

Dreaming

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Dreaming in Haitian Vodou: Vouchsafe, Guide, and Source of Liturgical Novelty

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Dreams are vital sources of liturgical novelty in Haitian Vodou—and this novelty is, itself, an underdescribed and understudied quality that the religion possesses. Classic scholarly descriptions have tended to portray Vodou as a living artifact, tradition-bound and slave to formality. On the contrary, Vodou is constantly responding to unique lived scenarios with novelty—a generative capacity reminiscent of Hannah Arendt’s natality. Dreaming plays a key role as provocateur and shaper of this natality. Additionally, it serves as a vouchsafe for belief; as a transformative force; as a form of divination; and as a source for theological and liturgical information. This article focuses, in particular, on why dreaming in Vodou has received so little scholarly attention. Additionally, it examines how Vodou priests and priestesses utilize dreaming in their work with clients, as well as the role that dreaming plays in the enactment of spiritual marriages, and in recent responses to the 2010 earthquake.

Keywords: Haitian Vodou, dreaming, dreams, historiography, liturgical novelty

For my part, I should not believe the Gospel except as moved by the authority of the Catholic Church.—Augustine¹

I would not believe it myself, if not for the fact that I have dreams.—Manbo Marie Maude Evans

VODOU AS DREAMED RELIGION

Dreams are vital sources of liturgical novelty in Haitian Vodou—and this novelty is, itself, an underdescribed and understudied quality that the religion possesses. Classic scholarly descriptions have tended to portray Vodou as either a

Dedicated to Manbo Marie Maude Evans, who taught me the importance of dreaming in Haitian Vodou. The members of Sosyete Nago informed much of this work. Kimberley Patton reviewed every draft. Carol Duncan provided valuable feedback at a critical stage. Jacob Olúpònà, Vincent Brown, Claudine Michel, Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, and Michael Jackson helped me to think more clearly about these and related topics.

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¹ From Augustine’s *Contra epistolam Manichaei quam vocant fundamenti v* [Against the Epistle of Manichaeus Called Fundamental], as cited in Calvin (2006, p. 76 fn.).

living artifact or a kind of Gormenghast, tradition-bound and slave to formality.² On the contrary, Vodou is constantly responding to unique lived scenarios with novelty—a generative capacity reminiscent of Hannah Arendt’s natality.³ Dreaming plays a key role as provocateur and shaper of this natality.

However, it is important to recognize that dreams, equally, may serve to support the status quo, as vouchsafes for matters of faith. A dream may provide direction for innovation, but it may also explain to the dreamer why things are the way they are. Situated half in and half out of the mystical cosmic mirror, dreams provide the dreamer with a perspective that frequently reveals the harmony (or disharmony) between the physical world and the world of the spirits. In cases of disharmony, dreams tend to be incitements to ritual action. Therefore, rarely do they diagnose that they do not also suggest solutions. As such, Vodou dreams might best be understood as psychopomps, guides for the dreamer through the complicated terrain of the living world.

METHODOLOGY AND POSITIONALITY

Haitian Vodou is a religion created by the descendents of Africans brought as slaves to the French colony of St. Domingue. It combines components of multiple west and west central African religious complexes (notably Fon/Ewe, Kongo, and Yorùbá) with European and Native American cultural and religious elements to create a religion entirely unique to Haiti and her diaspora. Haitian Vodou is the religion of millions of Haitians, although precisely how many is difficult to say. It is equally difficult to say what Haitian Vodou *is* because it is, in reality, an umbrella term for a variety of religious practices that often—although not always—share common assumptions about the world, as well as a common Afro-Haitian genesis.

In the American popular imagination, Haiti and Haitian Vodou have long been associated with nightmares. For many Europeans and Americans, the Haitian Revolution—arguably one of the birth pangs of the modern world—was their darkest nightmare sprung to life, violent delights come to violent ends. As the real or perceived catalyst for the Revolution, Vodou was envisioned by its “cultured despisers” (Schleiermacher, 1994) to be peopled with all the fiends of hell. Subsequently and persistently, Haiti came to be an imagined space of premodern savages playing at being civilized. In reality, Haiti was constitutive of modernity and has, in its extremes, exemplified both the best and worst of the Enlightenment project (Buck-Morss, 2009; Dubois, 2004). However, the fevered visions of Europe and America are the background against which one must cautiously position a discus-

² Cf. Peake’s (1946) *Titus Groan*. This series of fantasy novels takes place mostly within the palace of Gormenghast. In Gormenghast, every hour of every day is required to perfectly reproduce the events described in an ancestral book of hours.

³ Jackson (2008, p. xxii) beautifully explains Arendt’s idea of natality: “Nativity entails the perpetual reconstruction of one’s habitus and one’s past, *if not in essence then in appearance, in the way one’s world is experienced*—as in religious conversion, falling in love, or recovery from tragic loss. This is why the world is surprisingly new in the eyes of the young, who encounter it for the first time, and why it is ‘never what it was’ in the jaded view of the old, who have seen it all before. The world is thus something we do not simply live and reproduce in passivity, but actually produce and transform through praxis, creating a sense that life is worth living”

sion of dreaming in Vodou—especially given that religions in which dreaming plays an important role have often been identified as primitive. By emphasizing both the creative use by religious actors of dream information, and the extent to which dreaming provides religious novelty and thus a way of looking *forward*, I see the role of dreaming in Vodou as affirming—and helping to ensure—the contemporaneity of the religion with the modern world.

Research on Vodou must be shaped by interests that arise from the lives of Vodouisants themselves, rather than stock scholarly tropes. This is not to say that conventional scholarly topics do not have value, or that they do not shed light on aspects of the tradition. However, these outsider-derived (etic) interests have been given disproportionate weight compared with insider-derived (emic) topics that Vodouisants express as being of importance. Dreaming is vital to the lives of Vodouisants and, therefore, deserving of scholarly attention. It should require no further apology.

