

A multi-perspective analysis of videographic data on the performance of spirit possession in Dominican *Vodou*

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Abstracts

The article is concerned with spirit possession during public *Vodou* celebrations in the Southwest of the Dominican Republic. By analysing videographic material archived at the Phonogrammarchiv of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, features of Dominican *Vodou* are described from three interlocking perspectives, with particular emphasis on the enactment of the divine. These perspectives include the view of the researcher, a medical anthropologist, as well as the interpretations of a local specialist in the performance of the genre, and the perceptions and associations of a musicologist working at the Phonogrammarchiv preparing the collection for deposit and eventual access by archive patrons. Based on this multiperspectivity, the article provides a detailed description of spirit possession, including a wider perspective by referring to theoretical issues from different cultural areas and research disciplines, and it finally explores what constitutes a successful possession performance.

Der Beitrag befasst sich mit Besessenheit im *Vodou* der Dominikanischen Republik unter besonderer Berücksichtigung öffentlicher Zeremonien. Mittels Analyse videographischer Daten, die im Phonogrammarchiv der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften archiviert sind, werden die Charakteristika des Dominikanischen *Vodou* aus drei einander ergänzenden Perspektiven herausgearbeitet, wobei der Fokus auf performativen Aspekten liegt. Enthalten sind die Sichtweisen der Forscherin, einer Medizinanthropologin, des Weiteren die Interpretationen eines lokalen Praktizierenden von *Vodou* sowie die Assoziationen eines Musikologen, der am Phonogrammarchiv das Material für Archivierungs- und Ansichtszwecke aufbereitet hat. Ausgehend von dieser Multiperspektivität beschreibt der Beitrag das Phänomen Besessenheit detailliert und mit Blick auf andere kulturelle Kontexte und theoretische Konzepte verschiedener Disziplinen. Er widmet sich zudem der Frage, was zur erfolgreichen Performance von Besessenheit letztendlich notwendig ist.

Keywords

Spirit Possession, Dominican Republic, Performance, Multiperspectivity

Besessenheit, Dominikanische Republik, Performance, Multiperspektivität

The present article analyses videographic material on rituals of possession in the Dominican Republic. The collected material was created for methodological purposes within the context of a larger project on the “Modes and Function of Spirit Possession”, funded by the Austrian Science Fund, and

archived at the Phonogrammarchiv of the Austrian Academy of Sciences.¹ The aim of this paper is to point out the most salient features of Dominican *Vodou* during public celebrations in terms of its structure and phenomenology, with particular emphasis on the practice of spirit possession, by engaging three complementary perspectives from different backgrounds. A secondary goal is to describe some characteristics of the material itself and the circumstances under which it was produced as background information for researchers who intend to use the material for future research.

After some introductory remarks about the ethnographic background we will (i) present an analysis from the point of view of the researcher and collector of the video material, a medical anthropologist. First, she outlines the underlying research and discusses some methodological aspects. She will then present a typology of possession behaviour and interaction during public *Vodou* celebrations based on the paradigm of altered states of consciousness. Subsequently, we will (ii) depict a local view by giving space to the interpretation of José,² a long-term practitioner of Dominican *Vodou*. While he watched and reflected on the collected material during weekly sessions together with the researcher, José was asked to explain the cosmological meaning of what could be seen during the recorded rituals. In addition, he commented on local concepts of spiritual force, knowledge, morale and authenticity that he interpreted from watching specific situations of possession behaviour.³ Finally (iii), a musicologist who archived the material and created a content log will provide his interpretations. He has been working in a medical anthropological context himself, conducting fieldwork on healing and sorcery songs in the Western reaches of the Amazon lowlands. In addition, he already knew the researcher from prior academic collaborations, and had worked at the archive with her audio recordings from prior field trips to the Dominican Republic (2003–2006). His view is based on the intention of grasping what is going on in the recordings in very general terms, in order to make the material accessible for the archive's clientele.

1 Yvonne Schaffler would like to thank the Austrian Science Fund (FWF; project T525-G17) for funding her research since 2011. Both authors also thank the Phonogrammarchiv for archiving our video and audio recordings since 2001, for providing recording equipment and technical advice, and for inviting us to contribute to the current issue of the Phonogrammarchiv's Yearbook *International Forum on Audio-Visual Research*.

2 Data protection in accordance with the Helsinki declaration and the responsible ethical committee in Vienna does not allow revealing José's real name. Otherwise we would have considered him being the third author of the present paper.

