

Treating “Wild” Spirit Possession in the Dominican Republic: Parallels and Differences between Local and Euro-American Therapeutic Approaches*

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Abstract This article explores a variety of spirit possession within Vodou in the Dominican Republic that is unbidden and characterized by uncontrolled movement. Local explanatory models for states of distressing possession are being overwhelmed or punished by the spirits. While in most cases possession behavior becomes more organized and rich in symbolic meaning as an individual progresses on her spiritual path there also exist (rare) cases of chronic unbidden possession with violent features. The article draws on such case, in which dissociative states reflecting the dynamics of trauma are locally interpreted as possession by an unruly Indian spirit. In this case possession is functioning as an idiom of distress allowing a young woman to communicate her past traumatic experience in a culturally acceptable way, which opens the possibility to receive attention and comfort. Since both Vodou and psychodrama are based on experiencing and making visible the soul in action, communalities and differences between the two therapeutic systems are elaborated and juxtaposed.

Keywords spirit possession – Vodou – idioms of distress – psychodrama – Dominican Republic

Zur Behandlung der „wilden“ Geistbesessenheit in der Dominikanischen Republik: Parallelen und Unterschiede zwischen lokalen und europäisch-amerikanischen Vorgehensweisen

Zusammenfassung Der Artikel widmet sich einer Variante von Besessenheit im Vodou der Dominikanischen Republik, die spontan auftritt und durch fehlende Kontrolle gekennzeichnet ist. Lokale Erklärungsmodelle für Zustände von Besessenheit, die als schwierig erlebt werden, beziehen sich auf eine Überwältigung oder Bestrafung durch die Geister. Obwohl Besessenheitsverhalten in den meisten Fällen mit zunehmendem Fortschreiten religiöser Involviertheit organisierter und reicher an symbolischer Bedeutung wird, existieren auch seltene Fälle von chronischer Spontanbesessenheit mit gewaltvollem Charakter. Der Beitrag bezieht sich auf einen solchen Fall, in dem dissoziative Zustände, die eine Traumadynamik widerspiegeln, lokal als Besessenheit durch einen wilden Indianergeist interpretiert werden. In besagtem Fall fungiert Besessenheit als „Idiom of Distress“, als eine Sprache, die es einer jungen Frau erlaubt, ihre in der Vergangenheit gemachten traumatischen Erfahrungen auf kulturell akzeptierte Weise zu kommunizieren. Dies eröffnet ihr die Möglichkeit, Trost und Zuwendung zu erfahren. Da es sich sowohl bei Vodou als auch bei Psychodrama um therapeutische Systeme handelt, die (auch) auf der Aktivierung und Sichtbarmachung „seelischer“ Zustände basieren, arbeitet der Beitrag Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede heraus und stellt sie nebeneinander.

Keywords Besessenheit – Geistbesessenheit – Vodou – Idioms of Distress – Psychodrama – Dominikanische Republik

Résumé français see p. 254

Introduction

Spirit possession involves a temporary alteration of consciousness (trance or dissociation) during which the possessed person feels and acts as though a spirit’s identity has replaced her own, followed by reported amnesia for the event (e.g. BOURGUIGNON 1973, 1976; CARDEÑA *et al.* 2009; KLASS 2003;

ROUGET 1985). On the isle of Hispaniola, spirit possession is performed within the religious context of Vodou. Possession in Vodou has been typically described as a culturally sanctioned and rewarded practice of ritual healing (BOURGUIGNON 1976, DAVIS 1987, DESMANGLES & CARDEÑA 1994) but several authors also mentioned it as an explanatory framework for illness (AGOSTO MUÑOZ 1972; KHOURY,

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KAISER, KEYS, BREWSTER & KOHRT 2012; LEWIS 1971: 60).

In this article, I want to explore spirit possession in Vodou (resp. *vodú*) in the Dominican Republic, with particular emphasis on a variety connected to affliction that affects only a small fraction of the devotees (SCHAFFLER, CARDEÑA, REIJMAN & HALUZA 2016: 91–92). For this purpose, I will draw on the existing literature but also on first hand ethnographical data collected in multiple periods of fieldwork in the southwest of the Dominican Republic. During a period of more than two years of field research undertaken between 2003 and 2013, I applied qualitative research methods such as participant observation, life history and semi-structured narrative interviews, as well as videography.