Fortunately, there are scholars who agree. For example, Lee Irwin and Barbara Tedlock have relied extensively on dreaming as a way of accessing the intimacies of the religious lives of their subjects. Irwin (2001) advocates for taking emic perspectives on dreaming seriously in order to understand “the religious or spiritual role that dreams and visions have played as a creative and transformative medium in the maintenance of personal and collective religious identity” (p. 95). Tedlock’s (2001) research into the dreams of anthropologists reveals that dreaming often serves as a vital bridge from etic to emic perspectives. Tedlock proposes a methodology that interprets dreams and dream narratives in the context of their creation and performance—a recommendation I adopt here.

It is my hope that this article may also, in a modest way, challenge what it means to have a “modern” view of dreaming. For the most part, dreaming in the United States and Europe is perceived through a post-Freudian lens—that is to say, dreams are understood as artifacts of the psyche’s workings. For Freud, dreams were principally manifestations of the mind’s unconscious processes, a stage for expressions of our deepest needs and suppressed neuroses. Although subsequent decades have nuanced (and diffused) these views, it is still the case the dreams are primarily the domain of the psychologist. More recent work in the field of neurology, exemplified by the research of J. Allan Hobson (2001), has further marginalized dreams with the thesis that dreaming is an epiphenomenon nearly devoid of meaningful content.⁴

However, these questions are far from being resolved, and meanwhile, Haitian Vodou presents a viable alternative. Vodou’s views on dreaming are radically antireductionist: The dream cannot be said to originate or reside purely in the mind of the dreamer. Rather, the dream is a site of intersection—between the dreamer and disembodied entities, and between our physical world and a broader field of spiritual action. One cannot rightly exclude these views from what constitutes modernity without resorting to classist, colonialist, and racist maneuvers. On the other hand, opening the aperture to include these possibilities presents uncomfort-

⁴ This is the argument Hobson makes in some of his most influential work. In an apparent interpretive shift, Hobson (2009) has more recently begun writing about how dreaming may in fact constitute an important “virtual reality” space for the brain to learn and practice new skills.

able challenges to positivist ways of doing science—challenges that have few responses but that must be taken seriously by religionists, nonetheless.

Little scholarly work has been devoted to the topic of dreaming in Haitian Vodou. In the 1950s, Erika Bourguignon published the only essay on the topic, and her principal findings anticipate what is presented here. For example, Bourguignon (1954) noted that dreaming was principally viewed as a vehicle for communication with the spirits, and that these communications were often rich with liturgical information (among other things). However, her short essay failed to generate further scholarship on the topic; I speculate about some of the reasons for this later, when I review the relevant literature.

This article is foremost exploratory. My interest in the topic is shaped by both my scholarly curiosity and by my experience as an *oungan*, an initiated priest of Haitian Vodou. As a child of Manbo Maude Evans, my religious community is divided between Boston and Jacmel, Haiti.⁵ In many ways, this article revolves around my relationship with Maude as my spiritual mother and the way that she has taught me through dreams—her own as well as mine. My experiences interacting with Vodouisants in Haiti support the findings described here. This is buttressed by the fact that Bourguignon found many of the same things—not only in Haiti, but also during the 1940s, suggesting continuity in the tradition not only over space but also over multiple decades. Nonetheless, most of my examples are drawn from the diaspora because that is what I know the best. Future work will need to consider how issues relating to diaspora—for example, homesickness and nostalgia—may impact the spiritual dreaming of Haitian Vodouisants in the United States.⁶

DREAMED RELIGION

In Haitian Kreyòl—the cradle language of nearly all Haitians—the recitation of a dream narrative is typically preceded not by expressions such as “I had a dream” or “in my dream,” but rather “nan dòmi mwen” (“in my sleep”). As such, dreaming is not represented as a distinct theater in which a particular genre of activity unfolds, but rather as an extension of normal action conducted in sleep. Furthermore, most Haitian Kreyòl speakers demonstrate the strong tendency to narrate all stories, including dream stories, in the present progressive—that is, using the gerund form of verbs (e.g., “I am going over here, now I am doing this”). It is important to note that this is not because Kreyòl does not have the grammatical

⁵ Marie Maude Charles Evans, Antiola Bo Manbo, is a *manbo* (priestess) with more than two decades of experience. She, in turn, was initiated by the famous diviner and priestess Selide Bo Manbo (Mme. Maurice Sixto, Miracia Zephyr, d. 2009), of Port-au-Prince. Maude regularly holds services for the *lwa* in her temple in Mattapan, a suburb of Boston. During the summer, she travels home to Jacmel, Haiti, to conduct services and initiations.

⁶ In this article, I have taken care to remove from dream accounts any details that might reveal to the reader information about the dreamer’s sources of spiritual power—for example, those spirits that are the dreamer’s closest allies. In Vodou, this information is regarded as secret, primarily because there is concern that it can be used to harm. In this article, that level of information has not been vital to the analysis, and so it has not been an issue to omit it. However, lengthier work focused more closely on the interpretation of specific dreams would have to contend with this issue. Even for this article, I have aimed to be extremely sensitive to the intensely private nature of spiritual dreams and have not included reference to any dream without express permission of the dreamer.

capacity to express the full range of verb tenses present in other Romance languages. Rather, the use of the present progressive indicates the cultural preference for a particular performative style, in which the story is enacted as though it were happening in that moment, with listeners often interjecting responses as though they were there with the speaker as events were unfolding. These two formal elements—the use of the expression “nan dòmi mwen” to indicate the recitation of dream events and the use of the present progressive—strongly suggest that Kreyòl does not encode the radical ontological divide between waking and dreaming that is common in many other Western languages (a category that certainly includes Haitian Kreyòl). Rather, one continues to act and experience just as one does in waking life, except that one is asleep.

