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Ecstatic Religion : A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession

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Let me illustrate and at the same time move towards the position from which the arguments of this book stem. Here Ronald Knox's splendidly erudite study of Christian enthusiasm provides an excellent starting point (Knox, 1950) Beginning with the Montanists, Knox traces the erratic history of Christian enthusiasm, which he defines as a definite type of spirituality. He makes no attempt to explain by reference to other social factors the ebb and flow of ecstatic phenomena—possession, speaking with tongues, and the rest—whose wavering course he charts through so many centuries. These he views as the inevitable product of an inherent human tendency, almost of a failing—the disposition to religious emotionalism which John Wesley summed up in the word 'heart-work'. 'The emotions must be stirred to their depths, at frequent intervals, by unaccountable feelings of compunction, joy, peace, and so on, or how could you be certain that the Divine touch was working within you?' Knox is concerned to point the moral that ecstasy is less a 'wrong tendency' than a 'false emphasis'. But if he stresses the dangers of an excessive and unbridled enthusiasm, he also recognizes that organized religion must allow ecstasy some scope if it is to retain its vitality and vigour. These are the lessons which Knox seeks to impress upon the reader and which he finds little difficulty in illustrating in the mass of evidence which he so skilfully marshals.

Knox writes, as he says, primarily from a theological point of view. Yet certain interesting sociological insights almost force themselves upon him. Thus, with greater sociological perspicacity than Christian charity, he sees enthusiasm as the means by which men continually reassure themselves, and others, that God is with them. This view of ecstasy, as a prestigious commodity which could readily be manipulated for mundane ends, opens the door to the sort of sociological treatment which this book advocates, and which I shall enlarge upon shortly. (18-19)

For whatever reasons, the fact is that social anthropologists have in general shown a quite remarkable reluctance to ask the really significant questions when dealing with possession. This, of course, is not to say that no sociological interpretation whatsoever has been attempted. A number of anthropologists have considered the social role of the possessed priest or 'shaman', and the manner in which religious ecstasy may serve as the basis for a charismatic leader's authority. Others have emphasized the significance of the evasion of mortal responsibility implied where decisions are made not by men, but by gods speaking through them. And if some have stressed the employment of ecstatic revelations to conserve and strengthen the existing social order, others have shown how these can equally well be applied to authorize innovation and change.

This short catalogue, however, practically exhausts the range of most current preoccupations in the sociological study of possession. The crucial bread-and-butter questions still remain to be asked. How does the incidence of ecstasy relate to the social order? Is possession an entirely arbitrary and idiosyncratic affair; or are particular social categories of person more or less likely to be possessed? If so, and possession can be

shown to run in particular social grooves, what follows from this? Why do people in certain social positions succumb to possession more readily than others? What does ecstasy offer them? It is these basic issues concerning the social context of possession that this book examines. (23)

My slogan, if one is still necessary, is: let those who believe in spirits and possesion speak for themselves! (25)

After these necessary preliminaries, I begin in the third chapter to look closely at the social contexts in which ecstasy and possession flourish. Far from being arbitrary and haphazard in its incidence, there we shall see how a widespread form of possession, which is regarded initially as an illness, is in many cases virtually restricted to women. Such women's possession 'afflictions' are regularly treated not by permanently expelling the possessing agency, but by reaching a viable accommodation with it. The spirit is tamed and domesticated, rather than exorcized. This treatment is usually accomplished by the induction of the affected women into a female cult group which regularly promotes possession experiences among its members. Within the secluded cult group, possession has thus lost its malign significance.

Hence what men consider a demoniacal sickness, women convert into a clandestine ecstasy. And this of course is my justification for treating as a religious experience something which, on the surface, appears to be its precise opposite. If the reader still feels that this dramatic apotheosis is unconvincing, he should remember how frequently the great mystics of the Christian and other world religions have received their first illumination either in circumstances of extreme adversity, or in a form which appeared initially as a searing affliction. He should recall also how aptly the conception of this first call as a dreaded sickness meets the requirements for mystical authenticity so clearly formulated by Professor O'Brien.

For all their concern with disease and its treatment, such women's possession cults are also, I argue, thinly disguised protest movements directed against the dominant sex. They thus play a significant part in the sex-war in traditional societies and cultures where women lack more obvious and direct means for forwarding their aims. To a considerable extent they protect women from the exactions of men, and offer an effective vehicle for manipulating husbands and male relatives. This interpretation coincides closely with Ronald Knox's brilliant, if caustic, aside that in Christianity, 'from the Montanist movement onwards, the history of enthusiasm is largely a history of female emancipation, and it is not a reassuring one'. I do not subscribe to the latter judgement. But this conclusion—which Knox does not pursue systematically—offers striking corroboration, from a somewhat unexpected quarter, of the validity of our findings in very different cultural circumstances. (26)

So far we have said nothing of the character of the spirits involved in this type of possession. It is I believe of the greatest interest and importance that these spirits are typically considered to be amoral: they have no direct moral significance. Full of spite and malice though they are, they are believed to strike entirely capriciously and without

any grounds which can be referred to the moral character or conduct of their victims. Thus the women who succumb to these afflictions cannot help themselves and at the same time bear no responsibility for all the annoyance and cost which their subsequent treatment involves.They are thus totally blameless; responsibility lies not with them, but with the spirits.

Because they play no direct part in upholding the moral code of the societies in which they receive so much attention, I call these spirits 'peripheral'. They are in fact very often also peripheral in a further sense. For typically these spirits are believed to originate outside the societies whose women they plague. Frequently they are the spirits of hostile neighbouring peoples, so that animosities between rival local communities become reflected in this mystical idiom. And if their favourite victims are usually women who, as jural minors in traditional societies, also in a sense occupy a dependent—and in a sense also peripheral position, we have here a very direct concordance between the attributes of the spirits, the manner in which the afflictions they cause are evaluated, and the status of their human prey. Peripherality, as I use the term, has this three-fold character.

Such peripheral cults, as I try to show in Chapter Four, also frequently embrace downtrodden categories of men who are subject to strong discrimination in rigidly stratified societies. Peripheral possesion is consequently far from being a secure female monopoly, and cannot thus be explained plausibly in terms of any innate tendency to hysteria on the part of women. And where men of low social position are involved, although ostensibly existing only to cure spirit-caused illnesses, such cults again express protest by the politically impotent. Our own contemporary experience of fringe protest groups and cults should help us to appreciate what is involved here.

In addition to explaining illness, peripheral possession can thus be seen to serve as an oblique aggressive strategy. The possessed person is ill through no fault of his own. The illness requires treatment which his (or her) master has to provide. In his state of possession the patient is a highly privileged person: he is allowed many liberties with those whom in other circumstances he is required to treat with respect.(27)

This interpretation of peripheral possession as a form of mystical attack immediately suggests parallels with the employment of witchcraft accusations to express aggression between rivals and enemies. To accuse someone of bewitching you is, however, to attack them openly and directly, and represents a much more drastic strategy than is implied in the devious manoeuvre of peripheral possession. The possessed person exerts pressure on his superior without radically questioning his superiority. He ventilates his pent-up animosity without questioning the ultimate legitimacy of the status differences enshrined within the established hierarchical order. If peripheral possession is thus a gesture of defiance, it is also, usually, one of hopelessness. It follows from these distinctions that we should expect these two separate strategies to operate, in different social context, and this is largely what we find in practice. However, a highly significant synthesis is also achieved between them. We shall find that those who, as masters of spirits, diagnose and treat illness in others, are themselves in danger of being accused as witches. For if their power over the spirits is such that they can heal the sick, why should they not also

sometimes cause what they cure? Reasoning in this fashion, the manipulated establishment which reluctantly tolerates bouts of uncontrolled possession illness among its dependants, rounds on the leaders of these rebellious cults and firmly denounces them as witches. Thus, I argue, the most ambitious and pushing members of these insurgent cults are kept in check, hoist, as it were, with their own petard.