After a general introduction into Dominican Vodou, I will describe how possession is performed in different contexts. Then, I elaborate how vodouists explain perturbations in their possession experience within the framework of their religious system and cite the case history of a young woman as example. Next, I shall analyze afflictive possession in terms of scientific concepts and language. I will argue that afflictive possession can be understood as “idiom of distress,” and that the process of initiation into Vodou offers the afflicted a way of learning to interpret and express their embodied personal distress in a culturally appropriate manner.

Dominican Vodou: Las 21 Divisiones or Brujería

Research on spirit possession on the Isle of Hispaniola originally focused on Vodou in Haiti (BOURGUIGNON 1968, 1973b, 1976; DEREN 1953; MÉTRAUX 1955, 1972). However, the adjacent Dominican Republic could also preserve some aspects of African religions, which together with various influences from other spiritual traditions, evolved into Dominican Vodou, locally referred to as *las 21 divisiones* (the 21 divisions) or *brujería* (literally: witchcraft). An important difference between Haitian and Dominican Vodou is that the Dominican variety is less rigidly structured, and is syncretized to a higher degree with European Christian and esoteric elements like Kardecist Spiritism (DAVIS 1987, SCHAFFLER 2009b: 92ff). Several manifestations of Dominican folk religion overlap with *las 21 divisiones*, among them an urban style referred

to as *espiritismo material* (DAVIS 1987: 69), a famous San Juaneran tradition labeled *movimiento de palma sola* or *olivorismo* (MARTÍNEZ 1991, LUNDIUS 1995, LUNDIUS & LUNDAHL 2000), Afro-Dominican funeral rites handed down in *cofradías* (religious brotherhoods) (DAVIS 1976; HERNÁNDEZ SOTO 1996, 2004), and varieties of Dominico-Haitian Vodou to be found in the *bateyes* (former centers of sugar production) (ROSENBERG 1979) and the borderlands (BRENDBEKKEN 2008).

Under the reign of the dictator Rafael Trujillo, who ruled the Dominican Republic from 1930 until his assassination in 1961, the participation in vodouists celebrations was officially forbidden and spirit possession considered a savagery (DAVIS 1987: 38–40). According to elder practitioners of Vodou, the equipment of Dominican *brujos/as* (a folk term commonly used for faith healers) was most often limited to a *mesita* (small table) with a figure or a picture of La Virgen de la Altagracia (Virgin of the Highest Grace), a glass of water and a lit candle on it. Some *brujos/as* would practice cartomancy or stare into the water glass to tell the future (also SCHAFFLER 2009b: 48), while others practiced faith healing with prayers (*ensalmos*) (*ibid.* 157–158), or prepared folk remedies in bottles (*botellas*) (BRENDBEKKEN 1998). Only few Dominicans outside the borderlands, the *bateyes* or *cofradías* were ready to induce novices into the cult of Vodou, which is why Dominicans used to travel to Haiti to complete their cult induction (SCHAFFLER & BRABEC DE MORI 2015). During the last decades, a range of socio-economic factors along with gradual political and cultural liberalization contributed to an increased social acceptance of Vodou. Celebrations in honor of the spirits are now frequently to be found in urban areas of the southwest, commonly referred to as El Sur (PIPER 2012). However, unlike in Haiti, Vodou is not the dominant belief system in the Dominican Republic. Catholics make up between one-half and roughly two-thirds of the population, and the number of protestant evangelical congregations is growing rapidly (PEW RESEARCH CENTER 2014). As these protestant evangelical congregations aggressively attack the “satanic practice” of Vodou, many Dominican Vodouists continue to hide their religion from the public.

The most common term to refer to the spirits of Dominican Vodou is *misterios* (literally: mysteries) or *luases* (loas). Most *misterio* spirits have their

equivalents among Catholic saints such as Saint Michael, Saint Anne or Saint Jacob, and have been saturated by their imageries: during colonial times and under the weight of Catholic impositions the former African spirits were worshipped under the mask of Catholic saints (DEIVE 1975, MÉTRAUX 1972). However, unlike in Catholicism, those saints are able to act and speak through humans. As they take possession of a human, they are called by their second or “real” names, for example Belié Belcan for Saint Michael, Anaísa for Saint Anne, or Ogún Balenyó for Saint Jacob. Apart from the moral saints of the so-called white division (*la división blanca*), Vodouists assume that there are altogether 21 groups (divisiones) of spirits, each of them characterizing a particular functional category. Among the most important divisiones are the so-called Guedes that are connected to Death (*la división negra*), the unpredictable spirits of the already extinct indigenous population (*la división India*), or the aggressive and subversive petró spirits (*la división petró*). In addition to the broadly known divisions, there are also personal pantheons of individual followers that may comprise of deceased family members who have turned into ancestral spirits.

