Haitian Vodou Possession and Zombification: Desire and Return of the Repressed

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.14.11

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Recommended Citation

DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.14.11
Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol14/iss1/11

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In this article, I use Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to examine the contrasting phenomena of Haitian Vodou possession and zombification and how they serve to constitute the self within a cultural context of community. I examine possession not as a pathological phenomenon in the traditional Western interpretation of a whole and centered self, but rather as a cultural and personal opportunity to transform reality by shifting the boundaries of the mutable self. Described by devotees as “a ride by the loa,” the spirit possession of Vodou is a religious practice that unites the worshiper with the object worshipped, the god. In this powerful relationship, one literally becomes the desire of the other, if only for an unconscious moment. While possession reflects a successful re-unification with the object of one’s desire, zombification illustrates the power of the repressed. As a means of social control, the threat of zombification acquires its power from the repressed associations of Haiti’s violent history. Drawing on the horrors of an especially brutal colonial past, the madness of rebellion, and the fear of what that does to the spirit, the zombie represents and embodies the worst possible fate for any black Haitian. Zombification signifies the true annihilation of the self in a loss of will and a reduction to mere flesh.

I was initially drawn to an examination of Haitian Vodou not because of its apparent exoticism and alien appeal, but rather for quite opposite reasons. In *Mama Lola*, Karen McCarthy Brown (1991) portrays Haitian Vodou culture, whether in Haiti or transplanted to New York City, as the expression of people making sense of life, participating in its creation, and negotiating the uncertainty that arises from it. As an ethnography, her work is rich in the detail of the personal and collective strategies that comprise this negotiated space in history and culture. Like Maya Deren (1951) and Katherine Dunham (1969) did in previous decades, McCarthy Brown gives us an access to a culture we will likely never personally encounter. I took this introduction into Haitian Vodou as an intellectual opportunity to play with theory that fascinates and perplexes. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that human life fascinates and perplexes to the extent that we search for theory that can address the permutations of human being without requiring an obliteration of any of its aspects. The study of religion in society is particularly challenging if one wants to maintain a balance among that which is observed, that which is reported by participants, and that which is inferred theoretically. As McCarthy Brown’s informants spoke about the spirits or loa in the Vodou pantheon, their reflection of the parental imagos of psychoanalytic theory appeared to me both apparent and creatively multiplied. With such an abundant host of imagery, and the psychic relationships implied therein, it seemed that the Vodou religion was particularly revealing of the processes framed by psychoanalytic theory. Not only did Vodou seem to fit this theoretical framing, but it has also provided an expansion and deepening of this theory in the intersubjective play between the theory and the phenomena.

In this article, I employ Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to look at religious phenomena of Vodou, particularly spirit possession, for the theory’s capacity to bridge human motivation and interpretation with our own social creations. Lacan’s reinterpretation of Freud opened new routes of access to the dynamics of interrelationality between the individual and the created social world that appeared as already enculturated in the Freudian formulations. By situating the self in the Symbolic order of linguistic enculturation, Lacan finds that selves may be interpreted as products of specific cultural and social contexts as well as psychic structures. Where Freud’s (1923) model of the structures of the psyche implied a universality and reified gender relations, the Lacanian model depathologizes non-normative relations. Freud had begun to posit the self as destabilized from the standpoint of ego defenses, but Lacan dislocates the ego from the Cartesian model of *cogito* and asserts its total constructedness. The self, for Lacan, is constituted entirely in its relationships and as an other (in relationship) to itself.
In juxtaposition to the creativity and dynamism of possession practices, zombification has developed in Haiti from the traditions of the African poisoners and in response to a perceived need for a parochial form of social control. Where Vodou practices demand devotion to the gods and commitment to the perpetuation of the community, zombification could be the fate of those who egregiously violate the norms of kin and community responsibility. Rather than reinforce the self in the service of religion and community, the zombi represents the consequences of acting in one's personal self-interest, with the result of a loss of functional subjectivity. Between the self-building practices of spirit possession and the self-negating phenomenon of zombification, a vibrant cultural dynamic of self and society emerges.

Feminist and post-colonial theories demand that scholars examine lives and texts with a mindfulness to identities formed in the negative, as not-I, that carry their meanings in the shadows of, and as the object to, the first person. In many ways, the colonial influences on the religions of the African Diaspora had a profound othering effect. But at the same time, the people practicing these religions found their own ways of reconstituting this negativity as their own creation. The unintended consequences of colonial repression in such extreme forms created a cultural dialectic, which only served to reinforce and intensify traditional religious practices and identities. The oppression of life in slavery and poverty worked through religion to expose repression, as Norman O. Brown claims, to reveal a “hidden reality”². Religion and psychoanalytic theory accomplish a similar unconcealing of the unconscious. Psychoanalytic theory, whose purpose is to give access to this hidden reality, may be used to unravel the dynamics of unconscious motivators evidenced in visible human behaviors. But religion, whose purpose is to complete human existence, may reveal in psychoanalytic theory its own unacknowledged motivators.