3 Any sort of comments José made were collected and written down by the researcher.

Ethnographic background

Vodou is an African diaspora tradition composed of elements from African religions, Catholicism, and European Spiritism. It is practised in both countries located on the isle of Hispaniola: the Dominican Republic, previously colonised mostly by Spain, and the adjacent nation of Haiti, formerly a French colony (Deive 1996 [1975]). Due to knowledge exchange between *Vodou* practitioners from both countries, the Dominican *Vodou* tradition is influenced from Haiti, but the practitioners consider their religion as a different path, referring to it as *Las 21 Divisiones*. Regarding the difference between the two traditions, *Las 21 Divisiones* (or Dominican *Vodou*) is not as popular in the Dominican Republic as *Vodou* is in Haiti, and it does not have as rigid a structure. There are only few centres (altars) openly accessible, and practitioners conduct ceremonies and manifest the spirits (*misterios*) in rather flexible ways (Davis 1987).

Spirit possession

Spirit possession plays an important role in *Vodou*, as it does in many other world religions (Boddy 1994; Bourguignon 1973). Once a spirit descends upon a practitioner, the practitioner's body is believed to be used by the entity as a means of expression, resulting in a transient alteration in identity whereby the individual's normal identity is temporarily replaced by the spirit's. The spirits are believed to be able to give prophecies of upcoming events or situations pertaining to the possessed, who is also called "Horse of the spirit" (*caballo de misterio*). According to local tradition, practitioners have no recollection of what has happened during an episode of possession, and in fact, when the possessing spirit leaves the body, the Horse feels exhausted and wonders what has occurred during her absence. Although possession can be a tiring experience, vodouists see it as an innate ability and as a sign of election.

The concept of "spiritual force" (*fuera espiritual*) is central to the local understanding of spirit possession. Spiritual force is what connects the spiritual realm with humanity and what runs through places, objects and humans as they become bases for the spirits. It is sometimes described as a current of energy, as something that, as one Horse put it, feels as if it "enters you through the feet, then it takes you by the stomach, then it rises to your head; it makes you feel giddy and then you have fallen, you have lost your mind". Spiritual force is associated with bodily sensations like shivers, goose pimples or sensations in the stomach area, which can either mark the onset of possession or indicate a state of "being touched by the spirits". The latter is imagined as a state of closeness to the spirits, also referred to as state of "clear sight" (*vista clara*), during which an individual may receive important information otherwise not available to humans.

Vodouist celebrations

Experienced Horses (*caballos*) that own an altar and organise *Vodou* rituals are locally referred to as Servants (*servidores*). They may invoke spirit possession in both public and more private situations. Public celebrations (*fiestas de misterios, maní* or *velaciones*) serve to honour the spirits and involve drumming and singing. They are either calendric celebrations of a *servidor's* principle spirit(s) (*misterio de cabeza*), 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 who has responded to one's petitions for assistance. Typically, after the ceremony is opened with prayers, vodouists call upon the spirits by speaking more prayers, pouring libations, spraying perfumes and starting to dance when the drummers fall into a stirring rhythm. As the drumbeat intensifies, so do the movements of the dancers, who lose themselves to the rhythm and the heavy aroma of incense and perfume. To ensure that a *fiesta* involves several events of possession that make it "hot", the organiser commonly invites fellow Servants who are well known for their capacity to manifest spirits. Those Servants, who at the same time are spiritual leaders (*troncos*, i.e. "trunks"), bring their novices (*ramas*, literally: "branches"), to whom they provide spiritual mentoring. Ritual assistants (*plazas*) help to manifest the spirits by evoking them with ritual instruments, prayers and offerings. Among the guests of a *fiesta* are furthermore many of the organiser's clients, who are devoted to the celebrated spirits, as well as neighbours and onlookers whose relation to the spirits is not as tight. Although these bystanders usually do not intend to manifest the spirits, it is still possible that the spirits "ride" them spontaneously. A celebration is remembered as a successful one if—the later the hour, the higher spirited the atmosphere—many events of possession took place simultaneously. Particularly *fiestas* also serve advertising purposes. The owner, who is mostly also the organiser of a *fiesta*, puts her close relationship to the spirits on public display, while at the same time, her devotees and potential new clients enjoy the opportunity to contact the spirits and participate in an entertaining spectacle. Other types of ceremonies serve the purpose of mourning the dead (*rezo*), penitence or cult induction (*bautismo*).⁴ To sessions with the purpose of resolving private problems, only Servants and novices are invited, and the spirits are invoked "to work with" rather than to dance and celebrate; consequently, their actions are directed to tackle their devotee's concerns in a straightforward way.