In Vodou, the idea of being possessed is part of the normal cultural construction of the self and the local cosmology. In Vodouist jargon, possession is metaphorically referred to as “the mounting of the devotee by the spirit,” the devotee being called a *caballo* (horse) or *servidor(a)* (servant). This means that, from the moment of possession onwards, the devotee no longer experiences herself as herself, but as the possessing spirit who is using her body. Since messages and advice delivered by the spirit through the horse are considered of great value, possession is seen as a privilege only available for a chosen few, possessing certain mental capacities (DAVIS 1987, DESMANGLES & CARDEÑA 1994). As those capable of possession eventually graduate into the position of a healer, they not only gain in social status but also open up a new source of income, as they charge for their services (SCHAFFLER *et al.* 2016).

Honoring the spirits

The spirits are invoked and worshipped with their corresponding songs, ritual prayers, gestures, salutations, and drawings on the ground with flour (*fir-mas* or *veves*), as well as with offerings that consist

of different types of food, sodas, tobacco, and alcohol. The most prominent device to call the spirits, next to drumming music that is played with *tambores de palo*, is a small bell with a pervasive sound. Ritual activities serve the purpose of resolving private problems, mourning the dead (*rezo*), penitence, or cult induction (*bautismo*). Public celebrations to honor the spirits (*fiesta de misterios, mani or velación*) are either calendric celebrations of a *servidor*'s principle spirit(s) (*misterio de cabeza*, see below), usually associated with the date of the saint's death and ascension into heaven, or based upon completion of a personal *promesa* (promise) to a saint that has responded to one's petitions for assistance (PIPER 2012: 197–218). The owner of the location being used, who is also usually the priest(ess) and organizer of the festivities, puts her close relationship to the spirits on public display, while at the same time, fellow devotees and potential new clients enjoy the opportunity to contact the spirits and participate in an entertaining spectacle (SCHAFFLER & BRABEC DE MORI 2015). In the following, I present a typical sequence of action during a public celebration in honor of the spirits as I observed it many times in the region of San Cristóbal.

The festivities usually start in the early afternoon in the yard of a house. The guests that have brought food and drinks as offerings to the spirits with them, sit around on plastic chairs, chat and share drinks while they enjoy popular music. The excitement increases as the popular music is superseded by the pounding rhythm of live performed ritual *palo* drums. Seduced by the atmosphere, a non-initiated guest may now suddenly jump up from her chair, whirl around while uttering words in an incomprehensible language, and then roll over the floor with flailing limbs. While the attending spiritual leaders receive the arriving spirit with all necessary means, the majority of the guests remain passive and proceed to sip their drinks as what they see is nothing new to them. Once the spontaneous possession is over, the freshman novice is left exhausted, with her clothes stained with dirt. She may then ask the surrounding people what has happened while she was literally out of her mind. Subsequently members of the Vodouist community embrace her and advise her to seek cult induction as the spirits are clearly calling her. By the time the ritual activities begin, the crowd moves inside the living space of the house where representations of the celebrated saints are

positioned on top of an altar, which is surrounded by arrangements of flowers. A ritual assistant (*plaza*) rings the bell while holding up a ritual jar (*jarro divisional*) made of tin ware and adorned with multi-colored ribbons, pours libations to the spirits and performs the ritual salutations. The first principle to be officially called is “El Gran Poder de Dios” (God Almighty) who is asked to give permission to honor the other spirits. This is followed by a so-called *novena*, a circle prayer that includes the saying of the rosary with the Lord’s Prayer and Hail Mary. Finally, the 21 Division[e]s are invoked, starting with San Antonio/Legba in whose honour bread and wine are served. Some devotees wave flags to invite their most intimate *misterios*, while others “heat up” the fiesta by burning a splash of *agua florida* (a perfume) on the floor. The atmosphere becomes increasingly charged as the guests react to the intensified consumption of liquor and the heavy smell of tobacco, incense and perfumes. At this point almost everyone has stood up from their chairs, and started to dance to the fierce drumming that echoes from the walls. If indications appear that a devotee is about to be possessed—such as convulsions of the upper body or an in-ward turned gaze—a ritual assistant rushes to ring the bell and raises the ritual jar. Cheered by this reference, the manifesting spirit now arises and salutes the assistants and guests with ritual gesture, which only initiated devotees, know how to answer. After having been offered liquor and tobacco, it wanders around, works with ritual objects, delivers messages, does divining or laying on of hands, and gives advice. Later at night, the crowd gathers in the heat of the often tiny living space while the devotees now simultaneously invoke the spirits, filling the room with their sweat and steaming energy. The manifestation of the spirit in whose honor the festivity is celebrated, and the distribution of food offerings, marks the highlight of the festivities. Soon after midnight, most visitors are already on their way home and the last possessing spirits are also about to withdraw (see also SCHAFFLER 2009b: 166–168, SCHAFFLER & BRABEC DE MORI 2015).