This paper is structured to first make an examination of the arguments for using Lacanian theory over Freudian theory when attempting to discuss religious practices of an unfamiliar religion embedded in an unfamiliar culture. Next, I briefly describe Haiti's colonial history focusing on how religious practices of possession states create and reconstitute history and community. I then shift to a demonstration of the manifestation of religious imagery as based on the logic of the imago and the early psychic relationships of infantile fantasy as they relate to Vodou spirits and Haitian culture. A discussion of the ritual dynamics that contribute to the reconfiguration of the self/not-self follows with an emphasis on the contrasting phenomena of possession and zombification. Haitian society provides an especially rich background for such an examination because of its turbulent and unresolved history of colonization, slavery, rebellion, and transplanted culture. The deep dramas of real life for the dispossessed Africans have created an expressive social tapestry upon which they've woven their incredible stories.

Religion as Pathology

Sigmund Freud opened new access to the understanding of human motivation through his theorizing of psychic structures. His motivation, however, was to explain pathologies, and to account for dysfunctional symptomatology that appeared to be physiologically inexplicable. Freud constructed his fundamental approach to human psychic development in a dynamic of internal conflict, which either met healthy resolution in each phase or, failing that, resulted in neurosis. He saw the imperatives and restrictions of society as opposing the instinctive drives of humans and forcing each individual to negotiate her or his own balance with the conflict generated therein. Freud's model of society against the human, and neurosis against resolution, set the tone for examinations of social phenomena using psychoanalytic theory as the guiding paradigm. Although this theory can serve as a template to a methodology, the medicalized overtones ascribed to it have also constituted it as an instrument of cultural hegemony. Freud's disdain for religion as a reality-denying illusion³ and his insistence on science as the appropriate access to understanding reality, served to frame religions as evidence of a failure to mature. For Freud, atheism is the norm and religion a reaction to repressed reality or guilt. First World theorists and researchers who use psychoanalytic theory to explain religious phenomena often project this sentiment not only onto religious beliefs and practices arising from their own cultures, but also onto unfamiliar cultures⁴.
It is not at all surprising then that Maya Deren challenges the validity of a psychoanalytic interpretation of Haitian Vodou practices in her ethnographic study, *Divine Horsemen* (1951). She describes the rituals engaged in by the vodouisant as transformative rather than disinhibitive. In an expressive, open, and shared existence, she claims, "the communal memory is complete. [T]he man of a primitive community has a relatively meager unconscious, in the sense of secreted traumas which are to be searched out as motivations for behaviors." There will be no secrets or repressed memories in a community that shares intimate and open knowledge among its inhabitants. Haitian society cannot be seen to repress its members in the same ways that European societies do, and Freud's postulations of repression appear to be inappropriate for the Haitian example.

According to Deren, Vodou rituals are designed to reward the servant for her or his intentional devotion, to create an integrative discipline through service to the spirits, and to engage the devotee in the conscious development of a "soul." Possession, in particular, although it may appear as spontaneous release to the outsider, is achieved through practices and rituals dominated by concentrated discipline. Possession is the focal point of Vodou ritual; it is "the center toward which all the roads of Voudoun converge." Deren's project is clearly intended to counter the First-World view of Vodou practices as regressive and superstitious, and she identifies psychoanalytic theory as representative of a colonial negation of Haitian culture.

Freud may have conceived of psychoanalytic theory as universalistic, but by the necessary constraints of its location in western, European, post-Enlightenment civilization, it is infused with the political and ideological imperatives of its grounding. No theory can be free of these faults, but it is necessary to be aware of the presuppositions that come to bear on the application of any theory, especially those theories that become practice. The universalistic quality of psychoanalytic theory is problematized by Freud's biological structuralism. He formulated the theory as specific to the structural arrangements of the psyche, which were themselves dependent on biology. Human beings do indeed have a biology in common, but they do not share a common interpretation of it. The scientism of Freud's time (and ours) imposed what appeared to him to be a valid and indisputable basis for a universal human "truth", how ever, the body from which Freud drew his inferences was a Western European one. As long as culturally specific constraints informed the theoretical construction of the self, psychoanalytic theory couldn't promise the possibility of universal application.

