time that the world of the spirits is incarnated through them<sup>2</sup>.

This organized process of how and when to be taken over by spirits and ancestors is of course not unique to Haitian experts but occurs in healers of very different traditions including the Hindu Balinese (SURYANI & JENSEN 1993). In another context Western therapists know that it requires considerable dexterity to know how and when to yield control to various impulses. Rather than simply assuming a wholesale control or lack of it, WALKER (1972) has analyzed the ability to enter into possession along such dimensions as controllability and flexibility<sup>3</sup>.

Within the appropriate personal and cultural framework, Western prejudice of "demonic possession" notwithstanding, spirit possession can be a source of personal and social meaning that does not compromise the psychological integrity of the individual. A recent proposal for a "trance and possession disorder" diagnosis for the DSM-IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - arguably the most widely used psychiatric taxonomy in the world) states that "possession and trance states are common and normal components of religious and other ceremonies in many cultures" (CARDEÑA 1992: 300). Nonetheless, that proposal also recognized that a subset of individuals may be afflicted with a "possession trance" that is not part of traditional cultural or religious practices and produces significant impairment or marked distress. Some individuals in traditional cultures that sanction the presence of possession (e.g., STOLLER 1989) and in technological societies that do not (e.g., CRABTREE 1985), present with long-lasting or recurrent bouts of spirit possession that occur outside of the sites and times specified for such events, and may cause maladjustment and/or distress to the sufferer. The recognition of unwelcome and distressing forms of possession is typically also held by traditional cultures.

The proposed "trance and possession disorder" diagnosis is currently under study for possible inclusion in a future edition of the DSM under the dissociative disorders, those conditions represented by a failure in the integrated functions of memory, identity, perception and consciousness.<sup>4</sup> In this proposal, "trance" is defined as temporary alterations of consciousness or identity without replacement of identity, narrowing of awareness of the surroundings and seemingly uncontrolled stereotyped movements; "possession trance" is defined as temporary alterations in consciousness, memory, identity and/or behavior with the replacement of the customary sense of identity by another, stereotyped behaviors and full or partial amnesia (CARDEÑA 1992: 300). This disorder differs from conditions in which other pervasive or transient conditions (e.g., psychosis, substance-induced intoxication) are central and the experience of trance or possession trance are a secondary feature.

Trance and possession disorders may be the most prevalent forms of the dissociative disorders in cultures that have a tradition of non-pathological possession (cf. LEWIS-FERNÁNDEZ

1992). This does not imply, however, that possession in itself is pathological. Rather, it shows that alterations in identity may not only express religious longings and social tensions<sup>5</sup>, but also provide individuals with "idioms of distress" (NICTER 1981) that shape the form in which their psychological suffering or maladjustment are manifested.

In sum, even though the proposal for a psychiatric diagnosis involving possession would seem to suggest that such a manifestation is pathological, the converse is true. As elaborated below, spirit possession is generally an individual, social and religious manifestation of great significance, although it can also manifest individual impairment and suffering. In the next sections, we focus on the historical and cultural roots of Vodou in Haiti and describe how this religion explains possession not only as a normal human manifestation but one that, in most cases, is greatly valued and beckoned by Vodouisants.

### 3. Vodou and Haiti

*Voodoo* (or Vodou as the Haitians refer to their religion)<sup>6</sup> is the term used to designate the religious beliefs and practices of nearly seven million Haitians. The term *Voodoo* is a transformation of the Dahomean term *vodu* or *vodun*, meaning deity or spirit. Its rituals include trance possessions in which devotees are overtaken by Vodou spirits who are also identified with Roman Catholic saints.