It will be clear that whatever mystical or psychological benefits peripheral possession confers, it also regularly achieves other more tangible rewards. Following this up, we move on in Chapters Five and Six to explore the functions of possession where this has ceased to be solely the resort of the weak and humiliated and has become the mystical idiom in terms of which men of substance compete for positions of power and authority in society at large. Here enthusiasm emerges from its seclusion on the fringes of society into the full light of day.(28)

In distinction to the peripheral cults with their more limited and specialized functions, I shall refer to these thoroughly moralizing systems of ecstatic beliefs as 'main morality possession religions', or, more simply and less barbarously, as 'central possession religions'. I shall distinguish two types: those involving ancestor spirits (Chapter Five); and those involving more autonomous deities which are not simply sacralized versions of the living (Chapter Six). In both cases we shall examine how the inspired priest, or shaman, who has privileged access to these supernatural powers, diagnoses sins and prescribes the appropriate atonement. The political and legal authority wielded by the holders of these religious commissions is, as we shall see, largely a function of the availability of other more specialized agencies of political and social control. In highly atomized societies without secure and clearly defined political positions, the shaman comes into his own as an omni-competent leader, regulating the intercourse both between man and man and between men and the spirits.

If certain exotic religions thus allow ecstasy to rule most aspects of their adherents' lives, all the evidence indicates that the more strongly-based and entrenched religious authority becomes, the more hostile it is towards haphazard inspiration. New faiths may announce their advent with a flourish of ecstatic revelations, but once they become securely established they have little time or tolerance for enthusiasm. For the religious enthusiast, with his direct claim to divine knowledge, is always a threat to the established order. What then are the factors which inhibit the growth of this attitude towards ecstasy and keep possession on the boil? The empirical evidence, which we review, suggests that part at least of the answer lies in acute and constantly recurring social and environmental pressures which militate against the formation of large, secure social groups. (29)

In thus pointing to certain social functions fulfilled by possession I do not maintain that these exhaust the phenomenon's functional capacities, nor do I consider that in any complete sense they explain its existence. Once they have shown what for secular ends is done in the name of religion, some anthropologists naïvely suppose that nothing more remains to be said. Thus they leave largely unexplained the characteristic mystical aspects which distinguish the religious from the secular, and they totally fail to account for the rich diversity of religious concepts and beliefs. Although my ambitions do not

extend to explaining these particularistic aspects of different ecstatic religions, I do seek to uncover some of the foundations, psychological as well as social, upon which the ecstatic response is based. In pursuing these aims, I realize of course that I must sometimes seem to have allowed myself to be carried to conclusions which impose some strain on the existing evidence. Where this is the case I would only plead that enthusiasm is catching. Although I don't myself fall in this category, I might add that some of those anthropologists who have studied shamanism in other cultures have followed Carlos Castaneda to become themselves practising shamans in their own culture. (31)

Chapter III: Affliction and Its Apotheosis

Possession by an intrusive spirit is by no means invariably as warmly welcomed as it evidently was in the case of Hélène Smith. The initial experience of possession, particularly, is often a disturbing, even traumatic experience, and not uncommonly a response to personal affliction and adversity. Up to a point, this is even the case in those societies where the position of shaman-priest has become firmly instituted and passes more or less automatically to the appropriate heir by title rather than by personal attainment. In the first place, in such circumstances not every heir is as keen to succeed to his predecessor's position as the spirits are anxious to effect this transition. Where the successor shows reluctance in assuming his onerous duties, the spirits remind him forcefully of his obligations by badgering him with trials and tribulations until he acknowledges defeat and accepts their insistent prodding. We find examples of this spiritual blackmail in all those societies where, as among the Tungus, the position of shaman is regarded as an inherited office. An instance from the Macha Galla of Ethiopia will serve to illustrate the general situation. The old shaman of one of the Macha clans sent his son to Addis Ababa to be educated. There the Emperor helped him and he acquired a good schooling. While he was still at Addis Ababa under the Emperor's protection, his father died and he immediately fell ill. He had no strength, and did not want to return to his home there to succeed to his father's position as clan shaman. After a long period of illness, however, the Emperor advised him: 'You will not get well here and your education affords you no joy. Return to your father's land and live as your custom bids you.' Then the son returned home and became a shaman and soon recovered (Knutsson, 1967, p. 74). (59)

The link between affliction and its cure as the royal road to the assumption of the shamanistic vocation is thus plain enough in those societies where shamans play the main or major role in religion and where possession is highly valued as a religious experience. Here what begins as an illness, or otherwise deeply disturbing experience, ends in ecstasy; and the pain and suffering of the initial crisis are obliterated in its subsequent re-evaluation as a uniquely efficacious sign of divine favour. In other societies, however, where shamans play only a minor role and are concerned with disease-bearing spirits which are not central to the religious life of the community this apotheosis, although it still occurs, is thrust into the background. Indeed, in these circumstances, the connection between suffering and possession is so overwhelming that at first sight it seems to constitute an end in itself, rather than an end and a beginning.

Here, ostensibly at least, possession connotes misfortunes and sickness, and cult activity is primarily concerned to alleviate distress rather than to attain ecstasy. The emphasis is on disease and its cure, and not, overtly at least, on affliction as a means to the achievement of mystical exaltation. It is this feature, as we saw in the last chapter, which has led some writers to characterize such healing cults as being concerned only with 'inauthentic', or 'negative' possession, and to contrast these with religions where 'authentic' possession is realized as a divine ecstasy. To elucidate this misleading, and ultimately false, antithesis we must look more closely at such apparently 'negative' cults.

This negative aspect is strongly reflected in the character of the spirits involved. For by those who believe in them, but actually worship other gods, these malign pathogenic spirits are regarded as being extremely captious and capricious. They strike without rhyme or reason; or at least without any substantial cause which can be referred to social conduct. They are not concerned with man's behaviour to man. They have no interest in defending the moral code of society, and those who succumb to their unwelcome attentions are morally blameless. At the same time they are always on the look-out for a convenient excuse to harass their victims, and they are inordinately sensitive to human encroachment. To step on one inadvertently, or otherwise unwittingly annoy it, is sufficient to so inflame the spirit's wrath that it attacks at once, possessing its trespasser, and making him ill or causing him misfortune. These unattractive characteristics are displayed by all these hostile spirits, whether they are conceived of as anthropomorphic powers, or as puckish nature sprites.

