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The Loa as Ghosts in Haitian Vodou

Abstract: Loa, ghosts in Haitian Vodou, coalesce African and Creole gods, with the imagery of Catholic saints, all rooted in Haiti's colonial history as a Spanish and later French colony with slaves of different ethnicities from the West Coast of Africa. Although the Vodou belief system rests upon a firm belief in a supreme being, vodou serviteurs¹ pray to, serve and ask for guidance from their loa. In order to understand loa and possession by a loa, the concept of the soul in Vodou will be observed. At Vodou ceremonies a loa will manifest him- or herself through possession into a head of a serviteur, becoming now the "horse", which is being "ridden" by the loa. The distinction which kind of loa is riding a person is made visible by a loa's unique dance rhythm, song, clothing, colour, talk, sacrificial food and drink.

Historical Background

Vodou as a religion in Haiti originates in the turmoiled history of slaves brought from the Western coast of Africa to the island by Spanish and French colonialists.² This heterogeneous group of slaves mainly originated from the west coast of Central Africa and the Bight of Benin and was mainly made up of ethnicities such as the Yoruba, Fon and Ewe.³ Naturally, they brought their own religious beliefs with them to the New World. Although slaves were decreed to be baptised and Christianised, Roman Catholic missionaries generally adopted a policy of "guided syncretism" (Fernández Olmos 8) during the colonial period. Catholic priests tolerated the interpretation of Christian saints into polytheistic African belief systems of gods and ghosts, with the eventual goal that Christianity as the true faith would lead to the death of African gods and ghosts. However:

[T]he heritage of Guinea maintained in Haiti by serving the gods. Those who live are reclaimed by the ancestors who do not die – who return as vengeful revenants if not

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- 1 A serviteur is someone who serves the loa. See Deren 336.
 - 2 For a more detailed account of historical and political background see Fernández Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert 13–23.
 - 3 There is consensus in literature about the main groups of ethnicities and their geographical origin that have influenced Haitian Vodou. Most commonly the people of Fon, Ewe and Yoruba are mentioned, as well as their geographical origin in the kingdom of Dahome, Mahi and Nago. Slight divergences occur as to the number of each group of people brought to Haiti, as well as which smaller groups influenced Vodou as well. See Métraux pp 23–27 and Fandrich 775–791.

properly served – and by the gods who cajole, demand, and sometimes oppress the mere mortals [...]. The gods are not only in your blood but in the land. (Joan Dayan 1998, 33)

Vodou religion among slaves under Spanish and French rule was not given much thought by colonialists and slave owners until slaves revolted against French rule in Saint-Domingue from 1791 onwards. Their leaders were said to be *houngan*⁴ and their means of winning the revolution was believed to be due to Vodou practices. The exceedingly bloody revolution, mirroring decades of “ruthless exploitation” (Fernández Olmos 101) of slaves in the plantations, struck fear into colonialists worldwide. Furthermore, a supposed “knowledge” of Vodou and its practices triggered fears⁵, which spread like wildfire throughout the world. The Haitian Revolution ended with the abolition of slavery and the founding of the first republic in the West Indies in 1804, the Republic of Haiti. Afterwards, Vodou largely flourished throughout the nineteenth century in Haiti and practitioners were only persecuted again by the Catholic Church through so called anti-superstition campaigns from 1896 onwards (Fernández Olmos 104). Today Vodou is practised alongside Catholicism and Protestantism and is even incorporated into Rara festivities in the Holy Week before Easter (McAlister).

Vodou Belief System

“Vodou with its pantheon of ghosts, called loa – represents a fusion of African and Creole gods, the spirits of deified ancestors and syncretized manifestations of Catholic saints” (Fernández Olmos 102). The word *vodû* is of Fon origin and means “spirit” or “sacred energy” (Métraux 25 f.)⁶, as well as “image” and “god” (Dayan 1999, 13). Literature on Vodou is not concordant about usage of the words god, ghost and spirit when describing loa.⁷ Both the definition of ghost in the *OED* as well as the definition of spirit ascribe to the concept of loa. Ghost, as defined

4 *Houngan* – priest, minister and doctor of a Vodou community – see for a more critical argumentation of a definition in Deren 17, 330 and Métraux 425.

5 “Since slavery, Voodoo accounts had helped ‘authenticate’ fundamental rationalizations of white supremacy [... and] tales of Voodoo helped establish black criminality as a social fact.” See Gordon 769.

6 The word Vodou has many versions of spelling, among many others: Voodoo, Vodun and Voudoux. For Haiti most authors have seemed to settle for Vodou as it is closest to the original spelling. The popularized version of Voodoo associated with black magic and witchcraft has been largely created through literature and Hollywood movies. See for different spelling and definition Fandrich 779 f.

