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Filming the *Lwa* in Haiti

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Of Men and Gods. Directed by Anne Lescot and Laurence Magloire. Le Collectif 2004 Images, 2002. DVD. 52 minutes.

Voodoo Dance. Directed by Elsie Haas. Third World Newsreel, 1989. DVD. 52 minutes.

In the late 1940s, armed with a Guggenheim Fellowship, the filmmaker and dancer Maya Deren spent several years studying and filming Vodou ceremonies in Haiti. Having previously performed in Catherine Dunham's dance company, she travelled there with the intention of studying Haitian dance, but quickly found that she couldn't do so without studying the religion as a whole. The nine hours of footage of ceremonies that she took focus intensely on the motion and dance. And they also attempted to capture on film what Deren described in her book *Divine Horsemen* as the "center toward which all the roads of Vodoun converge": possession by the *lwa* (Deren 1953:247).

The term "lwa," often spelled "loa" in earlier ethnographic texts, is usually translated as either "spirits" or "god," and sometimes used interchangeably with the term "saints" by those who practice Vodou. But it is, on some level, impossible to translate. So, too, the appearance of the *lwa* among the living, through what Karen McCarthy Brown (2001) has called "possession-performances," is extremely difficult to translate into film (p. 57, 112). Deren, and some filmmakers who have followed her towards Vodou, have had to confront a difficult question: how do you film a *lwa*? How do you capture their presence in Vodou and in Haitian society?

The *lwa* themselves sometimes have something to say about this. In a ceremony I attended in a basement in the Paris *banlieue* of Bobigny in the late 1990s, a TV. cameraman who had been invited to film parts of the ceremony found that he had neglected to get permission from perhaps the most important of those present: Ogou Badagri. Having arrived, present in the body of one of the *houngan* who was overseeing the ceremony, Ogou charged the camera and sent the cameraman reeling, assuring that the rest of the ceremony would take place unrecorded on film.

During her time in Haiti, Maya Deren had more luck, and she memorably filmed the terror of one *chwal*, or horse, being mounted by a *lwa*, using the slow-motion she favored in much her filming. And when

in 1985, decades after her death, her widowed husband Teiji Ito and his wife, Cheryl, edited the footage and produced the film *Divine Horsemen*, they froze the film as it focused on the *chwal's* face, looking past the camera into the beyond. In her book, Deren also famously leads us to her own experience of possession, which she names a "white darkness," and then stops, unable to enter: for at when the *lwa* arrive, the *chwal's* spirit has to leave the body, for a time, to open a space for the *lwa* to communicate through speech and dance. No one, Deren pointed out, can ever narrate a possession from within (Deren 1953, chap.7).

While Deren's film and book converge on possession, making it central to their argument and aesthetic, Anne Lescot and Laurence Magloire's powerful 2002 film, *Des hommes et des dieux* (*Of Men and Gods*), come at it from a very different angle. The film asks a specific question: what place do gay and transgendered men occupy within the practice of Haitian Vodou? Lescot and Magloire answer this by focusing on a small group of men, following them in their daily routines, to ceremonies and on pilgrimage, talking to them about their vision of themselves and the place of Vodou in their lives. The result is a perspective completely different from that presented in *Divine Horsemen*, where the only characters are the *lwa* themselves, represented through *vévés* drawn on temple floors, through drumming, and through possession itself, and where those who practice the religion, even the *houngans*, *manbos*, and *hounsís* featured in the ceremonies, are nameless. Lescot and Magloire, instead, introduce us to a small cast of characters, and when we see their ceremonial lives as a piece of a larger whole. Indeed, taken together, the two films could work wonderfully to introduce students to diverging perspectives on the religion, and diverging methods for exploring religious practice. Aesthetically, they contrast sharply, with one shot in black and white and often in slow-motion, the other in high-definition color with a digital camera. And, of course, they show two very different Haitis, half a century apart from one another.

Of Men and Gods is a remarkable film. Side-stepping but never ignoring the broader issues of poverty and politics that occupy most documentaries on Haiti, it provides an engaging portrait of a series of very different men, with very different perspectives on their sexuality and its link to spiritual life. Some argue that Vodou provides an explanation for their sexual orientation, that the *lwa* (notably Erzulie, who in her various forms embodies and engages with questions of love and sexuality) have made them who they are. Several interviewees point out that, during possession, men can in some sense become women and vice versa, with the female *lwa* Erzulie, for instance, possessing the body of a man, who is outfitted with a dress and sings, speaks, and moves according to the image of the woman condensed in the *lwa* herself. But one *houngan*

dismisses the view that the *lwa* have something to do with the sexuality of individuals, declaring that they have nothing to do with his decisions about who he sleeps with.

The interviews all describe a situation in which many married men carry on secret sexual relationships with other men, and one scene depicts a small Port-au-Prince nightclub where such liaisons take place. But they also talk about—while the film itself clearly shows—how gay men take center stage in certain Vodou ceremonies, celebrated for their dancing and singing, finding in the religion a public space for the open expression of who they are. The footage of ceremonies, which is not extensive, is excellent presented and contextualized in the film's narrative, provide a view into the religion anchored in the experience of particular individuals within it. *Of Men and Gods* shares this approach with one of the most successful books about Haitian Vodou, Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (2001).