This is amplified for adherents of Haitian Vodou, for whom the space of dreaming is not simply an extension of waking life, but a porous territory suffused with spiritual powers and entities. To a degree, the same is true of the ordinary, solid world we share. Through possession, divination, and miracles, the spirits reveal their endless capacity to act in the physical world. However, in dreams, there is an immediacy and unmediated quality to the encounter with spiritual entities that, although not impossible in waking life, are exceedingly rare. In a dream, one can have a powerful encounter with a spirit without the intercession of another person (as is required to enact spirit possession). For these reasons, dreaming constitutes one of the foremost mechanisms through which Vodouisants communicate with the spirits and receive spiritual guidance. However, dreaming provides more than just access to the spirits. Dreaming serves as a vouchsafe for belief, as a transformative force, as a form of divination, as a source for theological and liturgical information, and as an inspiration for liturgical novelty.

When I speak of dreaming as a source of liturgical novelty, I mean that—outside of the standard calendar of services⁷—nearly all Vodou rituals are, in some way, generated as a response to or in conversation with dreaming.⁸ In the first case, the ritual is performed in direct response to a puzzling, complicated, or leading dream. For example, Vodou altars include a set of *plat Marasa*, which are small clay vessels used for the feeding of the Marasa, the sacred twins. Shortly after purchasing my set, Maude had a dream in which my Marasa indicated to her their desire to be baptized. In response to this dream, I hosted a small service in my home during which the *plat Marasa* were fed and baptized as my children.⁹ In most cases, a dream will not be quite so clear in its instructions. It is more often that a client has an unsettling dream, and this will inspire some form of ritual action in which an explanation or relief from the distress is sought.

In the second case of dreams inspiring liturgical novelty, a dream will be intentionally sought in which ritual instruction will be received. This is common in instances when a priest or priestess is approached by a client who is in need of

⁷ The standard calendar of services is mostly composed of the parties (*fèt*) held in honor of spirits' birthdays. These birthdays typically coincide with the day of the Roman Catholic saint with whom the spirit is coidentified. For example, Danbala's birthday is celebrated on March 17 because it is the feast of St. Patrick.

⁸ Other sources of liturgical novelty include divination and personal inspiration.

⁹ The act of baptizing ritual objects is not unusual in Vodou. However, I would not have undertaken to baptize my Marasa (at least, not at that time) had Maude's dream not instructed me to do so. For more on Marasa, cf. McGee (in press).

healing. The *manbo* or *oungan* then purposely seeks a dream in which the cause of the disorder will be explained and its cure will be imparted. Although this cure is usually some form of ritual action, it could also be instructions to see a psychologist or doctor (sometimes with a message that the doctor should look to a particular system or part of the body). In this case, one could argue that the visit to the doctor's office in fact becomes a ritual action because it is enacting a set of religious instructions.

In Karen Richman's (2005) *Migration and Vodou*, she traces the process by which Vodou—prior to the 20th century, a distinctly home-based religious practice—became a religion practiced primarily in temples under the direction of a professional priesthood. As she notes, however, this change has certainly not meant the eradication of home-based, private, or familial Vodou practices. In one interview with an informant from the Léogane Plain, Camolien AlexAndré, he speaks very directly about the role of dreaming in his religious life.

What I know, the [*oungan*] do not know. As soon as the *lwa* speak to me—you won't find me at dances or anybody's prayers. I don't go to the [*oungan*]. I didn't grow up seeing my father involved in it. I am my own [*oungan*]. If I should do this, if it's that "root" [*lwa*], I see it all in my sleep. After that, I have nothing to do with the *lwa*. (p. 120)

AlexAndré does not need a priest to mediate his relationship with his *rasin* (his family's ancestral, literally "root," spirits) because he receives all of the information he needs in his dreams ("m wè sa tout nan dòmi"). In other words, Vodou is a *dreamed* religion. It exists neither wholly in waking nor in sleeping, but rather in the liminal space created when dream information is translated, through liturgical acts, into lived experience.

However, Richman's Marxist analysis offers the misleading portrayal of the priesthood as a bourgeoisie that alienates the Vodou proletariat from its spirits by rejecting democratic techniques for spiritual guidance, notably dreaming. In fact, *oungan* and *manbo* continue to rely extensively on dreams—both their own and those of their clients and children.¹⁰ The following story illustrates the point. Once, I was discussing the role of the saints in Vodou with Manbo Maude. Maude insisted that, for her, the saints were coidentified with the *lwa*, the holy spirits of Vodou. The precise nature of this coidentification is difficult to explain because it is a religious mystery. Marc A. Christophe (2006) describes this mystery very accurately.

In effect, when a Vodouist looks at a lithograph of Saint Jacques/James or the Maria Dolorosa del Monte Calvario, he does not think that Ogou or Ezili are "hiding" under the pictures of those saints. Rather, in his vision, Saint Jacques is Ogou, Ezili is the Maria Dolorosa del Monte Calvario, and the obverse statements are true as well. Moreover, one should not see the fusion of the *lwas* and saints as a "christianization" of African deities or a "paganization" of Roman Catholic saints but as a metaphysical construct to which Vodou eschatology has given cosmic dimensions and which reflects the Haitian's vision of the world. (p. 95)

It is difficult to wrap one's mind around such a mystery. Maude concluded, "I would not believe it myself, if not for the fact that I have dreams." In her dreams,

¹⁰ Métraux (1959/1983) also notes the importance of dreaming to the priesthood when he records that it was considered extremely reckless to awaken a sleeping *oungan* because he might be receiving vital messages from the spirits.

the *lwa* frequently present themselves as the saints, encouraging her to go to church or make pilgrimages to Catholic sites on their behalf. For Maude, dreaming serves as a touchstone for matters of faith and theology. When she is teaching, nearly every point is illustrated with the recitation of a dream or an episode from her life that involved dreaming.