**Lacanian Psychoanalytic Theory**

When Jacques Lacan turned to an examination of Freud, he brought the influences of phenomenological philosophy, structural linguistics, and surrealism to his reinterpretation. Lacan's philosophical, anthropological, and linguistic approach reconstituted psychoanalysis as less rigidly scientific and more amenable to social variation and the broad ranges of human cultural expression. This created a shift from Freud's post-Enlightenment, modernist framing to a post-modern psychoanalysis. In Lacan's framing, there is no distinction between the human and society or health and neurosis. Language becomes the structure of psychic formulation, and the ego is permanently decentered. Lacan's conceptualization of the self as created entirely in/through social relations questions the Cartesian assumption of a whole self, existing prior to its social encounters. As David H. Fisher describes Lacan's stance, "[t]o the extent that modern culture is founded on the Cartesian notion of a unified subject, certain of its origins, or on understanding of individual existence over against culture, it is founded, for Lacan, on an error". Social criticism that is based on the Cartesian presupposition of conflict generated externally and in opposition to a true human nature displaces the responsibility of conflict's origin from within human interaction, and reifies society as an alienating agency.

Cultural specificity resides, at least partially, in language. By shifting Freud's biological constraints (tied to cultural metaphor) to language structures, Lacan moved the paradigm from European standards to local standards. Carl Raschke (1997) sees this move as a delegitimation of psychoanalytic theory's claim to "theoretical hegemony." Terrains of absolute knowledge are demystified and reinscribed within the "meta-language" of the "collective unconscious", relocating causal authority in the dialectic of culture and psyche. Deren (1951) similarly recognized the imposition of the Cartesian split.
The self as subject becomes less accessible with increased social interaction, while the self as object becomes more varied and complex. This conceptualization draws on Freud's insight into the ego as a defense, but more specifically suggests that the ego is entirely objectified.

This dynamic split leaves the self unconsciously in pursuit of its own completion as a life project. Lacan frames this within the context of the first relationship again. The self that is constructed in a promised wholeness, but cannot realize this achievement, is experienced as a "lack." Lacan constitutes the "phallus" as the fantasized power of the mother in the Imaginary and the father in the Symbolic, which promises this wholeness. But as a fantasy creation the "phallus" cannot deliver the power and plenitude it implies. Nobody actually possesses the "phallus," but the fantasy that it can be acquired drives desire. Like the infant's insistent cries for satisfaction, demand becomes the bridge to desire. Because the "phallus" is only imagined to exist in others, desire is also located in others. Our self-objectification requires us to look to others for a completion where we become the other's desire. Desire is carried from the Imaginary order created in the mirror phase into the Symbolic order of enculturation.

Freud's Oedipal arrangement was vital to his formulation both of the resolution of gender/sexual identity and to the alleged sources of religious feeling and impulse. Lacan revisits Freud's Oedipal formulation and resituates it as the child's entry into language. Where the plenitude of the mother represented the "phallus" of the Imaginary, the shift of identification to the world of the father through language becomes the "phallus" of the Symbolic. The perception of self as lack inspires the reconstitution of the "phallus" at every level; power is perceived to exist "out there" and as potentially attainable. The object's lack emerges as something wrong or missing and which ought to be there. 12 In patriarchal societies, the normative role of masculinity comes to represent the phallus as male power. The Symbolic order refers, however, to the opportunity offered by language to create or discover one's subjectivity. The third order is the Real in the Lacanian formulation. Here the true subject resides in the unconscious and the pre-symbolic universe of embodied experience, not the world as the
ego experiences it. The Real can have no lack as it is plenitude, and it requires no completion, as it is whole.

Where Freud’s theory of the superego and ego ideal was a little vague on the issue of religion, sometimes valorizing and sometimes denigrating its functions, in Lacan’s formulation we can see that the religious person has simply created a relationship with a god or gods. Within Lacan’s linguistic framing, religion provides another vehicle for the ego’s project of completion. William James Earle found a translation of Lacan’s interpretation of religion and desire, “the religious person ... makes God the cause of his desire, which is the proper object of sacrifice.” In other words, the self, as God’s object of desire, can take on the project of perfecting the soul for the sake of religious completion. Maya Deren’s claim that Vodou ritual is a conscious development of the soul concurs with this interpretation of the self as object created by its social milieu. The Imaginary can find expression in the oceanic experience of connection to gods or goddesses and implied sources of plenitude and power. The Symbolic informs the practices and the valuations that their meanings will have for the community—the official form of the phallus, for example. Early imagos from both the Imaginary and the Symbolic create the imagery that is projected of the gods. The play between the conditioning of the object and the eruption of the unconscious in religious expressions can give some access to the Real as possibility.