Thanks to Hollywood and the film industry<sup>7</sup> Vodou, or its derivative Hoodoo, engenders in the average mind images of malevolent witches and sorcerers who seek to inflict diseases or death on others by perforating wax or wooden representations. Other popular notions of Vodou include visions of exotic spells performed furtively by blacks inebriated with blood. Their persons invaded by supernatural forces, they enter into uncontrolled and dangerous frenzied states of consciousness while performing magical rituals accompanied by occult incantations. Whatever the motives may have been in popularizing such notions about Vodou, even a cursory examination of the evidence reveals that, in practice, its rituals do not confirm these popular views about it.<sup>8</sup>

Vodou is practiced by the majority of Haitians, whose lives are shaped by the beliefs and rituals of a complex religion with a rich historical tradition. Through a complex system of myths and rituals, Vodou relates the life of the devotee to spirits called *lwes* (from a Yoruba word for spirit), who govern all of human life as well as the entire cosmos. The *lwes* are spiritual entities, including ancestors, believed to manifest themselves in all of nature and particularly in the bodies of their Vodouisant devotees during spirit or trance possession. Vodouisants therefore consider possession a non-material achievement that allows them to embody divine powers that temporarily free them from oppression, poverty, and existential pain. Like many religions of the world, Vodou is a system of beliefs and practices that gives meaning to life: it provides solace and communion with the spiritual world, encourages a need for self-examination, and offers an explanation for death. Death is seen as a spiritual transformation, a portal to the sacred world beyond, where productive and morally upright individuals, perceived by devotees to be powerful ancestral figures, can exercise significant influences on their descendant by possessing them. Vodou is an expression of a people's longing for meaning, continuity and purpose in their lives.

By extension, the use of the term Vodou in Haiti is also generic, referring to a whole assortment of cultural elements: personal creeds and practices, including an elaborate system of folk medicine; a code of ethics transmitted across generations, which encompasses numerous proverbs and stories, songs and folklore; and various forms of artistic expression.



#### 4. Vodou Rituals

##### *Vodou Rituals: A Brief history*

The Africans who came as slaves to Saint-Domingue, as Haiti was called during the colonial period (1492-1804), were a culturally and religiously mixed group of people. Torn from their homelands and transplanted into a new milieu, they managed to salvage some of their heritage from the wreckage left of their old way of life. They relied on their African gods, became possessed by them, and participated in ritual ceremonies in their honor. Many written sources of the period (e.g. MOREAU DE SAINT-MÉRY 1958, I: 69) note that these ceremonies inspired violent slave revolts that threatened the lives of the colonial masters on the plantations and disrupted the social and economic stability of Saint-Domingue.

Because the planters perceived the slaves' religion as dangerous, they were quick to enact a number of edicts that regulated it throughout the colony. One such edict, the Code Noir of 1685, made it illegal for the slaves to practice their African religions openly and, under stiff penalties to the contrary, ordered all masters to have their slaves converted to Christianity within eight days after their arrival to the colony (GISLER 1965: 79).

The severity of such laws drove African rituals underground. To circumvent their masters' interference in the rituals, the slaves learned to overlay their African practices with a veneer of Roman Catholic symbols and rituals. They used symbols of the church in their rituals as "white masks over black faces", veils behind which they could hide their African practices. Makeshift altars and votive candles concealed the Africaness of their rituals (MOREAU DE SAINT-MÉRY 1958 [1797] I: 55).

The presence of Catholic symbols prompted the slaves to integrate them in their rituals, and the inclusion of prayers revering the Catholic saints caused them to establish a system of correspondences between the African gods and the Catholic saints. A system of reinterpretations was born by which particular symbols and images associated with the African gods were made to correspond to similar symbols associated with the saints in Catholic hagiology (SIMPSON 1978; MÉTRAUX 1958). Thus, for example, the Dahomean snake deity Damballah was made to correspond with St. Patrick because of the Catholic legend about Saint Patrick and the snakes of Ireland, represented iconographically by an image of the Saint beside many snakes. Hence, the slaves succeeded in achieving a syncretism, that is, a parallelism in belief and practices between various ethnic religious traditions from Africa and Catholic doctrines from Europe (DESMANGLES 1992).