7 For example, Métraux states that loa is translated to deity, but can be rather understood to mean ghost or demon (426). Deren’s definition of loa is deity (332), *gros-bon-ange*

in the *OED*, mirrors to a great extent the concept of *gros-bon-ange*:⁸ “[t]he spirit, or immaterial part of man, as distinct from the body or material part; the seat of feeling, thought, and moral action” (492). On the other hand, the *OED* defines spirit as “that which gives life to the physical organism, in contrast to its purely material elements” (251 I1a) or “in contexts relating to temporary separation of the immaterial from the material part of man’s being” (251 I1c). These definitions can be linked to the Vodou concept of *ti-bon-ange*.⁹

Haitian Vodou is based on a belief in a unique supreme being as creator of the universe. Contrary to the Christian god, the supreme being is believed to be a distant god. This god is supposed to have transferred some of its power to a pantheon of deities, called loa. A serviteur always serves the loa, not the supreme being. Therefore, Haitian Vodou is a religion with a monotheistic head and a polytheistic body. Leaders of a Vodou community, which often make up the core of a social community, are either called *houngan*¹⁰, describing a male priest and healer, or *mambo*, describing the female counterpart.

The Loa

Loa, also spelled lwa, are also often called “*mystères, anges, saints, or les invisibles*” (Dayan, 16, Fernández Olmos 105) in literature and are grouped into different “nations” (Deren 82 f., Fernández Olmos 105 f.). These nations are often roughly compared to the nations Haitian slaves came from (Fernández Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert 102). The most common of these nations are Rada and Petro/Petwo. The Rada nation is representing African loa and the Petro nation the Creole or Haitian born loa (Fernández Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert 217 and Deren 82 f.). According to Deren, the Rada nation unifies African originated loa from kingdoms such as Dahomey (Fon nation, nowadays Benin, Togo), Nago (Yoruba nation, nowadays Nigeria) and Ghede (82 f.). The Petro nation links Creole loa and rites with beliefs and ritual practices from central and south-

soul (330) and *ti-bon-ange* (336) means spirit. These definitions as defined in the glossary are not at all precise in her book, especially when loa mount serviteurs in rituals their description fits ghosts or spirits.

8 See for definition of *gros-bon-ange* under ‘Spiritual Concept of The Soul’ (McAlister 102 f., Deren 26 and Sommerfeld 83).

9 See for definition of *ti-bon-ange* under ‘Spiritual Concept of The Soul’ (McAlister 103, Sommerfeld 84).

10 *Houngan* – priest, minister and doctor of a Vodou community – see for a more critical argumentation of a definition in Deren 17 and Sommerfeld for the role of houngan and mambo as opposed to a doctor of western medicine.

west Africa arriving with people from Congo or Angola¹¹ (Fernández Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert 217). This organisation is based on attributes ascribed to loa, Rada loa are supposed to be benevolent and kind, as opposed to Petro/Petwo loa, which are malevolent and even violent or have (dark) magical capabilities. Further attributes follow along this dichotomy. The colour white or light colours are often used for Rada loa, black and red for Petro/Petwo spirits. Food and drink that is offered to the loa, speech and demeanor of serviteurs when they are possessed by ghosts, and *vèvè*¹² of a loa, are grouped according to this dichotomy¹³ (Deren 82 f. 86–150).

As stated above, each loa belongs to only one of the nations, but many loa exist in at least two cosmic spheres – most often it is stated that they serve in both Rada and Petwo rituals (Deren 82 f., 137–145, Fernández Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert 115 f.). If they appear in a Vodou ceremony the nation they belong to will be visible by their attributes.¹⁴

Métraux also opens up the discussion about belief in animism in Haitian Vodou¹⁵, as loa may change their habitat, they can live in trees, elements, animals and humans. Deren argues that loa may reside in trees and other natural objects, but they are not “spirits of the trees” (Deren 86), but rather independent of any vessel (86 f.).

Spiritual Concept of the Soul

To fully understand the concept of loa, the intrinsic spiritual concept of the spirit in Vodou needs to be explained. In Christian belief body and soul¹⁶ are linked to the spirit. The body functions as vessel of soul and spirit and the soul is a seat for a person’s personality, consciousness and unconsciousness. In Vodou belief the

11 Generally social anthropologists disagree on the percentage of slaves that came from each of these kingdoms to Haiti.

12 *Vèvè* – “Symbolic, caballa-like designs drawn on the ground to invoke the loa at ceremonies, made of wheat or maize flour or ashes.” (Deren 337, Métraux 427).