**Vodou, History, and Lacan**

Haiti was an especially profitable colony for France during the 17th and 18th centuries. African slaves were transported to Hispaniola as early as 20 years after Columbus’s arrival, and like most of the people stolen from Africa, they came from a variety of regions and represented a collection of religious traditions. Vodou is a spirit religion, but it is a mix of both Old World and New World processes. It is both a descendant of African spirit religions and a creation of the rough experience of life in the colonized Caribbean. Haitian Vodou involves many relationships within the community and between the devotee and the gods. Multi-layered traditions, a ravaged history, and cultural and personal strategies and possibilities inform these relations.

As a completely dispossessed people, the Africans in Haiti were severed from their ancestries and geographic communities. They were denied authority over their own lives and subjected to Roman Catholic religious practices. Both in the initial transportation of African spirit religion, and in the later association with rebellion and maroonage, Vodou loa came to represent cultural survival and resistance to colonization for African Haitians. Europeans feared this religion and imposed Catholicism and its imagery on the slaves. An examination of Afro-Latin religions by Andrés Pérez y Mena argues that the social-scientific model of syncretism has failed to acknowledge the consciousness of African and Indian participants in the production of their own religious forms. While it may appear from the outside that religious adherents have converted to Catholicism, the use of Catholic iconography and ritual objects has been adapted to accommodate traditional practices allowing practitioners “to conceal a reality which provided them a space to worship”. Vodouisants adopted the saints’ images as a cover for the continued practice of loa service. Although Vodou has been illegal for most of its western existence, it has survived under this cover of European propriety.

Possession as a trance state was an established tradition in the African forms of spirit religion. In Haiti especially, possession serves an institutional function. Lacking authorized social structures for Vodou practice, like churches, official schooling for practitioners, or state support, the logical repository for Vodou divinity is in the body of the serviteur, or servant to the god. This creates an available, mobile, and reproducible location for ancestry and collective identity to reassert itself on demand. In the bodies of devotees, the loa find expression and committed protection. In Vodou cosmology, the loa roam the countryside, never having left their obligation to life and the community completely. Within every human there is also a soulic dynamic that allows an exchange of living spirit for loa spirit without loss of animating spirit to the one possessed. Possession is likened to the loa as rider mounting the devotee as horse. Being ridden by the loa fills a “lack” created in the collective unconscious by dispossession, death, and the threats to material security. Anyone can be made into a loa upon death through a ritual to reclaim the soul of the departed from the waters of the abyss. Deren describes how this ritual, “retains
Wade Davis (1985) investigated reported cases of zombification, he made to serve the community, tradition preserved, and history recodified. The past as ground gained, upon and from which it moves forward to the future. The living do not serve the dead; it is the dead who are made to serve the living. Ancestors can be returned to the community, tradition preserved, and history recodified.

Zombification contrasts sharply with the practice of loa possession, however, and reflects a failure in communal responsibility. When Wade Davis (1985) investigated reported cases of zombification, he found that the "zombies" had violated community values and norms, and had been judged by a secret tribunal prior to their unfortunate fates. Rather than being victims of black magic and sorcery, they appeared to have brought their fates upon themselves with their anti-social behaviors. The people who were turned into zombies were deemed unfit to participate in society. Their crimes, however, were ethical and not technically crimes against property or otherwise punishable in a formal court of law. In other words, they were violations of specific cultural codes of behavior, which would not find retribution in the state system. Zombification is a form of vernacular capital punishment as Davis explains,

In the minds of the urban elite, zombification might well be criminal, but every indication suggested that in the vodoun society it was actually the opposite, a social sanction imposed by recognized corporate groups whose responsibility included the policing of that society.

Westerners often conflate the phenomenon of possession with that of zombification. The loa are not the same entities as zombies and are only related as spiritual opposites. Zombification is a ritual practice that evolved in the secret societies of Haitian culture as a means of social control. For a colonized people the official forms of social control complimented the institution of slavery and represented white oppression rather than providing a mechanism for maintaining just relations. The secret societies devised their own means of underground social management through the threat of taking away an individual's power to negotiate his own existence by turning him into a zombie. Zombification represents a crude form of servitude. Rather than empowering the community by returning loa to the people through ritual, zombification isolates the individual from community and obliterates his functioning will. Unlike service to the loa, the zombie can only serve a human master, much like his slave ancestors were forced to.