Throughout Haitian history, the encroachment of Vodou practices on Catholic theology has been embarrassing to the Catholic Church which has campaigned vehemently to eradicate "fetichism" from the island<sup>9</sup>. From time to time the Church has led so-called Antisuperstitious Campaigns in which, with the assistance of the military, it has sought and burned Vodou temples (houanfòs) and ritual paraphernalia throughout the country.

These efforts to eradicate Vodou have had little effect on the state of religion in Haiti however, for Haitians continue to practice, as did the slaves before them, a combination of two religions simultaneously, and to maintain allegiance to them in parallel ways. An often quoted Haitian proverb is that one must be Catholic to serve the Vodou lwas. The truth of that statement illustrates the distinctions in the roles that both religions play in Haitian society. It also illustrates what seems logical to Vodouisants – that the world is governed by the Godhead and the lwas (and by extension the saints) who can be represented in two ways. For them, the priest in his celebration of the mass functions as a point of contact with a distant and abstract Godhead who rules the universe. By contrast, the Vodou priest or priestess (houngan, mambó), in

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A significant detail about the names of the nanchons is that they no longer designate geographical locations, but characterize "categories" of lwas whose function is to ensure the proper operation of the cosmos. Many of the Rada lwas have Petro, Ibo, and Kongo counterparts. As if their images were inverted as they reflect each other in a mirror, the personae of the Rada lwas become reversed in the Petro nanchon. In designating the Petro or Kongo lwas, Vodouisants use the Rada name for each lwa and add epithets, such as Je-Rouge (Red-Eye) or Zaren-yen (Spider) or simply Dantò. For instance Rada's Ezili, who corresponds to the Virgin Mary because of her beauty and is the beneficent lwa of love in Vodou, becomes Ezili Je-Rouge in her Petro affiliation, a dangerous and offensive spirit who can cause harm to recalcitrant devotees.

In spite of the notable differences in the "same" lwa's personae and functions in the various nanchons, Vodouisants do not understand these differences to represent two distinct divine entities, the one symbolizing beneficence and creativity and the other maleficence and destruction. Rather, they believe that both personalities and functions are attributes of the same being.

This belief corresponds to ELIADE's notion of coincidentia oppositorum (ELIADE 1959: 174-78). On the one hand, a lwa expresses the diametric opposition of two divine personae sprung from the same Cosmic Principle – Bondye<sup>11</sup> who is the Gran Mèt (the Grand Master of the Universe), the Godhead who governs the cosmos; and on the other, it is the nature of these personae, in the bodies of possessed devotees, to present themselves by turns, or even sometimes simultaneously, as beneficent and terrible, as creative and destructive. Although the personae of the lwas appear to oppose one another, they are nevertheless reconciled (or rather 'transcended') by Bondye's vital force which not only permeates the universe but fosters the forces of good and evil. In short, the lwas' personae are merely different "faces" of the same Being who is considered much too impersonal to be approached directly, but can be invoked in rituals through less hallowed spirit media. This intermediary role of the lwas is manifested as well in the fact that dead ancestors may become themselves "versions" of traditional lwas.

In beckoning the lwas to the ceremonies, Vodouisants use every auditory and visual means at their disposal. Depending on its nanchon, each lwa has its own songs, its own dances and drum rhythms, as well as its own visual symbols and paraphernalia (e.g., a fake top hat for Gede). The symbols are known as vèvès, geometric, cabbala-like designs that symbolize the personae and the functions of a lwa. In the peristil, or the section of the hounfò in which the Vodou ceremonies are held, the houngan traces the vèvès for the lwas in the order in which they are invoked during a ritual. As the community sings and dances to the rhythmic music of a lwa, the houngan uses corn meal which he places in a dish held in his left hand. Grasping some of the corn meal with the thumb and the forefinger of his right hand, he carefully sifts the flour onto the floor of the peristil, meticulously drawing a vèvè for each lwa. Vodouisants believe that these visual and auditory media summon the lwas to leave their abode and to come to "mount" their devotees.