Mastering the art of possession

The radical alteration of embodied identity involves a number of unusual somatic sensations and body image changes (CARDEÑA 1989). Possession trance, thus, may feel strange to those who experience it

for the first time. Early possession, like in the above example of a non-initiated visitor at a festivity who suddenly jumps up from her chair, is typically unbidden and characterized by uncontrolled behavior. Vodouists describe it as *lobo* (“wolfish”) as they draw on the metaphor of a wild horse that is in need of taming. The wild horse (*caballo lobo*) may buck, break down or toss to and fro as it feels the weight of the horseman on its spine (BOURGUIGNON 1976: 40, MÉTRAUX 1955: 20). A local explanation for this is that the horse is not yet accustomed to its master, which at the same time enters with too much force (SCHAFFLER & BRABEC DE MORI 2015). To gain in control over the wild possession, a novice must spend several months or even years undergoing the process of ritual initiation. Cult induction (*bautismo*) involves the pouring of sodas and alcoholic beverages over the novice’s head and shoulders, which are considered to be the area where the spirits take their place when possessing their human host. This is referred to as *refrescamiento de cabeza* (literally: refreshing of the head). A calm and harmonious relationship between horse and rider may only develop as the spirit accepts the offerings. The process of initiation takes place under the caring guidance of a mentor, that is, a fully initiated person that has already been practicing for a long time. During celebrations in honor of the spirits, novice and mentor, both in a state of possession, dance together with the mentor directing the novice to move according to the aesthetic standards of Vodou. Over the course of time, the novice gains in control and expressive competence as her movements become rich with symbolic meaning, being carried out smoothly and elegantly with voice and facial expression fitting the embodied personality. Since it is a possessing spirit that passes on the essential ritual knowledge, the idea that possession involves some kind of training does not preclude the commonly shared cultural narrative, according to which possession is a sacred ability that requires one to be chosen by God and the spirits (SCHAFFLER 2009a, 2012; SCHAFFLER & BRABEC DE MORI 2016).

The spirit that took possession first is referred to as “misterio of the head” (*misterio de cabeza*). It is intrinsically connected to its horse, a nexus that may only be dissolved after a ritually agreed space of time that can take decades. In the course of cult induction, the initiate internalizes other spirit behaviors, too. Fully initiated individuals are able

to manifest a range of spirits with postures, movement sequences and symbolic actions that are now identifiable to insiders. For example, the opening dance patterns of Saint Jacob/Ogún Balenyó denote a fierce male entity that fights with a sword while he mounts a horse. Saint Michael/Belié Belcán’s opening posture is characterized by the gesture of raising a sword and the posture of treading down a demon. Saint Anne/Anaísa dances, moves, behaves and speaks in an utterly feminine way, and Guede Limbó/San Exedito, a famous Vodouist spirit that represents death and sexuality, may be expressed by miming the movements of the act of copulation at the beginning of possession, and later by obscene language and greedy eating habits. After their characteristic “signature move,” and as the spirits direct themselves towards the ritual participants, the symbolic content in their performances decreases and gives way to a more individualistic behavioral mode involving interaction and speech. When an initiate is fully immersed in her spirit role, her performance creates focus enabling her to control the activities of those around her. In such case, fellow ritualists immediately rush to receive the spirit, and the drummers shift their attention towards the possessed and support her action by performing the corresponding songs and rhythms. Both the degree and temporal duration of this control vary greatly between individuals and situations, and only a limited number of individuals—primarily spiritual leaders—exert great and consistent control (SCHAFFLER & BRABEC DE MORI 2015).