4 For a more detailed distinction and description of events, see Piper (2012: 197-218).

From the perspective of the researcher

Methodology and theoretical framework

Verifiable observation provides a solid foundation for analytic knowledge of the world, allowing for detailed description, observation of simultaneous activities and for overcoming the problem of limited attention spans. Video recordings may draw attention to processes that do not catch one's eye at first sight, that is, during participation in the event to be studied. Besides, videography allows for repeated observation of the recorded data, which facilitates a micro-analytic approach to action sequences (Knoblauch 2000: 169). Theories of knowledge and action are grounded in empirical evidence, and generalisations are built from recordings of particular, naturally occurring activities (Jordan & Henderson 1995).

In our current project, videography was conducted in conjunction with ethnographic fieldwork. The footage with a duration of more than 31 hours was collected during three fieldwork episodes in mostly urban environments in the southwest of the Dominican Republic between 2009 and 2012, lasting about ten months. Altogether, 113 occurrences of spirit possession were recorded, with 59 of them completely filmed from onset to end. Although this article focuses on spirit possession during public celebrations, it should be noted that also other types of events were recorded, such as pilgrimages, initiation rites and private ceremonies. Especially at an earlier stage of research, I videotaped any kind of ritual action available with the aim of becoming more acquainted with *Vodou* in general. Later, my interest focused on the recording of interactions between possessed persons and other ritual participants at the expense of recording entire ceremonies. With further narrowing my research interest, I started to specialise in early possession, that is, in possession by inexperienced individuals, segmenting these phenomena into early possession that does and does not cause suffering (see e.g. Schaffler 2012, 2013). In order to make this distinction, I also relied on biographical interviews. When analysing these interviews, I chose a number of individuals for case studies,⁵ and henceforth focused on them more than on others. As far as video analysis is concerned, the analytic parameters of the selected interactions are directed towards the focus of attention, facial mimics and lines of sight, body postures and distances between the actors. Furthermore, their positioning in space as well as group formation and the changes a group undergoes in the course of interaction turned out to be of central concern.

5 These biographical histories will be presented and analysed in forthcoming work by Schaffler.

In literature, possession is often described as a state of altered consciousness or trance (dissociation; see Bourguignon 1973, 1976; Klass 2003; Rouget 1985). Possession trance refers to a temporary alteration of consciousness characterised by behavioural changes and the replacement of a customary sense of personal identity by that of a spirit (Cardeña et al. 2009). In the following, I will sketch some of my observations on possession behaviour, drawn from footage of public celebrations.

Factors that shape possession behaviour are time, experience, spirit personality and extensive demands arising from the ritual setting, but also variations of trance depth on a continuum between only mild trance on the one hand, and deep dissociation on the other. I will here extend what has already been observed by Bourguignon (1976: 40).

Factors shaping possession trance behaviour

Timing

Possession bearings, in general, change notably between the possession's outset and its later episodes, when various symbolic proceedings are performed. Before the spirit's arrival, the gaze of the person about to be possessed turns inwards. Initial convulsions signal an approaching spirit and are sometimes accompanied by moaning. While the transition from an ordinary state to possession trance involves an introspective attitude with little awareness of the surroundings and sometimes convulsive behaviour, in the later course of a possession, in accordance with mythology, the spirit fully manifests in the head of the possessed person (fig. 1).⁶ This stage is characterised by extraverted and more organised behaviour, as well as by increased perception of the environment. During this second stage, the possessed person performs symbolic actions such as the salutation of the altar, the blessing of the doorsill, as well as prayer, song, dance, gesture, and emotions specific to the embodied spirit. During a third stage, she interacts with other ritual participants, performing ritual salutations and raising the ritual jar offered to her. Furthermore, she may express empathic care towards others through laying on hands, or spiritual counselling (see fig. 2). However, interaction with other ritual participants may also involve verbal critique or, very rarely, even cases of physical attacks. This interactional stage is followed by another stage of symbolic action, involving gestures of farewell, and bringing about the end of the possession. Episodes of possession

6 In Brazilian *Candomblé*, the process of transition is referred to as *irradiacão*, and it is described with similar features (Frigerio 1989; Halloy 2012a, 2012b).

involving all stages (transition—symbolic action—interaction—symbolic action) can only be observed among fully initiated long-term practitioners.



Fig. 1: Skilful manifestation of the spirit *Santa Marta la Dominadora* or *Lubana* during a public celebration. Photograph by Jorge Vicioso.