13 See, for example, ‘Loa Possession in Vodou Ceremonies’.

14 See Erzuli under ‘Loa Possession in Vodou Ceremonies’.

15 Here Métraux talks about *nanm* – which is a power or holiness which resides in everything and is believed in besides loa and the Divine Being (174–177).

16 *Nanm* – a soul in Haitian Vodou, according to McAlister (103), a power, or sanctity, according to Métraux (174 f.) or an animistic spirit, able to inherit anything from human beings to animals and plants (Sommerfeld 83). Not to be mistaken as concept of soul in Christian belief system (Métraux 174).

soul is split again into two aspects. On the one hand, *gros-bon-ange*¹⁷ or “good big angel” (McAlister 103), is closely bound to the physical body and can be perceived as “the metaphysical double of the physical being, [...] it is the immortal twin who survives the mortal man” (Deren 26). This good big angel keeps the body alive from birth to death, is seen as a person’s “own memory, intelligence, imagination and invention” (35). When a person deceases the *gros-bon-ange* will stay at the cemetery and can consequently become a loa or a *zonbi*¹⁸ (Sommerfeld 83, McAlister 102).

On the other hand, *ti-bon-ange*, the “good little angel” (McAlister 103) functions as a guardian angel and moral guide. While a child is protected unconditionally by its *ti-bon-ange*, adults have to lead an upright life so their good little angel can protect them. As opposed to the *gros-bon-ange*, which is bound to the physical body, the *ti-bon-ange* is mobile and can move away from the individual during dreams and trance. The good little angel is very easily scared away from the body and harmed by magic. Whenever a person’s good little angel is weak, a bad spirit or loa can easily harm the individual.¹⁹ During a Vodou ritual, in order for a loa to enter a serviteur’s head, the person’s *ti-bon-ange* will temporarily leave and make space for the loa, so it can dance in the serviteur’s head. While the loa rides its “horse”, the *ti-bon-ange* acts as a protector over the body from a distance, as it also does during dreams. With the death of a person the good little angel will leave the physical body forever, and will either be judged by God (Sommerfeld 84) or will “go [...] under the water to Ginen [Africa] to be with the *lwa*” (McAlister 103), while the good big angel “lingers near the grave” (ibid.).

Reviving or *retirer d’en bas de l’eau*

Nowadays, reclaiming a loa happens only with family loa, which are still subjected to constant change²⁰, and which guard family property and members if constant sacrifices are made to them. The ceremony to retrieve a loa is called *retirer d’en bas de l’eau*²¹ (Deren 46 f.) and has to take place one year and one day after a family

17 While all writers are concordant about the distinction and broad definition of *gros-bon-ange* and *ti-bon-ange*, Fernández Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert state the exact opposite definition of these two concepts of soul (214, 217).

18 “*Zonbi* are spirits of the recently dead who are captured and then owned by a ‘master’ and obliged to work.” McAlister 102, see more about perceptions of death in Haitian Vodou – Sommerfeld 88 ff. as well as Métraux 307 ff.

19 For more in-depth description of sickness through loa as well as other sources of harm see Sommerfeld 90 ff.

20 As opposed to older African and Haitian loa.

21 An account of a whole ceremony is found in Maya Deren, pages 46–53.

member's death (*ibid.*). To reclaim a *gros-bon-ange* is generally advised, as a soul not bound to its land and family of origin can according to common folklore haunt its family and lead to disease by itself (Métraux 307 ff., Sommerfeld 90–96), or can be set upon a someone as a *zombi* by a houngan or mambo (McAlister 98 f., 102 f., Métraux 324 ff.). Although it is advised, the ceremony is often not performed at all or sometimes years later, because large sums of money need to be paid to the houngan or mambo who retrieve loa. Rural families in Haiti are generally poor. *Retirer d'en bas de l'eau* is often performed in a community for several souls to be retrieved at one single ceremony.

The ceremony *retirer d'en bas de l'eau* is seen as a third birth, “the rebirth of the soul from the abysmal waters” (Deren 49). During this ceremony the *gros-bon-ange* is called upon to appear and is eventually bound to an earthen vessel called *govi*²² (330). After songs, dances and prayers to major loa such as Legba²³ and Baron Samedi, the *gros-bon-ange* enters from the abysmal water²⁴ into the peristyle²⁵, communicates with his or her family about any pressing matter and is subsequently lured into the *govi* on the head of the initiate by houngan or mambo.²⁶ The *govi* is the new residing place of a family loa and is now again part of the social world of the living, called upon whenever important family decisions are to be made or council for illness or complications is needed (Deren 46). Some family loa can rise to become local, regional or even great Haitian loa, called upon or appearing in Vodou ceremonies throughout Haiti.