Since they are so pointedly indifferent to human conduct, it would be reasonable to suppose that these unpleasant spirits would be quite indiscriminate in their selection of human prey. This, however, is far from being the case. Contrary to what might be expected, they show a special predilection for the weak and oppressed. We should be wrong, however, to leap immediately to a pessimistic assessment of the workings of providence in these cases. For as we shall see, it is often precisely through succumbing to these seemingly wanton visitations that people in such adverse circumstances secure a measure of help and succour. Thus, in complete contrast to the sublime indifference to the human condition which they are supposed to display, such spirits are in fact acutely sensitive to the plight of the under-privileged and oppressed. These assertions, fortunately, can easily be confirmed. All we have to do is to look closely at a number of societies where illness is interpreted as malignant possession, paying particular attention to the categories of person most at risk and to the circumstances in which they most frequently succumb to possession. Since we are here primarily concerned with the incidence of disease, we shall in fact be following what in medical parlance would be called an epidemiological approach.

Let me begin with data on the Somali pastoralists of north-east Africa which I collected in the course of field-work in what is now the Somali Republic (Lewis, 1969). In this strongly patrilineal Muslim society, witchcraft and sorcery as these phenomena are known elsewhere do not figure prominently in the interpretation of illness and misfortune. Their main religious life is concerned with the cult of Allah whom Somalis approach through the mediation of the Prophet Muhammad and a host of more immediate

lineage ancestors and other figures of real or imputed piety who, as in Roman Catholicism, play a vital role as mediating saints. As in other Muslim countries, this public cult is almost exclusively dominated by men, who hold all the major positions of religious authority and prestige. Women are in fact excluded from the mosques in which men worship and their role in religion tends to be little more than that of passive spectators. More generally, in the Somali scheme of things, women are regarded as weak, submissive creatures. This is the case despite the exacting nature of their nomadic life, and the arduous character of their herding tasks in managing the flocks of sheep and goats, and the draught camels, which carry their tents and effects from camping-ground to camping-ground.

In this male-dominated and highly puritanical culture, spirit possession, which is regarded as one cause among others of a wide range of complaints (ranging from slight malaise to acute organic diseases such as tuberculosis), occurs in a few well-defined contexts. The first of these which I shall discuss here concerns cases of frustrated love and passion, and involves emotions which, especially on the part of men, are not traditionally recognized or overtly acknowledged. The stiff-lipped traditional view is that the open display of affection and love between men and women is unmanly and sentimental and must be suppressed. The expression of love towards God, in contrast, is a highly approved emotion which is widely encouraged and rapturously phrased in Somali mystical poetry. But the direct acknowledgement of similar feelings between men and women is totally out of place. Thus, if a girl who has been jilted by a boy she loved and who privately undertook to marry her exhibits symptoms of extreme lassitude, withdrawal, or even more distinct signs of physical illness, her condition is likely to be attributed to possession by the object of her affections. Here, as in all other cases of Somali possession, the victim is described as having been 'entered'. (Although in this case it is strictly the personality of her former lover which is supposed to have 'seized' her, rather than a free spirit entity, I make no apology for mentioning this type of possession here since it serves as a useful prologue to what follows.) (63-65)

The other context of Somali possession is similarly regarded as an illness and involves parallel symptoms ranging from mild hysteria or light depression to actual organic disorders. In this case, however, these disturbances are unequivocally attributed to the ingress of a hostile spirit or demon. As elsewhere in Islam, Somalis believe that anthropomorphic jinns lurk in every dark and empty corner, poised ready to strike capriciously and without warning at the unsuspecting passer-by. These malevolent sprites are thought to be consumed by envy and greed, and to hunger especially after dainty foods, luxurious clothing, jewellery, perfume, and other finery. In the context which I am about to describe, they are known generally as sar, a word which describes both the spirits themselves and the illness attributed to them. The smitten victim is said to have been 'entered', 'seized' or 'possessed' by the sar.

The prime targets for the unwelcome attentions of these malign spirits are women, and particularly married women. The stock epidemiological situation is that of the hard-pressed wife, struggling to survive and feed her children in this harsh environment, and liable to some degree of neglect, real or imagined, on the part of her husband. Subject to

frequent, sudden and often prolonged absences by her husband as he follows his manly pastoral pursuits, to the jealousies and tensions of polygyny which are not ventilated in accusations of sorcery and witchcraft, and always menaced by the precariousness of marriage in a society where divorce is frequent and easily obtained by men, the Somali woman's lot offers little stability or security. These, I hasten to add, are not ethnocentric judgements read into the data by a tender-minded western anthropologist, but, as I know from my own direct experience, evaluations which spring readily to the lips of Somali women and which I have frequently heard discussed. Somali tribes women are far from being as naïve as those anthropologists (see e.g. Wilson, 1967, pp. 67–78) who suppose that tribal life conditions its womenfolk to an unflinching acceptance of hardship and to an unquestioning endorsement of the position accorded them by men. My interpretation here is further corroborated from a modern woman's perspective by Raqiya Abdalla's (1982) study of female circumcision and infibulation and, more impressionistically perhaps, in Nuruddin Farah's early novel, From a Crooked Rib (1970). (66-67)

This 'sex-war' view of the situation is very evident in the following folk-tale which, whether it records a true episode or not, has a very clear moral.

The wife of a well-to-do official was feeling out of sorts one morning and sitting morosely in her house, where there happened to be fifty pounds of ready cash belonging to her husband. An old woman (a sar specialist) came to visit the dejected wife and soon convinced her that she was possessed by a sar spirit and would need to pay a lot of money for the mounting of a cathartic dance ceremony, if she were to recover. The necessary sar expert was quickly engaged, food bought, and neighbouring women summoned to join in the party. When the husband returned from his work at midday for his lunch, he was surprised to find the door of his house tightly barred and to hear a great hubbub inside. The shaman ordered his wife not to let him in, on pain of serious illness, and after knocking angrily for some time the husband lost patience and went away to eat his lunch in a tea-shop. When, in the evening, the husband finally got back from work the party was over. The wife, who had recovered remarkably quickly, met him and explained that she had been suddenly taken ill. Sar possession had been diagnosed, and in consequence she had unfortunately to spend all her husband's ready cash to pay for the curing ceremony. The husband accepted this disturbing news with surprising restraint.

On the following day, which was a holiday, while his wife was out shopping in the market, the husband took all her gold and silver jewellery and her cherished sewing-machine to a money-lender from whom he received a susbtantial advance. With this money he assembled a party of holy men and sheikhs and feasted them royally in his house. When his wife returned later in the day, she found the door firmly closed and heard sounds of exuberant hymn-singing within. After trying unsuccessfully to get in, she in her turn went off puzzled to inquire from neighbours what was going on. When she finally returned home later, she found her husband sitting quietly by himself and asked what had happened. 'Oh', said the husband, 'I was suddenly taken ill, and to recover I had to summon a group of holy men to say prayers and sing hymns on my behalf. Now, mercifully, I am better; but, unfortunately, since there was no ready cash in the house I had to pawn all your jewels and even your sewing-machine in order to entertain my

guests.' At these words, as can be imagined, the woman raised a loud lament. But after a short period of reflection her anger subsided, as she perceived the reasons for her husband's action. She promised fervently never again to 'beat the sar'. Her husband in his turn undertook never again to entertain holy men at his wife's expense and later redeemed her riches. And so, we presume, the couple lived on afterwards in amity.