The lwas can communicate with the community in different ways. First, the variations in the personae of each lwa can manifest themselves in the bodies of a possessed devotee by turn as these appear to reflect their Rada or Petro (and by extension their Catholic) affiliation. Second, the opposed persona of the same lwa can also mount two separate devotees simultaneously, regardless of their sexes, during the same Vodou ceremony. The particular way in which a lwa manifests itself during possession relates both to the purpose for which it is invoked and to the nature of the message that the lwa decides to convey to its devotees. For instance in its Rada persona a lwa may appear in the body of a devotee whom it mounts as a gentle spirit who gives



their performance of the Vodou ceremony, establish contact with personalized yet mysterious spirits who reveal themselves in trance possession by taking over the bodies of their devotees.

In the roles that the hougans/mambos and Catholic priests play in the performance of their respective rituals, one discerns the functions of the two religions in Haitian society. In the Mass, the Catholic priest serves as the only conduit through which one can gain non-experiential access to the sacred world; in his role as the sole dispenser of grace, he stands at the crossroads between the sacred and profane worlds. Conversely, the hongan/mambo sets the stage for a direct contact of his devotees with the world of the lwas, for Vodou is indeed a democratic religion (DAVIS 1988: 46). In Vodou ceremonies, each believer has direct access to the spirit world through trance possession, an altered state of consciousness during which a person is believed to be "mounted" and "ridden" like a horse by a lwa (MARS 1955; BOURGUIGNON 1973; MÉTRAUX 1958, 118). Possession results in the temporary displacement of one's own personality by the envisaged mythological personality of the lwa. Since most of the mythological personae of the lwas derive from Africa and Europe, possession is a means by which Vodouisants can experience firsthand an affinity with African and European religious traditions, and hence participate in both cultures simultaneously. Possession is the liturgical moment of Vodou, a most sacred state, a quintessential spiritual achievement in a believer's religious life because it represents a direct engagement with the spirit world and confirms the beliefs of the devotees. For these reasons, Haitians would wish to have possession conferred on them not once, but several times in their lives. In short, the Haitian's view of the nature of the rituals of both religions can be summarized by the frequent remark that one goes to Catholic Mass to talk about God, but one goes to a Vodou ceremony to become God (DAVIS 1988: 48). For Haitians, the sacred and the secular are not split from each other, so it is natural that when the possessed individual incarnates the world of the spirits, s/he may also entertain the observers by engaging in fascinating dramatic enactments, or by dispensing practical advice if so required (cf. MÉTRAUX 1955; CARDEÑA 1989)<sup>10</sup>.

#### *Vodou Rituals: The many faces of the Lwas*

When Vodouisants speak of the lwas, and by extension the Catholic saints, they group them into families, or nations, called nanchons. The names of the nanchons in large part correspond to the geographical areas of West Africa from which they originated. Not only does each lwa have its own persona by which it can be distinguished from another, but each nanchon also has its own characteristic ethos that demands of its devotees corresponding attitudes. There are generally held to be seventeen *nanchons* of lwas (DESMANGLES 1992: 95), but most Haitians know only a few of these by name. They include the Wangol, Rada, Petro, Ginen, Kongo, Nago and Ibo. Of these the Wangol and Nago (or Anago) are the least known in Haiti. The Kongo and Ibo nanchons, on the other hand, are well-known, and many of their lwas have often been absorbed into the Petro. Many of the lwas of the Ginen (from Guinea) nanchon have also been absorbed into the Rada, and are the central objects of ancestral reverence in the hounfò, the site of vodou rituals. Although most Vodouisants recognize the Wangol nanchon (which originated in Angola), the first author found in the field that no one, including hougans and mambos, could cite the names for those lwas.