The 1989 *Voodoo Dance*, meanwhile, presents a very different approach to the religion, one that foregrounds its implication within the broader political landscape of post-Duvalier Haiti. The film is remarkable document of the years after the 1986 fall of Duvalier, showcasing a wide-range of prominent intellectuals and artists. Konpé Filo, a journalist for Radio Inter who worked with Jean Dominique, whose story is told in Jonathan Demme's remarkable documentary *The Agronomist*, talks about the importance of kréyol-language media in Haiti. André Pierre, a famous Haitian painter who incorporates Vodou artistry and imagery in his work, speaks about his relationship to the religion. The legendary singer Manno Charlemagne talks about his political persecution, and sings a song lamenting Haiti's situation and calling up a different future. Several professors discuss the economic and cultural conflicts within Haiti, one of them under the gaze of a portrait of Frantz Fanon.

One of these, the important historian Roger Gaillard, speaks beautifully about the relationship between past and present in Haiti:

Haitian independence was won with strength and arms from Napoleon's troops and has left its mark deep within the national conscience. In school, children learn about these wars in detail. And the people themselves through their songs, the oral heritage passed down to them, the Haitian people, even in the mountains, know of the existence of Dessalines, Louverture and Christophe. So where the independence of Haiti is concerned, Haitians know that it's a page they themselves wrote in the History of Mankind. They know how exceptional this war was, and they know that they are the heirs of men who fought that war and gave them the right to live on this land, to be masters of it, and their own masters.

But Gaillard also declares that Vodou is, like religion in other societies, “the opium of the people,” and that it cannot provide Haitians with the “revolutionary thought that they need” to generate political transformations. Others disagree, notably a young man named Grégoire, described as an “African student,” who at the edge of a ceremony describes Vodou as providing an ideal of “equal rights” and an approach for pursuing the “common good.”

In the wake of the revolution that deposed Duvalier in 1986, there was a period known as the *déchoukaj*, or “uprooting,” during which many Haitians struck back against those they perceived as having been part of the Duvalier regime. During the *déchoukaj*, many *houngans* accused of having collaborated with the regime were attacked and some were killed, and temples were often looted or destroyed. In response, activists formed the Zantray movement, which aimed to create a public organization devoted to defending the presence of Vodou in Haitian society. The organizing and perspective of this movement is showcased in *Voodoo Dance*. And many interviewees comment on the complicated ways in which Duvalier took control of religious institutions, including the Catholic Church, in Haiti, and reflect on what this means about the place of religion in Haitian society. Captured here is an intense series of debates that shook Haitian society in the late 1980s. Because it is so intensely grounded in this moment, the film would need to be placed well in its historical context if it was to be used in class, for it doesn’t represent the state of the debates in today’s Haiti. But it would be an excellent resource in a course that dealt with dictatorship and society in 20th century Haiti. The film does not provide much historical background specifically on the Duvalier dictatorship, or on the involvement of the U.S.—Demme’s *The Agronomist* does so in a more sustained way and is a very effective film for classroom use—but it does provide a powerful presentation of the voices and perspectives of a crucial generation of Haitian intellectuals struggling to find a way forward in the wake of Duvalier’s regime.

Both of these films, like Deren’s *Divine Horsemen*, will likely challenge many viewers in the U.S., notably students, who sometimes find it difficult to shed the encrusted visions of Vodou—inherited often unconsciously from popular culture—when confronted with the complex realities of the religion. Deren’s film as well as in *Voodoo Dance* show scenes of animal sacrifice, and *Of Men and Gods* presents an intense look at the complexities of sexuality in Haiti. But precisely for this reason, they would be very useful in teaching, especially in combination with readings on Vodou and Haiti that could frame student’s encounters with the films. Ultimately, it is probably impossible to begin to understand Vodou without seeing its visual culture—it’s dance, its objects, its art—as

well as hearing its music. These documentaries demonstrate beautifully that, while it is perhaps impossible to capture the *lwa* on film, it is possible to picture and acknowledge the incredible work that is done in their service.

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Sangre colonial: La Guerra de Corea y los soldados puertorriqueños

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***The Borinqueneers*. Documental escrito, producido y dirigido por Noemí Figueroa Soulet, narrado por Héctor Elizondo (inglés), David Ortiz Angleró (español). Inglés/español con subtítulos. El Pozo Productions, 2007. DVD. 78 minutos.**

A sí como los testimonios de los soldados afroamericanos y de los soldados de ascendencia mexicana que participaron en las guerras norteamericanas del siglo 20 remiten al anhelo respectivo de superar la divisoria racial-esclavista y el discrimen a las “espaldas mojadas”, las memorias de guerra de los soldados puertorriqueños manifiestan un abigarramiento simbólico más complejo. El documental *The Borinqueneers*, recientemente exhibido por Public Broadcasting System (PBS), confirma que, en la experiencia militar de los puertorriqueños, ciudadanos de Estados Unidos desde 1917, en las Fuerzas Armadas de Estados Unidos, cohabitan en relación inestable dos patriotismos, resistencias y fidelidades, idiosincrasias y mentalidades locales con imaginarios de democracia y el “*American Way of Life*”. En la pieza producida, escrita y dirigida por Noemí Figueroa Soulet, una hija de la diáspora