This is very reminiscent of Augustine's statement, in *Against the Epistle of Manichaeus*, that the Church vouches for the veracity of the Bible.¹¹ Augustine is pointing out, in other words, that his faith is not something he has generated and sustains on his own, but rather that is buttressed by religious authority. In essence, Maude's formulation is identical, except that she places religious authority not in the hands of the Church but in the hands of the spirits (*lwa*) themselves—with whom she has ongoing and generative interactions in her dreams. For Maude as much as for AlexAndré, Vodou is ultimately a dreamed religion, lived half in dreams and half awake—in much the way that a halved symmetrical object, placed against a mirror, will be uncannily made whole, although half of it be immaterial.

DREAMING IN TENSION: VODOU SCHOLARSHIP ON DREAMS

Given the importance of dreaming in Vodou, one may well ask why it has received so little scholarly attention. One of the main reasons may well be that dreaming, as an inexhaustible source of liturgical novelty and private spiritual inspiration, does not fit well with the dominant scholarly portrayal of Vodou as a rigorously traditional and formalized religion. Early scholarship on Vodou, exemplified by Melville J. Herskovits (1941, 1971), emphasized the extent to which Haitian Vodou reproduced elements of West African religious traditions. Haitian contemporaries of Herskovits, like Milo Rigaud (1953) and Arthur Holly (1918), valorized Vodou as a repository of ageless wisdom derived from ancient Egypt and the Levant.

Scholarship also has tended to focus on the very structured nature of temple-based Vodou societies. Rigaud (1953), Métraux (1959/1983), Maximilien (1945), Deren (1953), and many others expend considerable time and effort describing the various offices and functionaries of a Vodou temple. Each officer has his or her specific job, and the society functions very much like a military company. These same authors have tended to give attention to the *règleman*, the specific ritual order and gestures through which ceremonies are enacted. *Règleman* includes the long series of sung prayers (the *Priyè Ginen*) that opens all services. It also encompasses the dances, offerings, ritual salutations, and songs for the spirits—as well as the specific order in which the spirits are saluted. It is true that *règleman* is inherited through one's initiatory lineage and ceremonies are often evaluated by outsiders on the extent to which they properly execute the numerous requirements of *règleman*.

These formal elements have, I think, led many academics and outside observers to draw the mistaken conclusion that Vodou is therefore tradition-bound and hostile to innovation. On the contrary, the effect of these formalities is to create a strong crucible into which flows constant innovation and improvisation. Dreaming

¹¹ Cited as an epigraph.

and other sources of novelty and inspiration are in constant productive tension with these formalizing structures. The default is to use what is known to have worked in the past, that is, the received tradition. However, in response to the uniqueness and novelty of everyday life, new ritual forms and religious responses are constantly being created. Some of these may become the received traditions of tomorrow.

One may still ask how scholars have failed to note the centrality of novelty-introducing elements, most notably dreaming. An answer is suggested by Brown (1991/2001) in *Mama Lola*, her biography of Brooklyn Vodou priestess Alourdes Margaux. Brown's book is one of the few studies of Vodou to make frequent mention of dreaming and to recognize its importance in the religious lives of Vodouisants.

Sometime in the early 1980s, I stopped editing out my reactions to Alourdes . . . Paying attention to myself in relation to her became both a learning device (had I not brought some of my own dreams to Alourdes, I would never have learned as much about dream analysis in Vodou) and a way of staying honest . . . Yet, putting myself on the line in my field journal and in my relations with Alourdes and with Vodou was, in the end, even more than that. It was an acknowledgment that ethnographic research, whatever else it is, is a form of human relationship . . . This situation is riskier, but it does bring intellectual labor and life into closer relation. (p. 12)

Brown's point is important. Research on Vodou has been diminished by generations of scholars who have not allowed themselves to engage with Vodouisants at the level of the private—or else written themselves out of their work for fear that engagement will be interpreted as a lack of objectivity (this is a charge continuously leveled against Brown, for example). Still, if Brown had not shared her own dreams with Mama Lola—if she had not allowed herself to be a person interacting with another person, without the neocolonial structure of observer and observed—then she would never have learned about the importance of dreaming in Vodou.

It is easy to see this failure to engage playing out in scholarship. For example, in Houlberg's published interview with her field assistant Georges René (René & Houlberg, 1995), it is clear that René is alluding to the great significance of dreaming in his religious life. In the interview, René describes being married to the two *lwa* Ezili Dantò and Ezili Freda.¹² He talks about the days of each week that he sets aside to sleep (and dream) with his spiritual wives. Dantò promises René, "If you ask something, then when you sleep you will dream me, you will see what I will get for you" (p. 292). On another occasion, Dantò tells René that "she has to meet [him] in her kingdom[,] in her *royaume* [kingdom]" (p. 297). I feel confident that René is speaking of a dream journey to meet with Dantò in Ginen, "where she's coming from—the bush, the rich forest" (p. 297).¹³ However, Houlberg does not ask René to explain what he means. In fact, although it seems clear that he is

¹² In Haitian Vodou, it is possible for a human devotee to enter into a deeper relationship with a spirit by marrying the spirit. I address this topic later in its own section, "Spiritual Marriage and Oneiric Sexuality."

¹³ The word Ginen is translated as "Africa." However, in the context of Vodou cosmology, this Africa is not the continent presently identified by that name. Rather, it is the home of the spirits, a forested island residing simultaneously at the bottom of the cosmic waters (*anba dlo*) and at the backs of mirrors (*do miwa*). Ginen is also an eschaton—a place which is longed for, and which one hopes to see someday. In a certain sense, Ginen is therefore comparable to heaven. Cf. McGee (2009).

mostly talking of, about, and around the subject of dreams, Houlberg never once uses the word *dream* or asks him for more information.