The use by women of sar spirit possession, which this simple tale so well illustrates, is not confined only to the Muslim Somali. This pattern of possession exists also in Ethiopia (under the name zar), where it appears to have originated, and in the Muslim Sudan, Egypt, parts of North Africa, and the Arabian Gulf where it has even penetrated the sacred city of Mecca. In Christian Ethiopia, its psychological and dramatic aspects have been explored by the French surrealist poet and ethnographer, Michel Leiris (Leiris, 1958; see also Tubiana, 1983). Further light on its social significance there has been shed by subsequent anthropological research by Messing (1958), Young (1975), and Morton (1977). Messing records how wives use the cult in Somali fashion to extort economic sacrifices from their husbands by threatening a relapse when their demands are ignored—a process which the husbands seek to check by advocating Christian exorcism as the most appropriate treatment. Although more expensive initially, this latter procedure is theoretically efficacious as a single treatment. (69-70)

It will now be clear, I think, that we are dealing with a widespread spiritual interpretation of female problems common to many cultures, whose diagnosis and treatment gives women the opportunity to gain ends (material and non-material) which they cannot readily secure more directly. Women are, in effect, making a special virtue of adversity and affliction, and, often quite literally, capitalizing on their distress. This cult of feminine frailty which, in its aetiolated form, is familiar enough to us from the swooning attacks experienced by Victorian women in similar circumstances, is admirably well adapted to the life situation of those who employ it. By being overcome involuntarily by an arbitrary affliction for which they cannot be held accountable, these possessed women gain attention and consideration and, within variously defined limits, successfully manoeuvre their husbands and menfolk. p.77

Hence, within bounds which are not infinitely elastic, both men and women are more or less satisfied: neither sex loses face and the official ideology of male supremacy is preserved. From this perspective, the tolerance by men of periodic, but always temporary, assaults on their authority by women appears as the price they have to pay to maintain their enviable position. The concessions women extract can be regarded, in turn, as 'rewards for colluding in their own oppression' (Gomm, 1975, p. 541). p.78

Chapter 4: Strategies of Mystical Attack: Protest and Its Containment

It would no doubt be satisfying to male vanity to interpret the marked prominence of women in the possession of cults which we have just discussed as the reflection of an inherent, and biologically grounded female disposition to hysteria. Unfortunately, however, this conclusion is untenable because in practice these movements are not

entirely restricted to women. Notwithstanding my emphasis in the previous chapter, several of the cults .which we have already examined do in fact also include men, and not only those with obvious personality disorders. Italian tarantism, this 'religion of remorse', as de Martino punningly labels it, which still today attracts a few downtrodden male peasants, had in earlier periods a wider catchment among men. p.90

Thus, however narrowly or broadly conceived the peripherality of the spirits involved may be, the effect is always the same. What we find over and over again in a wide range of different cultures and places is the special endowment of mystical power given to the weak. If they do not quite inherit the earth, at least they are provided with means which enable them to offset their otherwise crushing jural disabilities. With the authority which the voice of the gods alone gives, they find a way to manipulate their superiors with impunity—at least within certain limits. (p.104)

As in fact we have already seen, peripheral possession is regularly used by the members of subordinate social categories to press home claims on their superiors. Witchcraft (or sorcery) accusations (and I emphasize that I am talking about the incidence of *accusations*) on the other hand, run in different social grooves. Typically, they are launched between equals, or by a superior against a subordinate.(p107)

But, if we look more closely at the data, we shall see that accusations of witchcraft are particularly frequently directed at those of these social categories who employ possession in what I have called the 'secondary phase' in the development of these cults. It is especially those subordinate men or women who, having graduated to become leading shamans, are singled out for attack and denunciation as witches....Thus, if possession is the means by which the underdog bids for attention, witchcraft accusations provide the countervailing strategy by which such demands are kept within bounds. There is a poetic justice in this. For, in effect, both subordinate and superior are indulging in self-fulfilling prophecies the result of which is to entrench the notion that the weak enjoy a special endowment of mystical power. It is also all admirably logical. (p109)

An obvious case in point is Haitian voodoo. If, in many respects, voodoo seems to fall squarely within the peripheral cult class, in other respects it might more appropriately be characterized as a separatist ecstatic religion. Here, and in other parallel cases, the difficulty of making the most appropriate classification is further compounded by the attempts of the rejected establishment to discredit such would-be separatist religions as mere peripheral cults, tolerable as long as they are presented as cures, but intolerable when they claim to be religions in their own right. (p.115-116)

So if it is in the nature of new religions to herald their advent with a flourish of ecstatic effervescence it is equally the fate of those which become successfully ensconced at the centre of public morality to lose their inspirational savour. Inspiration then becomes an institutionalized property of the religious establishment which, as the divinely appointed church, incarnates god: the inspired truth is then mediated to the masses through rituals performed by its duly accredited officers. In these circumstances individual possession

experiences are discouraged and where necessary discredited. Possession in fact becomes an aberration, even a satanic heresy. This certainly is the pattern which is clearly and deeply inscribed in the long history of Christianity. (p.118)

If generalized possession, enthusiasm in the original sense of the word, signals the rise of new religious cults, and sober ritualistic dogmatism is the mark of religions which have become so thoroughly embedded in society that almost all trace of inspirational spontaneity has departed, the question naturally arises as to what middle ground lies between these two poles of religious expression. In this and the following chapter we shall attempt to answer this question. We shall examine religions which still depend upon possession as the primary source of their authority, and which are neither mere peripheral healing cults, nor ossified ritualistic orthodoxies drained of inspirational vitality. p.119

After the failure of the rebellion of 1896, in which they participated, the Zezuru were subjected to intense missionary endeavour and soon began to abandon their traditional religion in favour of Christianity. European education, and the culture which went with it, were warmly received and accepted with enthusiasm. Spirit mediums dwindled in their numbers and following and lost their power and prestige to the rising new élite of Shona evangelists and teachers. A new morality, validated by the Christian faith, thus gradually replaced the old authority of the ancestor spirits which appear to have been relegated to the status of mere peripheral spirits and left to plague women.

In the early 1960s, however, this picture changed radically. With the growing suppression by the white Rhodesian government of the African Nationalist parties which the sophisticated Zezuru supported, there developed a self-conscious and deliberate rejection of Christianity and of European culture. Endowed with a new and increasingly politicized content, traditional religion burst forth again, filling the vacuum left by the prohibition of nationalist politics. Spirits which in the dominant world of men had become little more than a memory suddenly began to claim new mediums with growing insistence. The idiom of ancestral possession was quickly reinstated as a highly respected and popular vehicle for expressing local interests and ambitions. Many evangelists who had sought advancement through European culture dropped out of the church and became shamans. Teachers, and others who had secured positions within the European-dominated world, were dramatically recalled to the faith of their fathers. And the newly restored traditional religion was now highly expressive of Zezuru (and, in a wider context, of Shona) cultural nationalism.

It would be strange of course if this *volte face* occurred simultaneously throughout Zezuru society. Thus the fact that a considerable number of modern Zezuru shamans, possessed by ancestor spirits, are women suggests that these represent a residue from the earlier situation when the Christianization of Zezuru culture converted the ancestors into peripheral spirits which plagued the weaker sex. What, at an earlier stage, the men had rejected, women clung to. If this hypothesis is correct, the position has now so changed that the powers such women incarnate are again eminently respectable, and they are clearly on to a good thing! For events have changed in such a way that what was

abandoned to them as cast-off clothing from the central world of men is once again very much *a la mode*. pp.126-127

This suggests that main and peripheral possession cults should be seen as opposite extremes on a single continuum, rather than as completely different types of religion. p.129

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Mama Lola and the Ezilis: Themes of Mothering and Loving in Haitian Vodou

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Mama Lola is a Haitian woman in her mid-fifties who lives in Brooklyn, where she works as a Vodou priestess. This essay concerns her relationship with two female *lwa*, Vodou spirits whom she "serves." By means of trance states, these spirits periodically speak and act through her during community ceremonies and private healing sessions. Mama Lola's story will serve as a case study of how the Vodou spirits closely reflect the lives of those who honor them. While women and men routinely and meaningfully serve both male and female spirits in Vodou, I will focus here on only one strand of the complex web of relations between the "living" and the Vodou spirits, the strand that connects women and female spirits. Specifically I will demonstrate how female spirits, in their iconography and possession-performance, mirror the lives of contemporary Haitian women with remarkable specificity. Some general discussion of Haiti and of Vodou is necessary before moving to the specifics of Mama Lola's story.