Loa Possession in Vodou Ceremonies

Essentially all loa can appear in Vodou ceremonies, although a hierarchical order of appearance seems to exist, according to literature, as well as communities' favourites or local loa might appear as well (Métraux 110–111, Fernández Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert 110, 113, Deren 37 f.). While Legba, also called “old man at the

22 *Govi* is a red earthen vessel or a clay jar.

23 Legba is loa of the cross-roads, the first loa to be called upon in any Vodou ceremony, as he establishes a connection between this world and the world of *Les Invisibles*, the loa.

24 The abysmal water is represented in this ceremony by a nearby stream, pond or, lacking these, a trough of water (Deren 47).

25 Peristyle is a “structure, part of the hounfort [temple, surroundings and ceremonial altar of Haitian Vodou], in the middle of which is the *poteau-mitan*, or centre post, which reflects the traffic between heaven and earth” (Fernández Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert 217).

26 The appearance of the loa in the description by Maya Deren seems only to appear as a voice and only the shudder of the initiate when the loa enters the *govi* on its head shows a visible sign of the loa during the ceremony.

gate” (Deren 96) and loa of the crossroads, appears first to establish the connection between the worlds of the living and the dead, other major loa appear afterwards. Baron Samedi, loa of the cemetery, often appears last in a ceremony (Fernández Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert 113).

A Vodou ceremony involves song and dance for hours and is used to serve and offer the loa food and drink, receive council from them and keep the social fabric functional. It may take hours for an initiate to dance him- or herself into trance (Métraux 134 ff.), a prerequisite for a loa to appear in the head of a serviteur by possession. Whenever a loa rises up through the feet of a serviteur, the person being ridden by the loa will change cadence and speech pattern, the style of dance, gestures and countenance to the appearance linked to the loa. The serviteur will also ask for clothes, food, drink and luxuries ascribed to the loa according to its ascribed nationality (*ibid.*, Deren 86–150). Legba, being an African born loa (Rada) and the first to be called upon in a Vodou ceremony, will ask for a cane, a hat and a pipe, and will walk bent over and talk slowly as he is portrayed as an old man. He inherits the most important place in a Vodou ceremony as he establishes the connection between the world of the living and the world of the loa (96 ff.). Erzulie, the goddess of love, appears in both cosmic spheres. Erzulie as Erzulie Freda Dahomey is of African origin (Rada) and represents femininity, mother of life and beauty and is viewed as the Vodou version of Virgin Mary (138) or Aphrodite (Métraux 121). This version of Erzulie is fair skinned, loves luxuries such as perfume, expensive clothing and jewellery, flowers, cakes all of which have to be white, rose or light blue. A serviteur will call upon any of above mentioned objects when Erzulie is riding him or her²⁷ (Deren 137–145). Another version of Erzulie, Erzulie Ge-Rouge also called Erzili Danto (Fernández Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert 116), portrays a Haitian version of the goddess of love. Erzili Danto is clearly a Petro loa, who appears dark skinned, is a hard working peasant woman and has a racy humour. She loves rum and cigarettes and is dressed in red or otherwise colourful attire (*ibid.*). Baron Samedi²⁸ belongs to the Ghede nation of loa, which is a marginal nation, as these loa are connected with death. According to Deren, Baron Samedi is closest to the Petro nation, while Métraux lists him as belonging to the Rada nation. Baron Samedi is the guardian of the cemetery and the dead, and therefore takes on the attributes of Petro loa. He is dressed in black, wearing sunglasses, and carries around gravediggers’ tools, shovel, pickaxe

27 A male serviteur can be ridden by a male or female loa, the same holds true for female serviteur.

28 According to Métraux, Baron Samedi is part of a triad, always linked to Baron-la-Croix and Baron-Cimetière (126).

as well as a hoe. The serviteur mounted by this loa sings racy songs and dances in obscene ways (Métraux 126 f., Fernández Olmos & Paravisini-Gebert 113 f.). The Ghede loa generally complete a Vodou ceremony (Deren 37 f.). A possession can go on for hours, but whenever a loa leaves a serviteur, he or she claims to remember nothing. The loa will leave having aided the community of the living.

Conclusion

Vodou religion with its ghosts called loa is a complex matter. The religion itself being of African origin and evolving under Christian influence and slavery retains the original idea of ghosts that keep the link to its countries of origin, brutal past and immediate family alive. These loa are still very much a part of Vodou religion and Haitian society today. Especially in Vodou ceremonies and ceremonies to reclaim a family loa, the ghostliness of the loa is (just barely) visible.

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