Serving the loa, on the other hand, is experienced as a calling for individuals to take on a social responsibility. Unlike the Christian interpretation of possession as an evil invasion and overwhelming of the self by an unwanted entity, the loa merges with a portion of the person's spirit in a symbiotic relationship. The serviteur must be a mature person, preferably one who has mastered the self. Insufficient training or preparation can result in a difficult possession, and it is a practice that is considered completely inappropriate for children. The cultural parameters of this practice are carefully defined and accessible in the Symbolic order of language. It is understood that the boundaries of the self must be fluid enough to dissolve in the face of the will of the god being served, even though those boundaries must first be carefully established. Being ridden by the spirit is not interpreted as a loss of the self, but rather as a consolidation and reconfiguration of the self. As Joan Dayan argues in Haiti, History, and the Gods,

For the "possessed", that dance is not a loss of identity, but rather the surest way back to the self, to an identity lost, submerged, and denigrated. In the horrors of the New World, the ability to know the god in oneself meant survival, which is nothing other than the ability to keep expressing the self, if only temporarily, to a form of power that defies compromise.

A core of imperturbable, autonomous being clearly does not define the self in this sense. The self that receives a loa and recovers itself in the experience is a self that is open to its own mutability and completion in others, the "survival" of which Dayan speaks. Wholeness is achieved by taking on another spiritual entity. Just as a cultural lacuna is filled with the cultural practice of possession, the dialectic of the relationship of loa and horse is capable of filling individual experiences of lack. The power, or phallus of the spirit entity, is temporarily transferred to the devotee.

Loa possession reflects, in the bodies of devotees, the manifestation of the demand/desire/objectification dynamic hypothesized by Lacan. The loa makes many demands on its servant.
It demands to be fed its favorite foods, given the proper attire, and even to be granted marriage and conjugal rights. To engage with the loa is to take on a relationship that is directed by a spirit loosed on the land and looking for expression and satisfaction of its needs. The serviteur is looking to become the desire of that entity and partake of its power, or acquire, if only temporarily, the phallus. Although the serviteur goes so far as to donate her body to the loa, one cannot totally become the desire of the other. Such an achievement means the end of subjecthood as the serviteur must completely lose her/himself leaving no one present to respond to desire's demands. During possession the Vodouisant acquires the phallus of the god/loa, but in an apparently unconscious state, rendering the union partial. The appropriate self must return to its rightful bodily home without a memory of the event.

Haitian Vodou practices highlight the relationship of bodily investment in ritual toward the production of religious reality. Our First-World fear of the penetration of physical boundaries by the psychic is rooted in the cultural assumptions of the Cartesian split, and the cogito as representative of a higher order of being. To take the ego for the subject, however, is to mistake the mask for what’s underneath it and to become caught once more in the illusion that psychoanalytic theory seeks to reveal. The dynamic of possession reflects the configuration of the ego/object’s experience of itself as lack and the temporary satisfaction of desire in union with the god.

**Ritual Reconfiguration of the Self**

Lacan’s project was to unconceal an access to the subject of the unconscious, and to reveal the self or ego as an object. The image is the internalized image from the mirror stage that doesn’t really exist. It is the subject’s experience of itself as a perceived entity. Imagos of others are also constructed in the Imaginary. The infant’s and small child’s fantasy constructions of the mother reflect the range of its experience from immersion in plenitude and bodily satisfaction to the fear manifested of the mother as all-powerful and holding life and death in her hands. This imagery is unconscious and emotionally laden and as a result of this dynamic all of the emotion and desire generated in the experience are projected into externalized forms, which may be likened to the forms and characters conferred upon the Haitian loa, as the recipients of this transference.

Haitian Vodou is a highly relational practice because the spirits are like known friends, kin, and mentors. These relationships are intimate, and act as supplementary to blood ties. The loa called the Ezili are especially reflective of this phenomenon. They are female spirits whose manifested forms closely reflect the infant’s relationship to the fantasized mother of the Imaginary and to the transformed mother of the Symbolic. Lasyrenn’s image is the mermaid of primary narcissism, when the child’s desire is complete immersion and union with the mother. Lasyrenn is the siren or mermaid who calls sailors to their watery demise and lures one into the depths of lost consciousness. The Ezili who represents the Imaginary mother of ambivalence is Ezili Dantà. She is part ideal mother, “Hardworking, responsive, present in times of trouble, pretty but not vain,” and part unpredictable, enraged mother, “Dantà’s anger can exceed what is required for strict discipline. At times it explodes from her with an irrational, violent force.” Ezili Freda is the feminine sexualized in the shift to the symbolic definition of desire. Ezili Freda makes herself up as the object of the other’s desire and she is the mother completely stripped of her own sexual subjectivity. “The mother is a profoundly desexualized figure. ... Just as the mother's power is not her own, but is intended to serve her child, so, in a larger sense, woman does not have the freedom to do as she wills: she is not the subject of her own desire.” The examples of these mother imagos only represent a tiny fraction of the possible expressions available to the devotee from the loa pantheon.