The only essay exclusively about dreaming in Haitian Vodou was published by Erika Bourguignon in 1954. Bourguignon's research, conducted mostly in Port-au-Prince and Léogane in the late 1940s, confirms many observations I've made recently in the Boston Vodou community, demonstrating a consistency that is often assumed to not exist in oral traditions. Bourguignon begins by noting that dreams are classified as "things I see at night" and that people "do not necessarily distinguish between those that took place in dreams and those that involved contact with possessed individuals or with other ways in which the gods may let their wishes be known" (p. 262). As for the work of dreams, Bourguignon writes that "dream phenomena play a significant role in the validation of the culturally patterned world view" (p. 262). Furthermore, dreams "may be said to function as one of the vehicles of communication between the gods, the dead, and the living" (p. 264). Later, she adds, "to the dreamer the essential point in the dream is the message from the gods and the ability to communicate with them . . . No subsequent action is necessary, the dream is an entire complex of action within itself" (p. 266). In other words, as I will argue, dreaming is significant in Haitian Vodou as a vouchsafe for belief and as a tool for communication between humans and the divine. Of liturgical novelty, Bourguignon writes,

Dreams may not only communicate a generalized demand for the fulfillment of religious obligations, but may actually specify details of religious procedure to be followed. In this way, dreaming leads to the individualization of religious practices and is certainly one of the forces at work in the lack of uniformity in [Vodou] worship to be observed from one family to the next or from one cult house to the next. (p. 268)

She concludes,

Dreams furthermore act as channels for the development of idiosyncratic modes of worship and lend support to whatever mythology exists, which itself is largely based on anecdotal material about the gods. This mythological material, in turn, furnishes the basis for dream interpretation and for the manner in which dreams are experienced. (p. 268)

On one major point, I do make an interpretive departure from Bourguignon's findings. She is particularly interested in what she sees as the dramatic disconnect between the experience of the dream and the subsequent telling of the dream narrative. She illustrates this by telling of one of her informant's dreams. The woman, named Annette, reports that the spirit Ezili Freda came to her in a dream to express her displeasure that the woman had left Port-au-Prince. However, when Bourguignon presses for details, she learns that Annette actually dreamed of a man, an acquaintance, who was dressed as a police officer. The man asked her to return to Port-au-Prince. Annette interprets this as the spirit Ogou being sent by Freda to complain that Annette had left Port-au-Prince and therefore could not tend to her altar. Bourguignon theorizes,

. . . it is striking to observe that apparently dream experience and the dream as told are two distinct phenomena. That is to say, the dream is already partially interpreted when it is told, made to conform to the dreamer's culturally styled notions as to what dreams are all about. While Freudian authors speak of "secondary elaboration" this phenomenon seems to refer to the development of a dream theme in the act of telling it rather than to a total shift in the actual perception we find here. Annette tells she dreamed of a female deity and apparently

so experienced her dream. Only in questioning do we discover that in her dream Annette actually saw a man of her acquaintance, dressed in white, asking her to return to Port-au-Prince. The dream operates, as it were, on two levels of perception. The latent meaning of the dream, the dream's motivation, is still a further matter. (p. 266)

What Bourguignon sees as a radical divide between dream experience and dream narrative strikes me as possibly being more about Annette's reticence to tell the entirety of her dream to her employer. When pressed, Annette was quite aware that Freda had not come to her directly in her dream, but rather had sent Ogou as her messenger. It was not that she had overwritten these details, but rather that she had occluded them from her report. I can say only that it has not been my experience for dream reports to diverge so dramatically from dream experiences. In a good interpretation, Vodouisants typically account for as many of the details as possible. It may well be, however, that this is not the case for all Vodouisants, and could be an artifact of my own experiences working mostly with professional *oungan* and *manbo*, who have often studied dream interpretation techniques—whereas Annette was interpreting her own dream without the assistance of a professional dream interpreter. Nonetheless, the vast majority of Bourguignon's essay affirms what I have noted decades later in Haiti and in the Haitian diaspora. My aim is now to provide illustrations for these points, and demonstrate to the reader some of the subtleties of how they play out in the lives of Vodouisants.

PRIESTLY PRACTICE: DREAMS AS SOURCES OF GUIDANCE

I would like to highlight some of the ways that a focus on dreaming opens up a detailed view of how Vodou priests and priestesses assist their communities and clients—and, in turn, are assisted by their dreams. In my experience as an *oungan* and the child of a very active *manbo*, one of the most common reasons for a client to seek assistance is because he or she has had a dream that resists interpretation or requires action. For example, I recently received an e-mail in which a stranger asked for a reading (that is, divination through cards) and explained, “My dreams have been especially vivid lately and I need to know in which direction the *lwa* want me to go” (private correspondence, identity of sender concealed to protect privacy).

In many cases, the dreams that inspire a client to seek help will be unpleasant dreams or nightmares. Richman (2005) notes that ominous dreams are often taken as a warning that someone is the victim of black magic or malicious actions. However, the dreams that drive someone to seek priestly assistance are just as likely to be simply perplexing. That is, they stay with the person, obliquely insisting on their meaningfulness even as they refuse to give up that meaning. In some cases, the client will have a dream in which a readily identified, or self-identified, spirit will tell the client to undertake a particular ritual action—for example, ritual feeding, mystical marriage (*maryaj lwa*), or initiation (*kanzo*). However, most dreams do require interpretation. Through divination, perspicacity, and the assistance of the spirits, priests and priestesses must be able to correctly interpret the dreams that others report to them.

It is difficult to provide a brief summary of the method by which *oungan* and *manbo* interpret dreams. As perhaps befits the object of interpretation—dreaming,

with its endless fluidity and newness—dream interpretation is often ad hoc.¹⁴ Certainly, one of the most important elements of priestly dream interpretation is that it is done prayerfully. A central assumption about dreams in Vodou is that they are *communications* from the spirits and therefore yearn to be understood. It is the precise opposite of Jung's (1966) idea that "The dream itself wants nothing" (pp. 100–101). In Vodou, the dream wants *everything*: It wishes to become a social and communal fact through its recitation, it wishes to be properly understood for the messages it is conveying, and it wishes for those messages to be transformed into productive actions.