Vodou is the religion of 80% of the population of Haiti. It arose during the eighteenth century on the giant sugar plantations of the French colony of Saint Domingue, then known as the Pearl of the Antilles. The latter name was earned through the colony's veneer of French culture, the reknowned beauty of

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its Creole women, and most of all, the productivity of its huge slave plantations. Haiti is now a different place (it is the poorest country in the Western hemisphere) and Vodou, undoubtedly, a different religion from the one or ones practiced by the predominantly Dahomean, Yoruba, and Kongo slaves originally brought there. The only shared language among these different groups of slaves was French Creole, yet they managed before the end of the eighteenth century to band together (most likely through religious means) to launch the only successful slave revolution during this immoral epoch. As contemporary Haitian history has made amply clear, a successful revolution did not lead to a free and humane life for the Haitian people. Slave masters were quickly replaced by a succession of dictators from both the mulatto and black populations.

Haitians started coming to the United States in large numbers after Francois Duvalier took control of the country in the late 1950s. The first wave of immigrants was made up of educated, professional people. These were followed by the urban poor and, most recently, the rural poor. All were fleeing dead-end lives in a society drenched in corruption, violence, poverty, and disease. There are now well over one-half million Haitians living in the U.S.

Alourdes, the name by which I usually address Mama Lola, came to New York in 1963 from Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti and a city of squalor and hopelessness where she had at times resorted to prostitution to feed three small children. Today, twenty-five years later,* Alourdes owns her own home, a three-story rowhouse in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn. There she and her daughter Maggie run a complex and lively household that varies in size from six people (the core family, consisting of Alourdes, Maggie, and both their children) to as many as a dozen. The final tally depends on how many others are living with them at any given time. These may be recent arrivals from Haiti, down-on-their-luck friends and members of the extended family, or clients of Alourdes's Vodou healing practice.

Maggie, now in her thirties, has been in the United States since early adolescence and consequently is much more Americanized than her mother. She is the adult in the family who deals with the outside world. Maggie does the paperwork which life in New York requires and negotiates with teachers, plumbers, electricians, and an array of creditors. She has a degree from a community college and currently works as a nurse's aide at a New York hospital.

Most of the time Alourdes stays at home where she cares for the small children and carries on her practice as a *manbo,* a Vodou priestess. Many Haitians and a few others such as Trinidadians, Jamaicans, and Dominicans come to her with work, health, family, and love problems. For diagnostic purposes, Alourdes first "reads the cards." Then she carries out healing "work" appropriate to the nature and severity of the problem. This may include: counseling the client, a process in which she calls on her own life experience and the shared values of the Haitian community as well as intuitive skills bordering on extrasensory perception; administering baths and other herbal treatments; manufacturing talismans; and summoning the Vodou spirits to "ride" her through trance-possession in order that spiritual insight and wisdom may be brought to bear on the problem.

Vodou spirits (Haitians never call them gods or goddesses) are quite different from deities, or even saints, in the way that we in North America usually use those terms. They are not moral exemplars, nor are their stories characterized by deeds of cosmic or even heroic proportion. Their scale (what makes

*Editors' note: This article has been reprinted as it appears in our 1989 edition.

them larger than life though not other than it) comes, on the one hand, from the key existential paradoxes they contain and, on the other, from the caricature-like clarity with which they portray those pressure points in life. The *lwa* are full-blown personalities who preside over some particular social arena, and the roles they exemplify contain, as they do for the living who must fill them, both positive and negative possibilities.

Trance-possession within Vodou is somewhat like improvisational theater.[1] It is a delicate balancing act between traditional words and gestures which make the spirits recognizable and innovations which make them relevant. In other words, while the character types of the *lwa* are ancient and familiar, the specific things they say or do in a Vodou ritual unfold in response to the people who call them. Because the Vodou spirits are so flexible and responsive, the same spirit will manifest in different ways in the north and in the south of Haiti, in the countryside and in the cities, in Haiti and among the immigrants in New York. There are even significant differences from family to family. Here we are considering two female spirits as they manifest through a heterosexual Haitian woman who has lived in an urban context all her life and who has resided outside of Haiti for a quarter of a century. While most of what is said about these spirits would apply wherever Vodou is practiced, some of the emphases and details are peculiar to this woman and her location.

Vodou is a combination of several distinct African religious traditions. Also, from the beginning, the slaves included Catholicism in the religious blend they used to cope with their difficult lives. Among the most obvious borrowings were the identifications of African spirits with Catholic saints. The reasons why African slaves took on Catholicism are complex. On one level it was a matter of habit. The African cultures from which the slaves were drawn had traditionally been open to the religious systems they encountered through trade and war and had routinely borrowed from them. On another level it was a matter of strategy. A Catholic veneer placed over their own religious practices was a convenient cover for the perpetuation of these frequently outlawed rites. Yet this often cited and too often politicized explanation points to only one level of the strategic value of Catholicism. There was something deep in the slaves' religious traditions that very likely shaped their response to Catholicism. The Africans in Haiti took on the religion of the slave master, brought it into their holy places, incorporated its rites into theirs, adopted the images of Catholic saints as pictures of their own traditional spirits and the Catholic calendar as descriptive of the year's holy rhythms, and in general practiced a kind of cultural judo with Catholicism. They did this because, in the African ethos, imitation is not the sincerest form of flattery but the most efficient and direct way to gain understanding and leverage.

This epistemological style, exercised also on secular colonial culture, was clearly illustrated when I attended Vodou secret society[2] ceremonies in the interior of Haiti during the 1983 Christmas season. A long night of thoroughly African drumming and dancing included a surprising episode in which the drums went silent, home-made fiddles and brass instruments emerged, and a male and female dancer in eighteenth-century costume performed a slow and fastidious *contradans*. So eighteenth-century slaves in well-hidden places on the vast sugar plantations must have incorporated mimicry of their masters into their traditional worship as a way of appropriating the masters' power.

I want to suggest that this impulse toward imitation lies behind the adoption of Catholicism by African slaves. Yet I do not want to reduce sacred imitation to a political maneuver. On a broader canvas this way of getting to know the powers that be by imitating them is a pervasive and general characteristic of all the African-based religions in the New World. Grasping this

important aspect of the way Vodou relates to the world will provide a key for understanding the nature of the relationship between Alourdes and her female spirits. When possessed by her woman spirits, Alourdes acts out the social and psychological forces that define, and often confine, the lives of contemporary Haitian women. She appropriates these forces through imitation. In the drama of possession-performance, she clarifies the lives of women and thereby empowers them to make the best of the choices and roles available to them.