There are various interpretations from cult members as to why the performance of possession may fail, or be associated with suffering and illness, even though the horse is being readily initiated. One is that the spirits are angry at the horse and punish her for abstaining from her ritual duties, a condition locally referred to as *castigo* (punishment). In such case the spirits send illness such as general malaise, pain or negative life events, or they force the possessed to behave in an inappropriate or violent manner like rolling on the ground for prolonged episodes, or running out on the streets while spinning around (SCHAFFLER 2009b: 121–123; SCHAFFLER *et al.* 2016: 80). These incidences are sometimes followed by public expressions of guilt on behalf of the horse (SCHAFFLER & BRABEC DE MORI 2016), and her attempt to reestablish a healthy relationship with the spirits such as organizing a public celebration

in their honour. Another explanation for disturbance during possession is that the spirit feels restricted by a too tight wardrobe, hairbands or shoes, which is referred to locally as *espíritu amarrado* (bound spirit). In such case, helping hands pacify the spirit by removing the possessed individual’s shoes and hair ties. A further local etiology for failed possession is *cruce de corrientes* (crossing of forces), meaning that two or more competing spirits have manifested at the same time, and so neither can express themselves and deliver their messages. The problem is either resolved with the aid of a ritual assistant that helps the horse to invoke more carefully, one spirit at a time, or with an additional series of initiation rites to “better prepare the head” of the obviously not yet fully tamed horse.

Case study: A young woman possessed by unruly spirits

Thus far we have been discussing local etiologies for disturbance during possession within the ritual context, considering a lack of experience, punishment by the spirits or incorrect invocation. From a scientific point of view, possession trance, like all types of dissociative phenomena, has non-pathological and pathological expressions. Whereas the first bring about a range of social functions, the latter are associated with distress and dysfunction (CARDEÑA *et al.* 2009). With reference to the above example, the spontaneous “wild possession” by a religious novice during a religious celebration could be simply the result of inexperience. In that case, with progress on her spiritual path, her possession trance would become more organized and rich in symbolic meaning. Moreover, as the spirit personality emerging during possession would contain aspects of her own personality, she would be able to communicate opinions and desires otherwise kept secretly. Many solutions reached by the spirit would not be actually foreign or external to her but rather reflections of her own personality, under disguise (MISCHEL & MISCHEL 1947: 257).

Chronic unbidden and violent possession, however, does not allow for verbal expression as it renders the individual without speech. Being an embodied expression of distress and conflict it sends “a message of chaos and dysfunction” (SHARP 1996: 241), which may or may not be understood by those who observe it. In fact, the spirit possession idiom

has been widely acknowledged as an outlet for dissent and resistance to social and political power, albeit one which does not ultimately undermine dominant structures and authority (BODDY 1989, LEWIS 1971, OBEYSEKERE 1977, O'BRIEN 2001).

Recent investigations in areas of civil war have established a link between involuntary and violent possession, and traumatic experiences in the past (IGREJA *et al.* 2010, NEUNER *et al.* 2012, VAN DUJL *et al.* 2010). Also, possessed Vodouists in the Dominican Republic did have a more severe story of trauma than their non-possessed peers, although not particularly marked as the country has not undergone mass violence for a number of decades (SCHAFFLER *et al.* 2016). However, some Dominicans nevertheless experience considerable everyday violence, as in the case of a young woman, which I shall outline in the following paragraphs.

After a series of traumatic experiences including sexual and domestic violence and a failed childbirth, the young woman started to suffer from involuntary possession outside the ritual context over the course of several years. She was eventually diagnosed with a complicated variety of *caballo lobo* due to tormenting Indian spirits. Although her case is not a singular one, it should be stated that the vast majority of Dominican possession practitioners do not suffer to a comparable degree (or at all). In fact, affliction is often overstated to convince the initiates and the outsiders of the veracity of possession, as suffering is considered a sign of spiritual election.

The young woman had lost both parents at an early age. She grew up together with her maternal great aunt and cousins in a remote area in the district San Cristóbal. She became pregnant at age twelve as a result of a violent relationship with a much older man. Due to a lack of medical attention she suffered a traumatic childbirth, which was the reason why the newborn subsequently died. After experiencing one attack of uncontrolled movement and aggression shortly after giving birth, the young woman regularly started to suffer episodes of violent behavior at age 15. According to her own words she used to go into such frenzy that she “bit pieces of cement from the wall”. During her outbursts she was often drunk. Her relatives attributed her violent behavior to possession by the Indian spirits whose heritage would run in the family. The family owned a small altar where they honored some *misterio* spirits, of whom she used to be terribly afraid when she was

a child. Moreover, the young woman's great aunt used to wake up with the dawn and sing in a language no one would understand. On days that begun like this she would show a “hot temper” and sometimes leave the house to spend the day alone in the woods. Her behavior was interpreted as possession by an Indian spirit that answered the call of the wild. Vodouists see the spirits of the native Indian population as basically benign creatures that bring good luck and blessings. However, once they climb in the saddle of their horses they get rid of all signs of civilization, throw themselves into water or stuff their mouths with fruits. Moreover, some Indians like to fight and “have a passionate sexual attitude, which they owe to their foreign race and their lack of culture”, as one devotee put it.