Certain topoi serve as common starting points for the interpretation of a dream. The first is the gender and phenotype of the other people in the dream. Although not always the case, most important dreams in Vodou center around an interaction with another character. It is quite common for this character to be someone the dreamer knows in real life. However, Vodou dream interpretation typically ignores that fact; instead, this character is usually understood to be a spirit wearing the person's face, and the gender and phenotype are used to help discern which spirit it is. The first time that Maude asked me the phenotype of a character in my dream, I have to confess that I was taken aback. As a form of hypercorrection, many Americans (I include myself) often occlude the color of the person we are describing out of concern that its inclusion will suggest a preoccupation with race. However, Maude was simply trying to discern which spirit had visited me in my dream. For example, Danbala and Sen Jak are seen as white; Ezili Freda is white or sometimes a very light-skinned mulatto; Ezili Dantò, Ogou, Simbi, and Gede are white (by no means an exhaustive list).¹⁵ However, the spirits routinely defy these generalizations, so phenotype can be used only as an aid, not a determinant. In the final analysis, other factors must reveal the spirit's true nature. Primarily, these will be the spirit's personality traits, clothing, and accoutrements. For example, a dark-skinned man dressed like a farmer and talking like someone from the country will be recognized as Kouzèn. A dark-skinned man who is quite tall and carrying a machete is likely Ogou. Children are almost always identified with the Marasa, most especially when they are in pairs or groups. In addition, it is helpful to know on which day of the week the dream occurred. All spirits have particular days of the week assigned to them, so this information makes it much easier to know which spirit sent or appeared in the dream.

Other elements of the dream that priests will typically note are the presence of animals (and if so, which and how many), the setting of the dream, how the dreamer felt in the dream (emotionally and physically), whether there were any numbers in the dream (or anything being counted, such as money), and the events that transpired (the plot). More often than not, an examination of all of this information will render the dream easily understood. In other cases, however, it may remain obscure, and the priest will have to ask his or her spirits— or

¹⁴ Bourguignon (1954) makes almost this exact same point: "As far as dreams are concerned, generally speaking, theories of identifying the gods in one's dreams such as the ones just cited are ad hoc constructions, and do not necessarily fit specific dreams. They are afterthoughts, produced in response to the question: How do you know, how can you tell?" (p. 267).

¹⁵ Bourguignon (1954) notes this as well, establishing that it is not merely a diaspora development.

the spirit who sent the dream—to make clear what is remaining veiled. Often, divination with cards will be used to seek additional information. Finally, if all of these methods yield unsatisfying results, it may be necessary to have the client seek another dream, or for the priest to seek a dream, in which the original dream will be laid plain.

Priests have a number of ritual techniques they may use, or assist a client to use, to seek a powerful and directed dream. Most simply, one may speak to a candle before going to bed, addressing the flame as one would address a spirit and asking that a dream be sent in answer to a question or need. One may also make an oil lamp (*lanp*) to “heat up” (*echofe*, activate the power of) a spirit so that the spirit will come and assist, often by sending a powerful dream. Sometimes, the use of candles and lamps is integrated into the performance of a novena—typically a 9-day theurgic cycle of prayers aimed at resolving a problem or seeking the answer to a question. Frequently, the solution will come in the form of a dream. On occasion, knowledge of the solution may rise into consciousness just as the person is awakening. In this case, it is believed that the Marasa, the sacred children, have whispered it into the person’s ear.

There is a more complex ritual called *iluminasyon* (illumination) that amplifies these techniques. *Iluminasyon* is specifically designed to summon a powerful dream. To perform an *iluminasyon*, cotton wicks are made (usually 3, 7, or 21) and placed into a shallow bowl that has been filled with a combination of olive oil and *lwil maskrati* (unrefined castor bean oil). This dish, with the wicks, will then be floated in a basin of water. The wicks will be lit, the *Priyè Ginen* performed, and songs sung for the spirits. This ritual moves the practitioner into a liminal space and summons spiritual powers, so that he or she can lie down to have a powerful dream. The *iluminasyon* will be repeated for a set number of days or until a dream is received.

The most elaborate way to seek powerful dreams is to undergo *kanzo* (initiation). *Kanzo* contains all of the elements Patton (2004) notes as hallmarks of classical dream incubation, “(1) intentionality, (2) locality, and (3) epiphany” (p. 202). In incubation, the seeker lies down with the specific goal of seeking a powerful dream, does so in a special place known for its connection to powerful dreaming, and receives a powerful dream while in that place—ideally one in which he or she is visited by a divinity. In *kanzo*, the initiates are sequestered inside of a specially prepared temple room (called a *djevo*), where they lie down (typically for 9 days) specifically with the goal of seeking powerful dreams that will grant spiritual power and *konesans* (esoteric knowledge). For this reason, the word *kouche* (to sleep or lie down) is often used as a synonym for *kanzo*.¹⁶

¹⁶ I cannot give more details about the precise role that dreaming plays in *kanzo*. As an oath-bound secret tradition, there is little that can be said about *kanzo*. Although written accounts do exist—published by unscrupulous anthropologists and adventure seekers—I will not direct the reader to them.

THE DREAM OF THE GHOSTLY SLAVE AND THE TREASURE

To illustrate the way that dreaming is used in Vodou to generate ritual solutions and liturgical novelty, I share a story from my initiatory mother, Manbo Maude. She recounted it as a teaching story in response to questions I had about ghosts and hauntings. The story illustrates how dreams are acted on—and interacted with—to generate unique and effective ritual responses to real-life situations. In particular, this story shows how dreaming was used as a guide in a situation that was unforeseen and unforeseeable, and for which Maude had little prior experience to guide her. In the story, Maude tells of living in a haunted house in Port-au-Prince.