Sacred imitation is a technique drawn from the African homeland, but the kinds of powers subject to imitation shifted as a result of the experience of slavery. The African religions that fed into Haitian Vodou addressed a full array of cosmic, natural, and social forces. Among the African spirits were those primarily defined by association with natural phenomena such as wind, lightning, and thunder. As a result of the shock of slavery, the lens of African religious wisdom narrowed to focus in exquisite detail on the crucial arena of social interaction. Thunder and lightning, drought and pestilence became pale, second-order threats compared with those posed by human beings. During the nearly 200 years since their liberation from slavery, circumstances in Haiti have forced Haitians to stay focused on the social arena. As a result, the Vodou spirits have also retained the strong social emphasis gained during the colonial period. Keeping these points in view, I now turn to Alourdes and two female Vodou spirits she serves. They both go by the name Ezili.

The Haitian Ezili's African roots are multiple.[3] Among them is Mammy Water, a powerful mother of the waters whose shrines are found throughout West Africa. Like moving water, Ezili can be sudden, fickle, and violent, but she is also deep, beautiful, moving, creative, nurturing, and powerful. In Haiti Ezili was recognized in images of the Virgin Mary and subsequently conflated with her. The various manifestations of the Virgin pictured in the inexpensive and colorful lithographs available throughout the Catholic world eventually provided receptacles for several different Ezilis as the spirit subdivided in the New World in order to articulate the different directions in which women's power flowed.

Alourdes, like all Vodou priests or priestesses, has a small number of spirits who manifest routinely through her. This spiritual coterie, which differs from person to person, both defines the character of the healer and sets the tone of his or her "temple." Ezili Dantor is Alourdes's major female spirit, and she is conflated with Mater Salvatoris, a black Virgin pictured holding the Christ child. The child that Dantor holds (Haitians usually identify it as a daughter!) is her most important iconographic detail, for Ezili Dantor is above all else the woman who bears children, the mother par excellence.

Haitians say that Ezili Dantor fought fiercely beside her "children" in the slave revolution. She was wounded, they say, and they point to the parallel scars that appear on the right cheek of the Mater Salvatoris image as evidence for this. Details of Ezili Dantor's possession-performance extend the story. Ezili Dantor also lost her tongue during the revolution. Thus Dantor does not speak when she possesses someone. The only sound the spirit can utter is a uniform "de-de-de." In a Vodou ceremony. Dantor's mute "de-de-de" becomes articulate only through her body language and the interpretive efforts of the gathered community. Her appearances are thus reminiscent of a somber game of charades. Ezili Dantor's fighting spirit is reinforced by her identification as a member of the Petro pantheon of Vodou spirits, and as such she is associated with what is hot, fiery, and strong. As a Petro spirit Dantor is handled with care. Fear and caution are always somewhere in the mix of attitudes that people hold toward the various Petro spirits.

Those, such as Alourdes, who serve Ezili Dantor become her children and, like chil-

dren in the traditional Haitian family, they owe their mother high respect and unfailing loyalty. In return, this spiritual mother, like the ideal human mother, will exhaust her strength and resources to care for her children. It is important to note here that the sacrifice of a mother for her children will never be seen by Haitians in purely sentimental or altruistic terms. For Haitian women, even for those now living in New York, children represent the main hope for an economically viable household and the closest thing there is to a guarantee of care in old age.

The mother-child relationship among Haitians is thus strong, essential, and in a not unrelated way, potentially volatile. In the countryside, children's labor is necessary for family survival. Children begin to work at an early age, and physical punishment is often swift and severe if they are irresponsible or disrespectful. Although in the cities children stay in school longer and begin to contribute to the welfare of the family at a later age, similar attitudes toward childrearing prevail.

In woman-headed households, the bond between mother and daughter is the most charged and the most enduring. Women and their children form three- and sometimes four-generation networks in which gifts and services circulate according to the needs and abilities of each. These tight family relationships create a safety net in a society where hunger is a common experience for the majority of people. The strength of the mother-daughter bond explains why Haitians identify the child in Ezili Dantor's arms as a daughter. And the importance and precariousness of that bond explain Dantor's fighting spirit and fiery temper.

In possession-performance, Ezili Dantor explores the full range of possibilities inherent in the mother-child bond. Should Dantor's "children" betray her or trifle with her dignity, the spirit's anger can be sudden, fierce, and uncompromising. In such situations her characteristic "de-de-de" becomes a powerful rendering of women's mute but devastating rage. A gentle rainfall during the festivities at Saut d'Eau, a mountainous pilgrimage site for Dantor, is readily interpreted as a sign of her presence but so is a sudden deluge resulting in mudslides and traffic accidents. Ezili's African water roots thus flow into the most essential of social bonds, that between mother and child, where they carve out a web of channels through which can flow a mother's rage as well as her love.

Alourdes, like Ezili Dantor, is a proud and hard-working woman who will not tolerate disrespect or indolence in her children. While her anger is never directed at Maggie, who is now an adult and Alourdes' partner in running the household, it can sometimes sweep the smaller children off their feet. I have never seen Alourdes strike a child, but her wrath can be sudden and the punishments meted out severe. Although the suffering is different in kind, there is a good measure of it in both Haiti and New York, and the lessons have carried from one to the other. Once, after Alourdes disciplined her ten-year-old, she turned to me and said: "The world is evil. . . . You got to make them tough!"

Ezili Dantor is not only Alourdes's main female spirit, she is also the spirit who first called Alourdes to her role as priestess. One of the central functions of Vodou in Haiti, and among Haitian emigrants, is that of reinforcing social bonds. Because obligations to the Vodou spirits are inherited within families, Alourdes's decision to take on the heavy responsibility of serving the spirits was also a decision to opt for her extended family (and her Haitian identity) as her main survival strategy.

It was not always clear that this was the decision she would make. Before Alourdes came to the United States, she had shown little interest in her mother's religious practice, even though an appearance by Ezili Dantor at a family ceremony had marked her for the priesthood when she was only five or six years

old. By the time Alourdes left Haiti she was in her late twenties and the memory of that message from Dantor had either disappeared or ceased to feel relevant. When Alourdes left Haiti, she felt she was leaving the spirits behind along with a life marked by struggle and suffering. But the spirits sought her out in New York. Messages from Ezili and other spirits came in the form of a debilitating illness that prevented her from working. It was only after she returned to Haiti for initiation into the priesthood and thus acknowledged the spirits' claim on her that Alourdes's life in the U.S. began to run smoothly.

Over the ten years I have known this family, I have watched a similar process at work with her daughter Maggie. Choosing the life of a Vodou priestess in New York is much more difficult for Maggie than it was for her mother. To this day, I have yet to see Maggie move all the way into a trance state. Possession threatens and Maggie struggles mightily; her body falls to the floor as if paralyzed, but she fights off the descending darkness that marks the onset of trance. Afterwards, she is angry and afraid. Yet these feelings finally did not prohibit Maggie from making a commitment to the *manbo's* role. She was initiated to the priesthood in the summer of 1982 in a small temple on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince. Alourdes presided at these rituals. Maggie's commitment to Vodou came after disturbing dreams and a mysterious illness not unlike the one that plagued Alourdes shortly after she came to the United States. The accelerated harassment of the spirits also started around the time when a love affair brought Maggie face to face with the choice of living with someone other than her mother. Within a short period of time, the love affair ended, the illness arrived, and Maggie had a portentous dream in which the spirits threatened to block her life path until she promised to undergo initiation. Now it is widely acknowledged that Maggie is the heir to Alourdes's successful healing practice.