Despite the recognition that the young woman's problems were related to tormenting Indian spirits, her family shied away from the excessive costs that formal cult induction would cause. Instead, they tied the young woman up during possession so that she could not move. They also poured kerosene onto her, which, as they hoped, would dispel the unwelcome spirits. The young woman became depressed and thin. Her condition improved only after she left “el Sur” (the Southern Dominican Republic) for informal work in a tourist area. There, she gained weight and did not suffer from dissociative attacks until she met her second partner who she moved back to the south with. The attacks and refusal to eat returned the month after she gave birth to her second child. Her second partner brought her to a medical doctor, and then to several *brujos* who diagnosed folk diseases such as *'pamo* (spasm) (SCHAFFLER 2009b: 130–131) and possession by a Death spirit as a consequence of witchcraft (*ibid.* 99). In order to remove the sick-making agent, one healer gave the young woman a smelling potion to cleanse her body with. Neither of the treatments helped her.

Early one morning the young woman unconsciously left the house without putting on her clothes. After several hours she found herself circled by the members of a protestant evangelical congregation who attempted to cast out the demon that possessed her. A neighbor found her as she was desperately attempting to escape their action and brought her to a nearby Vodou center. The spiritual leader there confirmed that Indian spirits were invading the young woman, which was causing her unplanned wandering, her aggression and her refusal to eat. The vari-

ous attempts to exorcise the spirits had made them furious. The only way to domesticate them was to undergo initiation into Vodou as the young woman had to learn to deal with her unbidden possession. Diagnosed as such, the young woman began to feel slightly better as she was not afraid of witchcraft and demons anymore. However, the spiritual leader of the nearby Vodou center was not able to tame the spirits that were contacting her. Every once in a while he took the young woman to a celebration in honor of the spirits, but she embarrassed him by her possessed actions that had a strong aggressive and sometimes also sexual shaping. She used to rotate her hips, to rub her body against other people or objects, and to violently attack male participants, hitting and scratching their heads and shoulders.

One time she intended to jump into the nearby river and was only rescued by a visiting spiritual leader; an elderly woman, well known for her benevolence and ability to deal with difficult cases of possession illness. The female spiritual leader not only took care of the young woman's initiation without charging her money, but also cared for her mundane wellbeing. She helped her, for example, to acquire Dominican citizenship as the young woman's family had not registered her when she was a child resulting in her being undocumented. The young woman's current partner, who had not trusted in Vodou until this point, started to support her spiritual path for he concluded that this kind of treatment was finally helping her. At the beginning of her spiritual development under the guidance of her new mentor, the young woman's "naughty, mean, and wriggly" possessing Indian spirit, as someone called it, continued to manifest spontaneously and to disobey ceremonial regulations. However, the spiritual center was organized in a way that on such occasions the front porch would fill with devotees from the neighborhood sitting in plastic chairs all around the manifesting spirit. After the young woman had leaped around for a while in front of her audience, performing a desperate play rife with sex and violence, she received emotional support, particularly by elder female visitors of the spectacle who wiped her face, gently stroked her back or hugged her while she sat on their laps. More than three years after she had undergone her first ritual of initiation, the young woman was pregnant again and free of involuntary possession when I last met her in 2013. She reported that her possessions had

become more controlled although she had not manifested any other type of *misterio* besides the spirits of the indigenous population. During her pregnancy she would not mount the spirits at all for they, as she expressed it, had "eventually given her a break."

Chronic wild possession as an idiom of distress

To avoid the reductionist understanding of the biomedical model (LAMBEK 1989), I suggest describing chronic afflictive possession as "idiom of distress" rather than drawing on clinical concepts of pathology. Idioms of distress are shared ways of experiencing and talking about personal or social concerns that invite action within the context of specific complexes of personal and cultural meaning (AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION (APA) 2013: 758, NICHTER 1981). They index past traumatic memories as well as present stressors and lie on a trajectory from the mildly stressful to deep suffering (NICHTER 2010). In addition, I would like to define them as embodied symbolic language for psychosocial suffering that derives its legitimacy from its shared metaphors, meaning and understanding in a group (DE JONG & REIS 2010). In the Dominican South, individuals often find few culturally sanctioned opportunities for the expression of past traumatic experiences and negative emotions other than expression in cultural performance. Possession thus may be seen an adaptive response in circumstances where other modes of expression fail to communicate distress adequately (NICHTER 1981). In the case of the young woman, early outbursts of aggression were not recognized as genuine reactions to her experience of violence. Consultations of a medical doctor and several *brujo/as* did not provide her with the help she needed as their attempts of therapy consisted of only one single intervention. The Vodouist perspective, on the other hand, according to which the young woman's suffering resulted from a sacred gift necessary to protect, supplied her with an available, socially sanctioned (at least among cult members) framework for the interpretation and acceptance of otherwise threatening and disturbing phenomena (MISCHEL & MISCHEL 1947: 256, WOLFRADT 2013: 16). As a result, the young woman found meaning in her chronic and unbidden dissociative episodes and felt much safer. Being embedded in a benevolent social network was an important source of support and helped her to cope. As the young woman repeat-