The vast repertoire of spirit figures that have been generated both from the natural world and from the human social world answer to a multiplicity of psychic projections. As the serviteur proceeds through training and initiation, it becomes evident to other practitioners and the community which spirit the initiate will serve. One serves the spirit most appropriate to one’s character, the archetype most salient to one’s expression or the development of one’s “soul”. In addition to the psychic benefits of the intimate relationship to the loa, there are social benefits to the community, as well.
McCarthy Brown describes a preparation for a ritual in Alourdes' home that was to recognize the loa Ogou's birthday. Alourdes noticed that the spirit of the gate, Legba, had apparently been forgotten in the preparations, whereupon he quickly mounted her and chastised the group for the oversight. Like Dantá giving mothers advice on child care, the intervention of a spirit into community affairs reinforces norms and cultural authority. The serviteur is exempt from accountability in these situations. It is always understood that it is the actions and voice of the loa interjecting itself back into the world that is responsible for any social transformation that occurs. The power of the returning god supersedes petty human behaviors and reasserts parental-like authority in a transcendent form. Every time a loa dances in the head of a devotee, the Vodou community is exposed to a new possibility of intercession from the gods.

Devotees use their bodies as the ultimate instrument in possession as an expression of service to the loa. Lacan's model of lack and desire is based on a linguistic presupposition and not a biological one. Julia Kristeva hypothesizes a quality of energetic expression arising from the interplay of the drives and formal social structures in the developing self. She describes a modality, which she calls the "chora" that facilitates and structures the drives and "primary processes" as they are inscribed and enculturated. "Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his development, they are arranged according to the various constraints imposed on this body--always already involved in a semiotic process--by family and social structures." Symbolic enculturation defines the capacities of the vodouisant's body. The language and the speaking of Vodou clearly reflect a body enculturated to accept the transference of non-self spirit. Lacan's notion of the Real allows an access to the part that the body plays in the loa/serviteur dynamic. The fragmentation or chaos of the Real and our first bodily awarenesses may provide the basis for the surrender of the body to the loa in possession states. In this sense, Kristeva's logic can be seen as the bridge between Lacan's linguistic formulation and the bodily experience that enables an active transference.

Possession often occurs after long hours of drumming and dancing, when serviteurs have been pushed to extremes and conventional physical boundaries are confused or ruptured. Experienced practitioners have mastered the mutability of bodily and egoic boundaries and are able to allow the self (or ego) to step aside almost at will. The control of the body that is won by the constructs of the ego is surrendered to a more primal experience that is pre-egoic. Contributing to this seeming devaluation of bodily integrity is the Haitian belief in the body as merely a "vessel of flesh." The Symbolic order again provides the medium through which this phenomenon is normalized. Cultural convention tells the serviteur that the shifting of spirits in and out of bodies is a highly valued, though demanding event. The spirit who rides a devotee may be of a different gender, age, or physical ability. Still, while the spirit rides, the body performs according to the character and habits of its rider. The loa/serviteur relationship exposes the fragility with which identity boundaries are constructed in the space that is opened in the body.

Another expression of the chora may occur in the ritual process of zombification. The subject is acculturated to accept the condition of the zombie as a possible social fate and as a natural phenomenon. Zombis are apparently "created" with the use of poisonous potions that reduce the human metabolism to imperceptible lows. For the purposes of the zombie's family and community the person is dead and ritually buried but without the reclamation ceremony that preserves the individual's soul for future generations. A sorcerer will exhume the living body and partially revive the person to be put to work as a drone, usually far from her/his home community. The poisoners have used the knowledge of their ancestors to devise this special potion and have altered the social role of poisoners to suit communal rule. The drugs that are administered in the creation and maintenance of zombification may suppress the energies articulated in the chora, but they are also inscribed within the symbolic context of its social manifestation. While the drives are engaged during possession states in the service of the loa and community, the drives are subjugated and repressed by the state of zombification. The self can neither serve its own needs in this condition, nor can it contribute to the richness of community.
Return of the Repressed

I have argued that Vodou spirit possession not only corresponds to a psychoanalytic model of identity construction and deconstruction, but that it is also an expression of cultural empowerment. Possession brings ancestors back into the community, reinscribes cultural tradition and authority, and opens new possibilities of relating. The practice of the Vodou religion is an expression of cultural reclamation and validation. Haiti's colonial history has also created unique forms of social expression within a dialectic of control and resistance. The loss of ancestry and place created an emptiness to be filled, the horrors of slavery created an immediate confrontation between the drives to life and death. Haiti's unique development under brutal colonial rule marked the society with its own peculiar formulation of cultural imagos.