Yet this spiritual bond between Alourdes and Maggie cannot be separated from the social, economic, and emotional forces that hold them together. It is clear that Alourdes and Maggie depend on one another in myriad ways. Without the child care Alourdes provides, Maggie could not work. Without the check Maggie brings in every week, Alourdes would have only the modest and erratic income she brings in from her healing work. These practical issues were also at stake in Maggie's decision about the Vodou priesthood, for a decision to become a *manbo* was also a decision to cast her lot with her mother. This should not be interpreted to mean that Alourdes uses religion to hold Maggie against her will. The affection between them is genuine and strong. Alourdes and Maggie are each other's best friend and most trusted ally. In Maggie's own words: "We have a beautiful relationship . . . it's more than a twin, it's like a Siamese twin. . . . She is my soul." And in Alourdes's: "If she not near me, I feel something inside me disconnected."

Maggie reports that when she has problems, Ezili Dantor often appears to her in dreams. Once, shortly after her arrival in the United States, Maggie had a waking vision of Dantor. The spirit, clearly recognizable in her gold-edged blue veil, drifted into her bedroom window. Her new classmates were cruelly teasing her, and the twelve-year-old Maggie was in despair. Dantor gave her a maternal backrub and drifted out the window, where the spirit's glow was soon lost in that of a corner streetlamp. These days, when she is in trouble and Dantor does not appear of her own accord, Maggie goes seeking the spirit. "She don't have to talk to me in my dream. Sometime I go inside the altar, just look at her statue . . . she says a few things to me." The image with which Maggie converses is, of course, Mater Salvatoris, the black virgin, holding in her arms her favored girl child, Anaise.

It is not only in her relationship with her daughter that Alourdes finds her life mirrored

in the image of Ezili Dantor. Ezili Dantor is also the mother raising children on her own, the woman who will take lovers but will not marry. In many ways, it is this aspect of Dantor's story that most clearly mirrors and maps the lives of Haitian women.

In former days (and still in some rural areas) the patriarchal, multigenerational extended family held sway in Haiti. In these families men could form unions with more than one woman. Each woman had her own household in which she bore and raised the children from that union. The men moved from household to household, often continuing to rely on their mothers as well as their women to feed and lodge them. When the big extended families began to break up under the combined pressures of depleted soil, overpopulation, and corrupt politics, large numbers of rural people moved to the cities.

Generally speaking, Haitian women fared better than men in the shift from rural to urban life. In the cities the family shrank to the size of the individual household unit, an arena in which women had traditionally been in charge. Furthermore, their skill at small-scale commerce, an aptitude passed on through generations of rural market women, allowed them to adapt to life in urban Haiti, where the income of a household must often be patched together from several small and sporadic sources. Urban women sell bread, candy, and herbal teas which they make themselves. They also buy and re-sell food, clothing, and household goods. Often their entire inventory is balanced on their heads or spread on outstretched arms as they roam through the streets seeking customers. When desperate enough, women also sell sex. They jokingly refer to their genitals as their "land." The employment situation in urban Haiti, meager though it is, also favors women. Foreign companies tend to prefer them for the piecework that accounts for a large percentage of the jobs available to the poor urban majority.

By contrast, unemployment among young urban males may well be as high as 80%. Many men in the city circulate among the households of their girlfriends and mothers. In this way they are usually fed, enjoy some intimacy, and get their laundry done. But life is hard and resources scarce. With the land gone, it is no longer so clear that men are essential to the survival of women and children. As a result, relationships between urban men and women have become brittle and often violent. And this is so in spite of a romantic ideology not found in the countryside. Men are caught in a double bind. They are still reared to expect to have power and to exercise authority, and yet they have few resources to do so. Consequently, when their expectations run up against a wall of social impossibility, they often veer off in unproductive directions. The least harmful of these is manifest in a national preoccupation with soccer; the most damaging is the military, the domestic police force of Haiti, which provides the one open road toward upward social mobility for poor young men. Somewhere in the middle of this spectrum lie the drinking and gambling engaged in by large numbers of poor men.

Ezili Dantor's lover is Ogou, a soldier spirit sometimes pictured as a hero, a breathtakingly handsome and dedicated soldier. But just as often Ogou is portrayed as vain and swaggering, untrustworthy and self-destructive. In one of his manifestations Ogou is a drunk. This is the man Ezili Dantor will take into her bed but would never depend on. Their relationship thus takes up and comments on much of the actual life experience of poor urban women.

Ezili Dantor also mirrors many of the specifics of Alourdes's own life. Gran Philo, Alourdes's mother, was the first of her family to live in the city. She worked there as a *manbo*. Although she bore four children, she never formed a long-term union with a man. She lived in Santo Domingo, in the Dominican Republic,

for the first years of her adult life. There she had her first two babies. But her lover proved irrational, jealous, and possessive. Since she was working as hard or harder than he, Philo soon decided to leave him. Back in Port-au-Prince, she had two more children, but in neither case did the father participate in the rearing of the children. Alourdes, who is the youngest, did not know who her father was until she was grown. And when she found out, it still took time for him to acknowledge paternity.

In her late teens, Alourdes's fine singing voice won her a coveted position with the Troupe Folklorique, a song and dance group that drew much of its repertoire from Vodou. During that period Alourdes attracted the attention of an older man who had a secure job with the Bureau of Taxation. During their brief marriage Alourdes lived a life that was the dream of most poor Haitian women. She had a house and two servants. She did not have to work. But this husband, like the first man in Philo's life, needed to control her every move. His jealousy was so great that Alourdes was not even allowed to visit her mother without supervision. (The man should have known better than to threaten that vital bond!) Alourdes and her husband fought often and, after less than two years, she left. In the years that followed, there were times when Alourdes had no food and times when she could not pay her modest rent but, with pride like Ezili Dantor's, Alourdes never returned to her husband and never asked him for money. During one especially difficult period Alourdes began to operate as a Marie-Jacques, a prostitute, although not the kind who hawk their wares on the street. Each day she would dress up and go from business to business in downtown Port-au-Prince looking for someone who would ask her for a "date." When the date was over she would take what these men offered (everyone knew the rules), but she never asked for money. Alourdes had three children in Haiti, by three different men. She fed them and provided shelter by juggling several income sources. Her mother helped when she could. So did friends when they heard she was in need. For a while, Alourdes held a job as a tobacco inspector for the government. And she also dressed up and went out looking for dates.

Maggie, like Alourdes, was married once. Her husband drank too much and one evening, he hit her. Once was enough. Maggie packed up her infant son and returned to her mother's house. She never looked back. When Maggie talks about this marriage, now over for nearly a decade, she says he was a good man but alcohol changed him. "When he drink, forget it!" She would not take the chance that he might hit her again or, worse, take his anger and frustration out on their son.

Ezili Dantor is the mother—fierce, proud, hard-working, and independent. As a religious figure, Dantor's honest portrayal of the ambivalent emotions a woman can feel toward her lovers and a mother can feel toward her children stands in striking contrast to the idealized attitude of calm, nurture, and acceptance represented by more standard interpretations of the Holy Mother Mary, a woman for whom rage would be unthinkable. Through her iconography and possession-performances, Ezili Dantor works in subtle ways with the concrete life circumstances of Haitian women such as Alourdes and Maggie. She takes up their lives, clarifies the issues at stake in them, and gives them permission to follow the sanest and most humane paths. Both Alourdes and Maggie refer to Ezili Dantor as "my mother."