edly presented her wild possession at the protected area of the porch of her second spiritual mentor, the audience there understood her performance in two ways. For one, they negotiated it in accordance with the prevailing cultural narrative as due to possession by an unruly Indian spirit. But the young woman's performance was evocative, and so the surrounding visitors became aware of the psychosocial nuances attached to it. As they stroke her back, wiped her tears and rocked her in their arms, the young woman finally received the attention, protection, and comfort that she so desperately needed.

Parallels and differences between Vodou and Western therapeutic approaches

Although Vodouists do not attribute their violent possessed states to distress and trauma, they do think that the verbal and performative expression of the spirits is of vital importance for the mental health of the possessed. From their perspective, a person whose possessing spirits are exorcised, instead of being treated with all due respect, is likely to end up suffering from *loquera* (madness) (SCHAFFLER 2009b: 163). In the same vein, BOURGUIGNON (1965: 54) mentions that if an individual prevents a spirit from coming, it may manifest itself with much greater violence, "so violently as to kill the 'horse'." In the Euro-North American cultural context, the understanding that an inner movement should be expressed in order to maintain wellbeing evokes the idea of catharsis. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle claimed that Tragedy (a form of drama based on human suffering), through pity and fear, accomplishes catharsis, or purification, of the same emotions. The notion of emotional purification was reinforced much later during the origins of Freudian psychoanalysis when Josef Breuer beginning with 1880 developed a "cathartic procedure" for individuals suffering from hysterical symptoms.

Catharsis referred to the act of expressing, or more accurately, experiencing, the deep emotions often associated with traumatic events in the individual's past, which had originally been repressed or ignored, and had never been adequately addressed or experienced. This purging of the retained emotion under hypnosis was supposed to eliminate the hysteric symptoms (STRICKLAND 2001: 106). Around the same time, Pierre Janet, a French psychiatrist and psychologist, the founder of modern

dynamic psychiatry and specialist in the field of dissociation and traumatic memory, observed various aspects of automatism in hysterical patients and the apparent multiple personalities they were exhibiting during trances or subconscious states. His basic argument was that when people experience emotions that overwhelm their capacity to effective action, the memory of this traumatic experience is split off from consciousness and dissociated. It returns later as fragmentary reliving of visual images, somatic states, emotional conditions or behavioral enactments (VAN DER KOLK, BROWN & VAN DER HART 1989). Janet recognized the adaptive value of dissociative symptoms, as their appearance opens up access to traumatic memories. Through communication, listening and appreciative observing he gradually reduced the negative affect that accompanied these symptoms when he was treating his patients. Moreover, he used hypnosis to modify and transform his patient's memories into "less frightening" or meaningful narratives (VAN DER HART, BROWN & VAN DER KOLK 1995). In the case of the young woman, her traumatic memory of domestic and sexual abuse manifested as spontaneous outbursts with violent and sexualized content. Within the vodouist framework, these outbursts were given the meaning of a possessing Indian spirit whose appearance, during rituals, was provided room and appreciation.

Further parallels between Vodou and Western therapeutic approaches are found when comparing spirit possession with psychodrama, an action method developed by Jacob Moreno. Moreno adapted Aristotle's cathartic principle to newer drama theories and created a method of spontaneous drama in which protagonists are given the opportunity to liberate themselves from "conserved" roles and written manuscripts (KELLERMAN 2006: 76). Later on, Moreno developed this approach into psychodrama, a form of psychotherapy, which departs from the premise that the normal process of an individual's socialization and learning leaves many of her personality traits underdeveloped. Being a "regenerative ritual to release life that has got stuck" (OTTOMEYER 2006: abstract), psychodrama offers the participants the possibility to rehearse new ways of behavior and experience. Also spirit possession enables individuals to establish different kinds of social roles and relationships not otherwise available to them (SELIGMAN & KIRMAYER 2008). A

striking example as to how possession allows for carving out new social space for individuals is the reversal of sex roles, which society prohibits in the non-possessed state. During Vodouist celebrations men manifest female spirits and vice versa. In such cases the male, under possession of a female power, is free to enact feminine traits, and vice versa. In addition, since a person’s identity, self-concept and social roles are influenced by the spirits that most habitually possess her or him the spirits influence the possessed also beyond the ritual context (MISCHEL & MISCHEL 1947). Since cross-sexual behavior is attributed to a tight connection between a human and a spirit with the opposite sex, homo- or transsexuals are widely accepted among Vodouists (PIPER 2012) whereas outside the Vodou context they are given a social stigma.