The Rada, Petro and Kongo nanchons are by far the best-known in present day Haiti. Rada derives from Arada, the name of a prominent kingdom in Dahomey (a country currently known as Benin) during Haiti's colonial period. Similarly, the Kongo lwas originate in the Bakongo region of West Africa, which provided thousands of slaves to Haiti during the colonial period. Petro has been said to derive (MÉTRAUX, 1958) from a mythological character, Dom Pedro, re-

ported to have been a maroon leader who led a slave rebellion in the eighteenth century that eventually contributed to the liberation of Haiti in 1804. The second author found in the field that some Vodou practitioners strongly questioned this origin for the Petro name.

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In spite of the notable differences in the "same" lwa's personae and functions in the various nanchons, Vodouisants do not understand these differences to represent two distinct divine entities, the one symbolizing beneficence and creativity and the other maleficence and destruction. Rather, they believe that both personalities and functions are attributes of the same being.

This belief corresponds to ELIADE's notion of coincidentia oppositorum (ELIADE 1959: 174-78). On the one hand, a lwa expresses the diametric opposition of two divine personae sprung from the same Cosmic Principle – Bondye<sup>11</sup> who is the Gran Mèt (the Grand Master of the Universe), the Godhead who governs the cosmos; and on the other, it is the nature of these personae, in the bodies of possessed devotees, to present themselves by turns, or even sometimes simultaneously, as beneficent and terrible, as creative and destructive. Although the personae of the lwas appear to oppose one another, they are nevertheless reconciled (or rather 'transcended') by Bondye's vital force which not only permeates the universe but fosters the forces of good and evil. In short, the lwas' personae are merely different "faces" of the same Being who is considered much too impersonal to be approached directly, but can be invoked in rituals through less hallowed spirit media. This intermediary role of the lwas is manifested as well in the fact that dead ancestors may become themselves "versions" of traditional lwas.

In beckoning the lwas to the ceremonies, Vodouisants use every auditory and visual means at their disposal. Depending on its nanchon, each lwa has its own songs, its own dances and drum rhythms, as well as its own visual symbols and paraphernalia (e.g., a fake top hat for Gede). The symbols are known as vèvès, geometric, cabbala-like designs that symbolize the personae and the functions of a lwa. In the peristil, or the section of the hounfò in which the Vodou ceremonies are held, the houngan traces the vèvès for the lwas in the order in which they are invoked during a ritual. As the community sings and dances to the rhythmic music of a lwa, the houngan uses corn meal which he places in a dish held in his left hand. Grasping some of the corn meal with the thumb and the forefinger of his right hand, he carefully sifts the flour onto the floor of the peristil, meticulously drawing a vèvè for each lwa. Vodouisants believe that these visual and auditory media summon the lwas to leave their abode and to come to "mount" their devotees.

The lwas can communicate with the community in different ways. First, the variations in the personae of each lwa can manifest themselves in the bodies of a possessed devotee by turn as these appear to reflect their Rada or Petro (and by extension their Catholic) affiliation. Second, the opposed persona of the same lwa can also mount two separate devotees simultaneously, regardless of their sexes, during the same Vodou ceremony. The particular way in which a lwa manifests itself during possession relates both to the purpose for which it is invoked and to the nature of the message that the lwa decides to convey to its devotees. For instance in its Rada persona a lwa may appear in the body of a devotee whom it mounts as a gentle spirit who gives

moral sustenance to the devotees. By contrast, in its Petro persona it may threaten its devotees simultaneously with misfortunes if they fail to tend offerings in its honor.

But in whatever form the lwas choose to manifest themselves, trance possession exhibits a liminal character that places the possessed person in a state of social ambiguity. VAN GENNEP (1960) was the first to analyze liminality as one of the stages in the rites of passage<sup>12</sup>. Based on van GENNEP's study, TURNER has used the term to refer to one's state of social "ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories" (TURNER, 1967: 97; DOUGLAS 1966). He notes that the characteristics of the "liminars"<sup>13</sup>, that is, those persons or entities that are the subjects of ritualistic manipulation, become ambiguous, "for they pass through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. Liminars are in between or betwixt" (TURNER AND TURNER 1978: 249).