Vodou is a religion born of slavery, of wrenching change and deep pain. Its genius can be traced to long experience in using the first (change) to deal with the second (pain). Vodou is a religion in motion, one without canon, creed, or pope. In Vodou the ancient African wisdom is preserved by undergoing constant transformation in response to specific life circumstances. One of the things which keeps Vodou agile is its plethora of

spirits. Each person who serves the spirits has his or her own coterie of favorites. And no single spirit within that group can take over and lay down the law for the one who serves. There are always other spirits to consult, other spirit energies to take into account. Along with Ezili Dantor, Alourdes also serves her sister, Ezili Freda.

Ezili Freda is a white spirit from the Rada pantheon, a group characterized by sweetness and even tempers. Where Dantor acts out women's sexuality in its childbearing mode, Freda, the flirt, concerns herself with love and romance. Like the famous Creole mistresses who lent charm and glamour to colonial Haiti, Ezili Freda takes her identity and worth from her relationship with men. Like the mulatto elite in contemporary Haiti who are the heirs of those Creole women, Freda loves fine clothes and jewelry. In her possession-performances, Freda is decked out in satin and lace. She is given powder and perfume, sweet smelling soaps and rich creams. The one possessed by her moves through the gathered community, embracing one and then another and then another. Something in her searches and is never satisfied. Her visits often end in tears and frustration.[4]

Different stories are told about Freda and children. Some say she is barren. Others say she has a child but wishes to hide that fact in order to appear fresher, younger, and more desirable to men. Those who hold the latter view are fond of pointing out the portrait of a young boy that is tucked behind the left elbow of the crowned Virgin in the image of Maria Dolorosa with whom Freda is conflated. In this intimate biographical detail, Freda picks up a fragment from Alourdes's life that hints at larger connections between the two. When Alourdes was married she already had two children by two different men. She wanted a church wedding and a respectable life, so she hid the children from her prospective in-laws. It was only at the wedding itself, when they asked about the little boy and girl seated in the front row, that they found out the woman standing before the altar with their son already had children.

Alourdes does not have her life all sewn up in neat packages. She does not have all the questions answered and all the tensions resolved. Most of the time when she tells the story of her marriage, Alourdes says flatly: "He too jealous. That man crazy!" But on at least one occasion she said: "I was too young. If I was with Antoine now, I never going to leave him!" When Alourdes married Antoine Lovinsky she was a poor teenager living in Port-au-Prince, a city where less than 10% of the people are not alarmingly poor. Women of the elite class nevertheless structure the dreams of poor young women. These are the light-skinned women who marry in white dresses in big Catholic churches and return to homes that have bedroom sets and dining room furniture and servants. These are the women who never have to work. They spend their days resting and visiting with friends and emerge at night on the arms of their men dressed like elegant peacocks and affecting an air of haughty boredom. Although Alourdes's tax collector could not be said to be a member of the elite, he provided her with a facsimile of the dream. It stifled her and confined her, but she has still not entirely let go of the fantasy. She still loves jewelry and clothes and, in her home, manages to create the impression, if not the fact, of wealth by piling together satin furniture, velvet paintings, and endless bric-a-brac.

Alourdes also has times when she is very lonely and she longs for male companionship. She gets tired of living at the edge of poverty and being the one in charge of such a big and ungainly household. She feels the pull of the images of domesticity and nuclear family life that she sees everyday on the television in New York. Twice since I have known her, Alourdes has fallen in love. She is a deeply sensual woman and this comes strongly to the fore during these times. She dresses up, becomes

coquettish, and caters to her man. Yet when describing his lovable traits, she always says first: "He help me so much. Every month, he pay the electric bill," and so forth. Once again the practical and the emotional issues cannot be separated. In a way, this is just another version of the poor woman selling her "land." And in another way it is not, for here the finances of love are wound round and round with longing and dreams.

Poor Haitian women, Alourdes included, are a delight to listen to when their ironic wit turns on what we would label as the racism, sexism, and colonial pretense of the upper-class women Freda mirrors. Yet these are the values with power behind them both in Haiti and in New York, and poor women are not immune to the attraction of such a vision. Ezili Freda is thus an image poor Haitian women live toward. She picks up their dreams and gives them shape, but these women are mostly too experienced to think they can live on or in dreams. Alourdes is not atypical. She serves Freda but much less frequently than Dantor. Ezili Dantor is the one for whom she lights a candle every day; she is the one Alourdes turns to when there is real trouble. She is, in Alourdes' words, "my mother." Yet I think it is fair to say that it is the tension between Dantor and Freda that keeps both relevant to the lives of Haitian women.

There is a story about conflict between the two Ezilis. Most people, most of the time, will say that the scars on Ezili Dantor's cheek come from war wounds, but there is an alternative explanation. Sometimes it is said that because Dantor was sleeping with her man, Maria Dolorosa took the sword from her heart and slashed the cheek of her rival.

A flesh and blood woman, living in the real world, cannot make a final choice between Ezili Dantor and Ezili Freda. It is only when reality is spiced with dreams, when survival skills are larded with sensuality and play, that life moves forward. Dreams and play alone lead to endless and fruitless searching. And a whole life geared toward survival becomes brittle and threatened by inner rage. Alourdes lives at the nexus of several spirit energies. Freda and Dantor are only two of them, the two who help her most to see herself clearly as a woman.

To summarize the above discussion: The Vodou spirits are not idealized beings removed from the complexity and particularity of life. On the contrary, the responsive and flexible nature of Vodou allows the spirits to change over space and time in order to mirror people's life circumstances in considerable detail. Vodou spirits are transparent to their African origins and yet they are other than African spirits. Ancient nature connections have been buried deep in their iconographies while social domains have risen to the top, where they have developed in direct response to the history and social circumstances of the Haitian people. The Vodou spirits make sense of the powers that shape and control life by imitating them. They act out both the dangers and the possibilities inherent in problematic life situations. Thus, the moral pull of Vodou comes from clarification. The Vodou spirits do not tell the people what should be; they illustrate what is.

Perhaps Vodou has these qualities because it is a religion of an oppressed people. Whether or not that is true, it seems to be a type of spirituality with some advantages for women. The openness and flexibility of the religion, the multiplicity of its spirits, and the detail in which those spirits mirror the lives of the faithful makes women's lives visible in ways they are not in the so-called great religious traditions. This visibility can give women a way of working realistically and creatively with the forces that define and confine them.

Notes

1. I use terms such as possession-performance and theater analogies in order to point to certain aspects of the spirits' self-presentation and interaction with devotees. The terms should not be taken as indicating that priestesses and priests simply

pretend to be spirits during Vodou ceremonies. The trance states they enter are genuine, and they themselves will condemn the occasional imposter among them.

2. In an otherwise flawed book, E. Wade Davis does a very good job of uncovering and describing the nature and function of the Vodou secret societies. See *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).

3. Robert Farris Thompson traces Ezili to a Dahomean "goddess of lovers." *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), p. 191.

4. Maya Deren has drawn a powerful portrait of this aspect of Ezili Freda in *The Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New Paltz, N.Y.: Documentext, McPherson and Co., 1983), pp. 137–45.

Further Readings

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