There are, however, certain important differences between the Vodouist path to healing and that of Western psychotherapy. In Vodou, personal experiences are not enacted close to reality as they are in psychodrama. They rather appear as “cultural performance”, in which the horse, to some degree, “manipulates” cultural meanings to express her personal needs and emotions (OBEYESEKERE 1977: 236). A further important difference is that in psychodrama the protagonists reflect on and evaluate their behavior in order to understand a particular situation or problem in their lives more deeply (KELLERMAN 1992). Vodouists, on the other hand, conceal their specific problems by using the collective cultural narrative. Personal issues are only told implicitly, e. g. by relating to some spirits rather than to others, or by articulating a spirit’s opinions, demands, and behaviors following one’s inner movements. In psychodrama, catharsis has the function of facilitating self-expression and enhancing spontaneity. Then, in a second phase, the emphasis is on integration of the released feelings (KELLERMAN 2006: 82–83). In *Vodou*, we do not find such a second phase – not least because the possessed subjects experience altered states of consciousness and claim amnesia for the time of being possessed. Moreover, whereas in Euro-North American therapeutic approaches there is an “emphasis on confession,” with the concept of healing being strongly linked to remembering, telling and integrating traumatic experience (SELIGMAN & KIRMAYER 2008: 39–41, VAN DER HART *et al.* 1995), in the Vodouist context, neglecting to face trauma by acknowledging it verbally is not a bar-

rier to healing. In fact, Vodouists may profit more from acting out unprocessed trauma within the containment of the group, symbolizing “what cannot be spoken directly” than from directly addressing their anger, powerlessness, social marginalization and insecurity, as such expression would constitute an inherent threat to culturally dominant values and structures. If they insisted upon talking about and focusing on their traumatic experiences and subsequent emotional pain they would risk being considered “emotionally damaged” and consequent social stigmatization. Enacting their affliction in the form of “wild possession”, on the other hand, brings about all sorts of social responses that contribute to healing more effectively than talking about trauma would in that specific context (SELIGMAN & KIRMAYER 2008: 39–41).

Conclusion

At times possession in Dominican Vodou begins with difficulty to control, and possibly violent episodes of dissociation. From the local perspective, the explanation for these episodes is that the spirits enter the inexperienced human with too much force, which Vodouists refer to as *caballo lobo* (wolfish horse). Ongoing disability to control dissociation combined with violent behavior may be diagnosed as wild possession (*caballo lobo*) by a certain set of spirits, namely those of the already extinct indigenous population, which resist taming more than other spirits.

A scientific explanation for chronic afflictive possession is that it serves as an expression of distress that, due to societal restrictions, cannot otherwise be expressed than in an embodied symbolic language.

In Vodou, episodes of spontaneous possession, particularly as they take place for a long time and are associated with suffering, turn out to be the entry to a vocation as a religious adept (although suffering is only one possible pathway to possession, see SELIGMAN 2014). The process of initiation, which consists in the reiterated participation in rituals, aims at “taming” the spirits and strengthening the spiritual power of the affected human, to establish a harmonious relationship between her and the spirits. Mastering possession is not only associated with less disturbance and more control over the process but also with the ability to incorporate various

different spirit personalities. As Vodouists skillfully enact possession, they express their desires and emotions in both symbolic and overt form, using the spirits as an extension of self without its accompanying social constraints. In this vein, possession and the associated rituals have important psychosocial functions such as providing an explanation for uncontrolled dissociative episodes within a cultural framework, and inducing dissociation in a structured and controllable way.

Compared with psychodrama, there are a lot of similarities but also important differences. As both group works are based on experiencing the soul in action, Vodouists and psychodramatists experience and express desires, emotions and behaviors that are usually forbidden. However, in contrast to the protagonists of psychodrama, Vodouists do not aim at verbalizing and integrating past traumatic experience and released feelings, but profit from the positive social responses occurring during and after the ritual and due to their position as possessed individuals.

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