Maude had found the home, taken out a lease on it, and engaged a maid to stay with them. The first sign of calamity came as soon as they moved in: Immediately on stepping over the threshold, Maude's cousin cried out, proclaiming that there was something horrible in the house and that she wouldn't stay a moment in it. At the time, however, Maude did not pay much attention to her cousin, assuming that these were mere histrionics.

Soon after, however, Maude returned home from work very late one night. The maid had left her dinner—a fish in sauce over rice—on a covered dish. But it was so late, and Maude was so tired, that she just went to bed. In the morning, she came down and, considering eating the fish, she removed the cover. On the plate, all that remained was the perfect skeleton of the fish, picked clean but unbroken. As soon as she saw the bones, all of the hairs on her neck stood up, as though in response to an uncomfortable presence in the room. She ran to the maid's room and woke her up, demanding to know if she had eaten the fish. The maid flatly denied it. Maude went and asked her daughter—although she was barely old enough to eat a fish. The answer was the same. No one had touched the fish.

Later in the week, Maude had a dream:

In the dream, I saw the ghost. He showed me that he was guarding a treasure hidden in the house. He was so sad. He was wearing manacles on his legs. He was a slave, you see.

In her dream, Maude came to understand that the slave had been offered as a human sacrifice by his French owners so that there would be a spirit to protect their hidden treasures until they could return. But they never did return, having fled to the Americas or France, or perhaps killed in the Revolution. So the spirit of the slave remained, bound to the treasure and the property until such a time as he could be rid of his responsibility.

The next day, Maude made a feast to feed the unhappy ghost. Taking the food into the *lakou* (the enclosed yard) of the house, she dug three holes, arranged the food in the holes, and covered them over. That night, the spirit visited her again.

He was so happy! He showed me where the treasure was and wanted me to have it. He wanted to work for me. He said that as long as I was in the house, no harm would come to me or my daughter because he would watch out for us. He said he would give me the money to buy the house because he wanted me to stay. When I left, that spirit was so sad. For a long time, no one would rent that house.

This was the end of Maude's story. There was a beat of silence before I eagerly asked the obvious questions: But what of the treasure? Why did you not help the spirit to move on?

Well, I think that's what he wanted by offering to give me the treasure. But the money was not fit to take. It was cursed, covered in the slave's blood. No good could come from it.

In this story, the occupants of the house struggle with the sense that there is something wrong. However, clarity comes only in the form of Maude's dream. In the dream, the ghost is able to explain to Maude his predicament. This dream gives her the key to the mystery and guides her to the necessary liturgical novelty that will correct the situation. The dream serves as a middle space in which Maude can encounter the ghostly slave. He is not entirely in the physical world; she is not able to cross into the spirit world. The dreaming space, however, is in the midst of these.

Once she has conversed with the ghost in her dream, Maude is able to realize that what the slave desperately needs is care; he needs to be integrated into the community as a person. And so she does what one would do for any hungry guest—she prepares a meal and feeds him. By taking the food into the courtyard and burying it, she places it in a space that, like the dream, is liminal, accessible from both sides. Through continued dreaming, the ghost is able to participate in this new intersociality, expressing his gratitude with an offer to give Maude the treasure. Her dream information, however, makes it clear that she must not accept. The treasure she sees is drenched with blood and would bring her no greater luck than it had brought the unfortunate slave.

SPIRITUAL MARRIAGE AND ONEIRIC SEXUALITY

In Vodou, human devotees sometimes enter into marriages with *lwa*. This has drawn a fair amount of attention from scholars, perhaps because it is nearly unique in the landscape of world religions.¹⁷ These spiritual marriages are enjoined for a number of reasons, such as mystical protection, promises of improved health or finances, and deeper spiritual devotion. They are solemnized by an actual marriage ceremony, during which the spirit possesses one of the assembled so that he or she can exchange rings and words of commitment with his or her human spouse. Marriage contracts are signed. Wedding cake is shared. This has all been described in the scholarly literature. What typically gets left out of such descriptions is the fact that, in dreams, Vodouisants enact the intimacies of these marriages.

As an obligation of a spiritual marriage, the human spouse must sleep alone on the night that is sacred to the spirit while abstaining from sex with a human partner.¹⁸ Ideally, the spouse sleeps in clean clothes that night and on freshly laundered sheets—again, bearing the hallmarks of dream incubation. That night is set aside so that the spiritual spouse can visit with his or her beloved. Dreams on these nights are not necessarily sexual; frequently, they are not. They may, for

¹⁷ Cf. René and Houlberg's essay (1995) in which René describes his experience of being married to Freda and Dantò.

¹⁸ It is almost always necessary to marry multiple spirits because being married to only one spirit has the potential to provoke jealousy or unbalance the personality of the human spouse. Therefore, spirits are generally married in sets—for example, Ezili Freda, Ezili Dantò, and Ezili Je Wouj. As a result, human spouses typically have multiple nights a week when they are obliged to sleep alone and abstain from sex with a human partner. The number of days and which days vary depending on the number of spirits and whether the officiating *oungan* or *manbo* possesses the spiritual leverage to negotiate so that multiple spirits will be content to share days.

example, be occasions for the spirit to relay important spiritual messages to his or her spouse. Nonetheless, a certain number of these dreams are erotic in nature. These dreams are received happily by the human spouse as a sign of the profound union with the spirit, not to mention that these dreams are inherently pleasurable.

Notably, erotic spiritual dreams are not limited to only those Vodouisants who are formally engaged in a spiritual marriage. Spiritual wedding ceremonies are expensive undertakings, and often have to be postponed for years while the human devotee saves money. In addition, not all spirits request marriage, but are instead content with less formal arrangements. Moreover, romantic and sexual relations with spirits are at times quite gender-bending. Many Vodou houses will only make heterosexual marriages between humans and spirits. Others will, either tacitly or openly, approve at least some homosexual unions—more often those between women and female spirits than between men and male spirits. Several gay male Vodouisants have told me that the oneiric sex they have with their female spiritual wives or mistresses is, without question, the best sex they have ever experienced. I have also had women tell me that Dantò has tried to (or succeeded in) having lesbian sex with them, even though they are not lesbians. In other cases, spirits will come to their human devotees in dreams as the gender that is most appealing to the devotee. For example, a gay man may dream of having sex with Freda as a man. The most common explanation for this is that the spirits are androgynous or hermaphroditic and adopt gender and sexual identities in response to the needs of their devotees. As one *oungan* told me, “They show you whatever part you need to see.”