The spirits that came from Africa belong to the Rada cult and are termed benevolent. The spirits that were born in Haiti are far more aggressive, and sometimes quite dangerous. They are the Petro loa and among them may be found the zombie. Joan Dayan recounts the story of the Dessaline Rebellion of 1804 and the mulatto, Jean Zombi, whose brutal murder of whites horrified even the rebels. The hatred engendered in the practice of violently subjugating a people in slavery erupted in the character of the rebel who became the model for zombification. Dayan argues that, “the zombie calls up the most macabre figure in folk belief. No fate is more feared. The zombie, ... haunts Haitians as the most powerful emblem of apathy, anonymity, and loss. ... The phantasm of the zombie—a soulless husk deprived of freedom—is the ultimate sign of loss and dispossession”.

Zombification as a method of social control is particular to Haitian society. While it is certainly a fearful fate, it is even more so for its situatedness in a society with a past of slavery. Zombification represents the dual-sided terror of fear and hate that the history of slavery incites in the collective unconscious. On the one hand, to be owned and forced to work for another is the condition of the slave. To be mindless and forced to work for another is the condition of the zombie. The zombie is an especially fearful entity because of its reenactment in the present of the horrors of the past. The zombie is the repressed returning to remind Haitians of how bad humans can be.

Slavery is such an intense threat to the psyche that only the very strong could resist its mind-numbing effects and not become like zombies. The Maroons who escaped to the hills became not only the resource for resistance, but the symbols of it. When rebellion came, however, pent-up rage became the driving force for some. Violent resistance constitutes the rebel as an animal, as much a slave to her/his fury as the zombie is to the malevolent sorcerer. Mindless reaction creates the subject as the enemy, and stands as a fearful
reminder to Haitians of the horror a person can become when given over to hate.

From the Lacanian perspective, cultural mythologies of the "undead" also imply a repression of the libido or life instinct. The split subject is condemned to a psychic fate of internal opposition between the possibility (and inevitability) of oblivion in death and the drive or will to live on, "the indestructible, immortal life that dwells in the domain 'between the two deaths,'" emerges as the ultimate object of horror." The living dead are walking reminders among us of the possibility of the loss of subjectivity, which is nothing more than a reminder of the subject we aren't and cannot be. They are who we all are underneath the mask of selfhood, but condemned to act in the world without belonging or reconstitution in relationship. They are also a reminder that we must confront our split as a reality of existence. Life imposes itself upon us whether we like it or not. Imagine no relief from the wound that is life, from the eternal frustration of seeking after desire that is never satisfied, from the ego's need to constantly fortify itself and never rest in its pursuit of its own justification. The horror of a life of slavery and torture is also the horror of being forced to live on within this fate.

The things that make life tolerable and enjoyable--family, friends, kin and community--the very things the person condemned to zombification has demonstrated a disdain for, are removed from her access by reason of her "death" to the social world. The zombi is effectively condemned to live, though not really socially alive, as a non-contributor to her social milieu. Castration is realized through zombification when all of the power is not only externalized, but also held beyond desire's access. In this way, the metaphor of zombification is universal and relevant to members of non-Haitian society. Life without relationship is life made impossible.

The relationship of the loa and the serviteur is an act of individual expression, an affirmation of collective identities, and a communal encounter with the power that should be. Zombification is a reminder to the collective, of the possibility of the loss of mastery over the self. It may be necessary to keep psychic boundaries fluid for the good of the community, but the complete rupture of these boundaries in the zombi is a reflection of potential destruction of the community.

Haitian society lives in an ongoing confrontation with its own past as a present reality. Possession and zombification represent the dialectic of agency and reaction, of consciousness and mindlessness, and of the uncontrollability of life and death. Zombification is not simply a bad possession, it is the antithesis of the loa/horse relationship. There is no desire to inspire the serviteur to perfect her soul, the subject is completely annihilated in objectification, and the play between the self and the Real ceases. There is only flesh, and flesh is vulnerable.

Conclusion

Psychoanalytic theory tends to interpret the intersection of the self and society as a location problematized by society's repression of the instincts. This underlying theme was constituted in the moment when Freud saw the ego as the mediator between the self and the world as reality principle. Theories derived from this conceptualization have consistently gotten caught in the trap of the self/not-self paradox. We cannot distinguish ourselves as created objects; rather, we take ourselves-as-creations for what is real, and our external projections of this dynamic as that which either satisfies or opposes our "true" selves.