Possession manifests similar qualities of liminality that can be examined in several ways. First, as DOBBIN observed in the case of the Jombee Dance in Montserrat, possessed individuals transcend all societal controls that maintain formal divisions between social classes or between those in traditional authority and the rest of the community (DOBBIN 1986: 122). Possession is a ritual form that is antithetical to traditional social structures and exhibits what the TURNERS call "social antistructure" (TURNER AND TURNER 1978: 249); it repudiates traditional political hierarchies and ascribes to them an "invisible" character (TURNER 1967: 96-97). The disappearance of these social distinctions is a corollary to social ambiguity since the community's infrastructures that contribute to a person's self-identity are suspended during possession<sup>14</sup>. Hence, the possessed can be seen as socially "unclassified", participating in a communal ritual but having, at least temporarily, a modified and ambiguous status within that community<sup>15</sup>. Paradoxically, as do most rituals, possession also affirms the group's shared moral values, gives a clear sense of *communitas* (TURNER AND TURNER 1978: 249), and it strengthens the communal bonds that bind members of a group to one another. In the context of a Vodou ceremony, trance possession is a state in which any believer can enter regardless of his or her social station or sphere of authority in the community. Once possession is attained, a "mounted" person becomes a mouthpiece of a lwa, and can call the community to the straight and narrow most forebodingly. As already noted, the Petro characterizations in particular can be threatening to recalcitrant devotees. Hence, trance possession engenders a temporary social equality that functions strictly as a means of reinforcing some social norms and the community's religious fervor. Second, the possessed devotees become transitional beings who stand symbolically between the sacred world of the lwas (Vilokan) and the profane world of humans; in this role they are central channels of communication between both worlds.

In Haiti, the lwas speak to the community of the living in the body of the possessed, but they are also requested to carry messages of intercession to other lwas (and by extension to the Christian saints) in Vilokan, or to spirits of ancestors in the sacred abyss. This is particularly true of trance possessions occasioned by Legba, typically the first lwa invoked and the interlocutor and polyglot among the lwas, the "Hermes" of the Haitian pantheon of spirits, and represented by St. Peter, the keeper of the gates, in its Catholic persona.

That liminality does not restrict itself merely to humans, but applies to the roles of the lwas as well can be seen particularly by Gede's position in the Vodou pantheon. In Vodou theology, Gede is the master of Ginen, the world of the dead, into which all human souls retreat after dying. As lord of death, he stands at Ginen's portals and controls the passage of souls into the cosmic graveyard. He is believed to cause death by extracting human souls from the human bodies that serve as their shells, and then gives them new life in ethereal form in Ginen. Many Vodouisants believe that he also allows the souls of the dead to reincarnate into new bodies at conception. Hence, Gede is not merely the lord of death but of life as well. In Vodou mythology and iconography, he is identified with such symbols as the black wooden crosses that are

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frequently erected on tombstones at grave sites; with tools of gravediggers such as pickaxes and shovels; and with objects such as piles of stones, skulls, and dried leaves. Most if not all Haitian graveyards contain a cross represents Gede.

But as the lord of life, he is also represented by the phallus and is identified with the inevitable sexual element in human nature. Pictures of him drawn on the walls of the Vodou temple often show a very elegant man with enlarged nostrils indicating breathing, a symbol of life, but with petrified arms and feet. His large thoracic cavity is depicted as a skeleton, a symbol of death. In contrast, his erect phallus is large, to symbolize life. Through the body of a possessed devotee, he walks with *gouyads*, gyrating movements that emulate the sexual act (DESMANGLES 1992: 95). He is represented in the Catholic hagiography by saints wearing black robes.