CONCLUSIONS

The shakings of *Goudougoudou* have left untouched few aspects of Haitian life, in Haiti or *lotbòdlo*.¹⁹ A tragedy that has occasioned the need for many innovations, it is not surprising that dreaming has taken a place at the center of many Haitians’ responses to postquake life. Since *Goudougoudou*, many Vodouisants have told me that they dreamed about an impending catastrophe in the days and weeks prior to January 12, 2010. Notably, no one told me about such dreams *prior* to the earthquake. I do not say this to diminish the possibility that people were having genuine prognosticative dreams. Rather, it is to emphasize the fact that the *idea* of prophetic dreams about the earthquake has become part of how at least some Vodouisants have struggled to embed the earthquake within a meaningful narrative.

Perhaps more significant is the fact that many Vodouisants have had meaningful dreams *after* the earthquake. For Vodouisants, the earthquake brought not only personal tragedy, with the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, but also a ritual crisis, as it quickly became clear that the vast majority of victims would not

¹⁹ *Goudougoudou* is the dreamlike personified name of the earthquake (*tranblèmanntè a*) of January 12, 2010. In the weeks following the earthquake, this name circulated through *tele dyol* (word-of-mouth). It may be an onomatopoeia, capturing the sound of the shaking earth. The name has been widely adopted by Haitians. *Lotbòdlo*, meaning “the other side of the water,” is an expression commonly used to mean the United States.

be able to receive adequate burials. In Vodou, it is believed that appropriate funerals are necessary to liberate the soul of the deceased and ensure that it is not the victim of malicious magic.²⁰ Without these rites, it is conceivable that the soul might be trapped by a sorcerer (*bokò*) or simply left to wander the earth, disconsolate and hungry, growing vengeful. Anecdotally, I can say that for many Vodouisants, dreaming has provided and continues to provide a space for ritual response and farewells, encouraging the dead to seek rest and consolation, even as the living are consoled.

Dreaming is, in many ways, one of the life currents of Haitian Vodou. Therefore, it is not surprising that it would come to the fore as a tool for generating responses to unprecedented disaster. As postquake Haiti continues to emerge from the rubble, I anticipate that dreaming will only grow in prominence, as need arises to fill the void left by disrupted ritual life and the untimely loss of ritual experts and spiritual elders. It is interesting that dreaming is also gaining importance in Haitian evangelical communities, a dramatic shift from the view Bourguignon (1954) reported that Protestants were believed to dream “only rarely and with difficulty” (p. 267). On the contrary, these new Protestants most certainly dream, and their responses to the earthquake are informed by their dreams.²¹ This begs for more research into the ways that evangelicalism in Haiti has absorbed the influences of Vodou in its search to become more appealing and meaningful to converts.

Future directions for research include looking at the ways that homesickness and nostalgia play a role in shaping how Vodouisants in the diaspora interpret their dreams. It is also necessary to consider how the dreams of converts to Vodou come to be in alignment with a Vodou ethic of dream interpretation.²² Guidance for such a project might be found in Tedlock’s (2001) work on how anthropologists’ dreams learn to speak a trade language mingling their own culture’s dream vocabulary with that of the culture they are researching. I am particularly interested in how the sharing of dream narratives is used, not only as a teaching tool by spiritual leaders, but also as a way for Vodouisants to communicate important and sensitive information to one another.

Vodou dream interpretation is an improvisational art, combining received tradition with the idiosyncratic symbol sets of both dreamer and interpreter. By necessity, then, the way that dreams are used to derive liturgical and theological

²⁰ Vodou funerary rites (especially the songs and drumming) are called *bohoun*. Initiated Vodouisants, especially *manbo* and *oungan*, receive funerary rites called *desounen*. These elaborate rites can take up to 9 days of constant ritual activity to complete, especially if the *manbo* or *oungan* was the lineage head. For the deceased, these rites accomplish two crucial tasks. First, they disentangle the various incorporeal parts of the person from the physical body—returning to God what is God’s, and sending the soul of the deceased (the part containing his or her individual personality and accumulated memory, wisdom, and *konesans*) beneath the ancestral waters (*anba dlo*) where it will sojourn for a year and a day. Second, using the ritual of *brule zen* (burning the pots), the rites fortify the soul of the deceased with the necessary heat and strength to endure the cleansing, cool spiritual waters that purify the soul, readying it for life as an ancestor. After a year and a day, an additional ceremony, called *wete mò nan dlo* (removing the dead from the water) is conducted, during which the soul is lifted out of the waters and restored to the community as an ancestor.

²¹ I am drawing on a paper presented by Elizabeth McAlister (2010) at the 2010 Haitian Studies Association Conference in Providence, RI, called “Neoliberal Capitalism and ‘Disaster Evangelism’ After the Haiti Quake.”

²² These converts include Haitians, Haitian Americans, and *blan* (foreigners of non-Haitian extraction, including white and black Americans).

information will vary from practitioner to practitioner. In spite of these differences, the fact remains that dreaming—however it is used—is vital to the religious lives of nearly all Vodouisants. An extended treatment of dreaming in Vodou would provide a further opportunity to examine the productive tension that exists between religious forces in Vodou that push both for novelty and for conservation. Although scholarship has tended to emphasize the latter—or, in some cases, to champion the former—it is rare that their dynamic relationship has been appreciated as a unity, a process of checks and balances that allows the tradition, at once, to keep itself and renew itself.

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