Haitian Vodou practices demonstrate that the boundaries that we consider real and as demarcations of the self can be ritually and deliberately confounded. The Real is consciously lost to us in our encounter with culture, but insists on erupting into the openings the ego can't dominate. Vodou practices force openings to another consciousness, which, according to Norman O. Brown, is the special effect of religion. Reality, which is always already constituted by the repressed, is a substitute for the Real, but cannot affect its obliteration. When Vodou is seen as the persistence of a unique and separate cultural expression in the face of intense oppression, it is difficult to argue that it is a pathological escape into illusion. It is, instead, a highly creative endeavor to both maintain commonality in the face of disruption and to keep the doors open to possibility.

Vodou elegantly makes sense of life in the often threatening and insecure world of Haitians, both historically and in the present. The particular identity of people from the African Diaspora survived colonial oppression and transplantation to a new land, where it evolved a most effective system for its own reproduction. The needs that all
humans have to express the conflict and complexity of internal and external relations find form and life for Haitians in the spirits called the loa and in the rituals of service to them. Individual and cultural psyches, history, tradition, and politics all intersect in the Vodou community. Here, there is no self against society.

A version of this paper was presented at the October 2000 Society for the Scientific Study of Religion conference in Houston, Texas.

Notes

1. In “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function” in Écrits: A Selection (1977), Lacan posits ego formation as the developing awareness of a self in the context of a reflected experience in relationship to the objects of one’s social environment rather than as driven by a given internal psychic structure.


3. While in The Future of an Illusion Freud claims that religious belief provides a “narcissistic satisfaction” (p.22) based on an “infantile prototype” (p.38) of the relationship to the father, this derogation occurs as contradictory to his claims from The Ego and the Id, that the resolution of the Oedipal conflict results in the ego ideal which “answers to everything that is expected of the higher nature of man...” and “contains the germ from which all religions have evolved” (p.123).

4. A rather disturbing example of this practice can be found in Erik Erikson’s Childhood and Society (1963) where he examines child rearing practices of Native American tribes and declares the entire society to display a form of neurosis attached to the failed resolution of a particular stage of psychic development.


6. It is not completely clear what Deren means by soul in her reference to it. She describes a long-term process of integration of the Vodouissant in personal, communitarian, and cosmic relations; all of these are ultimately tied to “an invisible rewarding force” (p.198). It appears that her description is somewhat like that of the Buddhist “mind,” but her term remains fairly amorphous.

7. Ibid., 247.

8. Robert Young (1991: 142) identifies this shift as creating a reversal of perspective, “we now tend to consider the individual from the perspective of the social rather than the social from the perspective of the individual.”


12. See The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis, ed. Anthony Wilden, for a longer explanation on pages 186-7. Wilden notes that, “Lacan is concerned with elucidating the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real relationships between three subcategories of ‘the lack of object’—castration (Imaginary object); frustration (removal of the real object: for example, the breast); and privation (the real absence of the organ in the woman)—and further relationships between the people involved. Thus castration (which is neither real nor really potential) is part of the child’s relationship to the father, that of the ‘Symbolic debt.’ Frustration is part of the child’s relationship to the mother, that of an ‘Imaginary injury’.... Privation, however is real—nothing is lacking (nothing can be lacking in the Real, which is a plenum)—and the subject’s relationship is not so much to a person as to ‘reality’ itself. Since privation concerns ‘what ought to be there,’ the object involved is symbolic.”

13. Rodney Stark also elaborates on the idea of religious deities providing relationship for believers in One True God, although he focuses on a rational choice model and the creation of an exchange relationship between the god and the devotee.

15. In The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti, Desmangles (1992) recounts that as escaped slaves living in the hills of Haiti, Maroons played a large part in the organization of resistance to White rule. They raided plantations, practiced vodou or "drumming," and represented freedom to the enslaved population. Many of the participants and leading actors in the war of independence were made into loa.


17. Vodou was briefly legal after the 1804 rebellion, suppressed shortly thereafter, and only finally legalized in 1987.


25. Devotees have been known to emerge from possessions with serious injuries from performing feats only suitable to a god.

26. The general knowledge that this "unnatural" kind of death can occur leads to the practice of piercing the corpse's heart or decapitating it upon death. Haitians may request that their bodies be so treated to ensure that they do not become zombis. This practice has been interpreted as morbid by outsiders who do not understand its origins.

27. Wade Davis, on page 12 of his 1985 work, The Serpent and the Rainbow, traces the term zombie to the "Kongo word nzambi, which more or less means 'spirit of a dead person.'"


Haitian Vodou Possession and Zombification