According to MAYA DEREN, Gede is a complex figure in Haiti; he symbolizes liminality being positioned between the womb and the tomb (DEREN 1972: 102). His high position in the Vodou pantheon underlines the significance of sexual intercourse and death in Vodou theology. He is the agent that follows the passage of the soul from the sacred world of the dead to the profane world of humans, the principle of crossing between ethereality and corporality (another of the reasons why Gede is symbolized by a cross), and the link between the living and the dead.

In conclusion, the nanchon in Vodou does not primarily designate the historical origin of the lwas, but represents the ethos of the lwas as well as the characteristic attitudes with which the devotees approach them. In their Rada, Petro or Catholic characterizations, or at least in the way in which these characterizations are manifested in the possessed devotees, the lwas appear as beneficent or maleficent, and the devotees act out these personae as the community envisages them in the local mythology. By such manifestations, the community is able to recognize not only which lwa has come to visit the peristil, but also which nanchon is represented. In a sense, the living depiction of the lwas' personae in the bodies of their devotees replaces the literary and artistic vehicles upon which mythologies of other cultures, including those of Christian Europe, often rely for the portrayal of their deities, although iconographies and stories of lwas also play an important role in Vodou. In Haiti, one does not come to know the lwas by merely observing them, but by "becoming" them – a temporary condition that produces social and spiritual ambiguity, but nonetheless a condition that is significant for the spiritual and moral well-being of the individual and the community.

#### Notes

1. An almost identical term is MULHERN's (1991) use of "embodied alternative identities" for possession and related phenomena.

2. The second author recorded the account of a Western educated houngan who described a process from initially unexpected and uncontrolled possessions to a current mastery of the entry and departure into spiritual so as to advise Vodouisants seeking assistance (CARDEÑA, 1991)

3. Not only is the organization and control of the experience something that the possession practitioner needs to develop, but also the individual with mostly imaginal experiences. Various research project show that in a small subset of individuals the proneness to have an intense and realistic fantasy/imaginal life is associated with psychopathology (cf. CARDEÑA 1992; LYNN & RHUE 1988).

4. The collection of articles in the journal *Transcultural psychiatric research review*, V 29(4), 1992, contains both the rationale for the proposal and a number of reactions to it from experts in the area.

5. The work of BODDY (1989) on the use of possession cults among women is particularly relevant in this context.

6. Henceforth in this paper, we use the term Vodou, the official Haitian Creole orthography for Voodoo.

7. As seen in the movies such as *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, and the film made for television, *The Believers*

8. Although the expectation by tourists has given rise to "tourist" Vodou ceremonies that represent some of these distorted images (cf. ANDERSON 1984)

9. For instance, the second author observed in the mid-eighties that the day preceding an important Vodou ceremony in Saut-d'Eau, the local priest conducted a procession carrying an effigy of the Virgin Mary to the waterfall where many Vodou ceremonies take place, seeking to preempt them.

10. While enactments during possession may at times serve mostly an expressive or entertainment functions, it is also the case that various traditional and modern cultures use dance and other forms of performance to, as HARTZ (1987) puts it, "embody the supernatural".

11. This term derives from the French *Bon Dieu*, meaning the Good Lord.

12. The phases in the process of these rites include separation (the preliminal phase), transition (the liminal phase) and incorporation (the post-liminal phase).

13. The italics are his.

14. An extensive analysis of the subversion of boundaries in the afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé is found in WAFER (1991).

15. The second author observed in the countryside that even "marginal" individuals, that is individuals with psychological disorders, were welcome in Vodou ceremonies. On the other hand, DAVIS (1988) proposed that zombification, not a defining part of Vodou practices, could be visited on individuals who violated social serious norms. Experts in harmful practices are called bokor, in contrast with the traditional appellation of hougans and mambos.

## 5. Deutsche Zusammenfassung

### Trance-Besessenheit und Vodoo in Haiti

Dieser Beitrag befaßt sich mit den kulturvergleichenden, psychologischen und religiösen Aspekten der Besessenheitstrance, vor allem innerhalb der Vodoo-Religion und Gesellschaft Haitis. Das Forschen über die rituelle Besessenheit, darunter auch bestimmte Formen pathologischer Besessenheit, ist immer schon ein Anliegen religionswissenschaftlicher Studien gewesen. In der letzten Zeit werden zunehmend die dabei stattfindenden dissoziativen Vorgänge untersucht.

In der westlichen Volksmeinung, aber auch in der Psychologie des 19. Jh. nahm man an, daß Besessenheitszustände entweder Manifestationen dämonischer Kräfte oder Symptome einer psychiatrischen Erkrankung sind. Im Gegensatz hierzu betrachtet die neuere Forschung die Besessenheitszustände als eine transkulturelle religiöse Ausdrucksform, die aus sinnvollen und funktionalen Verhaltenselementen im Kontext einer spezifischen Mythologie mit eigenen Ritualen besteht.

Wir definieren die Besessenheit als eine vorübergehende Änderung der eigenen Körperidentität samt Bewußtsein, Gedächtnis und Verhalten, die mit dem Glauben einhergeht, daß der Körper durch mythologische Geister mit persönlichem Erscheinungsbild „beritten“ wird.

Vodoo in Haiti ist eine synkretistische Religion, die aus historischen Gründen die afrikanische Tradition der direkten Kommunikation mit Geistern und Familiennahmen mit der christlichen Hagiographie verbindet. Man glaubt, daß sich die Geister der Besessenheit bedienen, um sich selbst ihren Adepten zu manifestieren und ihnen somit Zugang zur spirituellen Welt zu ermöglichen.

Die rituelle Besessenheit erfüllt eine Vielzahl von Funktionen innerhalb der religiösen Gemeinschaft. Es eröffnet den Individuen eine körperliche Kommunikation mit göttlichen Kräften, die sie zeitweise von der Unterdrückung, Armut oder dem existenziellen Leiden befreien.

Es verdeutlicht eine Art „sozialer Antistruktur“ als einen zweideutigen Zustand, in dem die gesellschaftlichen Infrastrukturen, die zur Selbstidentität der Person und ihrer entsprechenden sozialen Beziehungen beitragen, vorübergehend außer Kraft gesetzt werden. Jedes Mitglied der Gemeinschaft kann im Prinzip besessen werden, unabhängig von seinem sozialen Status. Das Individuum im Zustand der Besessenheit, wird zum Sprachrohr eines Geistes und kann mit jedem andern Mitglied der Gemeinschaft direkt kommunizieren ohne Rücksicht auf die soziale Rangordnung und ohne Angst vor späteren Repressalien. Die Besessenheit ermöglicht eine temporäre soziale Gleichheit, die vorrangig dazu dient, die religiösen Werte und Leistungen der Gemeinschaft zu verstärken. In ihren rituellen Rollen sind die Besessenen liminale Wesen. Sie stehen gleichsam zwischen der heiligen Welt der Geister und der profanen menschlichen Welt. Sie fungieren deshalb als Kommunikationsbrücke zwischen den beiden Welten. Auf Haiti sprechen die Geister zu der Gemeinschaft durch den Körper der Besessenen, die auch dazu aufgefordert werden können, den Geistern menschliche Botschaften zu übermitteln.

Indem der Geist *Ezili* z.B. in der *Rada-Nanchon* über vorwiegend wohlwollende Eigenschaften verfügt, ist der gleiche *Lwa* als *Petro-Nanchon* ein besonders gefährlicher Geist. Darüber hinaus entsprechen verschiedene Erscheinungsformen von *Ezili* katholischen Ebenbildern wie z.B. in diesem Fall der *Heiligen Maria* und der *Schwarzen Jungfrau*.

Abschließend stellen wir fest, daß die rituelle Besessenheit ein gemeinschaftlicher Ausdruck mit stark religiöser und sozialer Bedeutung und mit einer reichhaltigen und komplexen Mythologie ist.

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