Mythological personality

Much of the possessed person's behaviour depends on which mythological personality is imagined to enter her body. Hereby, the category (*división*) the possessing spirit adheres to defines if the possessed will either progress through the stages described above or will not show much ritualised behaviour at all. The latter case sometimes occurs with so-called "Indian" spirits that tend to resist cooperation with other ritual participants for their assumed savageness and "lack of culture".⁷ Furthermore, spirits of the *petró* group may appear angry, hot and frenzied, and likewise resist cooperation, at least as long as they are not appeased with offerings and promises. Generally, female spirits are expressed gently and their presence is more subtle and easier in movements. Male spirits tend to be enacted in a more energetic way, they appear stronger and even aggressive in nature; their presence is more visible in the actions of the possessed. There are spirits that burst into tears as they manifest (*La Virgen Dolorosa* or *Metresilí*),⁸ and

7 For a more detailed description of the concept of the "Indian Spirit" see Schaffler (in print).

8 *La Virgen Dolorosa* and *Metresilí* refer to the same spiritual being by two different names, a Catholic and a *misterio* name, both closely related through religious syncretism (Piper 2012: 123–131; Schaffler 2009: 49–68). Therefore, in the following most spirits are mentioned with their two names.

others that appear flirty (Santa Ana or Anaísa) or are up to shenanigans and bad behaviour (San Expedito or Guedé Limbó). Some spirits appear as small children who desire sweets and toys and cry out loud if their wish is denied (Santo Niño Jesus de Atocha or Candelito).



Fig. 2: The spirit Guedé Luis (right) turning to a visitor. Photograph by Yvonne Schaffler.

(In)experience

The quality of possession strongly depends on the level of experience of the possessed person. The possession behaviour of an inexperienced person lacks organisation and is thus referred to as wild possession (*caballo lobo*, literally “wolf-horse”).⁹ Symbolic action is, if at all, only hinted at, and empathic care is rather needed by the possessed one than provided to others. An inexperienced Spirit Horse tends to lack control, from not timing her possession right, to entering possession for only a short period (see fig. 3). She may fall to the ground in what appear to be convulsions, sometimes violently flailing about. The ritual assistants will assist her in regaining her footing.

9 I referred to *caballo lobo* for example in Schaffler (2012, 2013).



Fig. 3: Novice to Vodou during “wild possession”. Photograph by Jorge Vicioso.

There is a tendency that inexperienced possession trancers dissociate during early stages of a *fiesta*, when still few participants are present and none of those present is drunk yet. This enables them to receive maximum support from ritual assistants. Besides, it appears that also lay participants most of the time watch each other carefully in order to minimise the risk of injury during trance episodes. If indications appear that a person is about to fall into possibly violent possession trance, bystanders stretch out their arm, for example, in order to protect the trancer’s head from hitting the wall. Furthermore, violent trancers are often surrounded by a wall of people who thus prevent them from falling or hurting themselves otherwise. Those who experience negative emotions while being ridden by the spirits are soothed with tender gestures.

Optimal experience

Fully initiated and experienced individuals often dispose of what I shall call skilfulness in possession. Their performance tends to coincide with an air of energy, and counts on a high degree of support from ritual assistants, drummers and the larger surrounding group. When a possessed person is fully immersed in her spirit role, her performance creates focus. The drummers shift their attention towards her and support her action by performing the corresponding songs and rhythms. Moreover, members of the surrounding group tend to focus their attention on a person whose movements are swift and charged with religious meaning, with their parallel awareness fostering the experience of group cohesion. When the Horse attains the

centre of attention and feels positively encouraged by all the means the ritual setting can offer her, she may give in to what in psychology is described as flow.¹⁰ During this kind of experience, the trancer “automatically” (non-consciously) and consistently performs previously observed behaviour, which to her feels like being moved by an external force.

Excessive demand

Another type of possession attracted my attention for its lengthy duration and its varying intensity. What I henceforth call “centrepiece possession” tends to occur when the room is already crowded with guests and devotees, a strategically favourable point in time to receive a maximum of attention. Centrepiece possession refers to possession performed by the organiser of a public celebration herself, as she successively manifests those spirits honoured on this very occasion. This type of possession includes salutations of a large number of people, the distribution of food, and possibly charging ritual objects with spiritual force. When the organiser performs centrepiece possession, her attention often keeps shifting between a focus on her spirit role and on the (re)actions of the audience. Such a performance —since spirit manifestations often blend—can last up to hours, perhaps starting with features of skilful possession, but notably subsiding in intensity of concentration over time. When the organiser of a *fiesta*, for example, attempts to keep the room’s decoration from being damaged, when she briefs her assistants, or in case she simply has become tired due to the ritual’s excessive demand, her former state of altered consciousness may temporarily pass into ordinary state consciousness, her behaviour indistinguishable from that of everyday.

This phenomenon may lead even to ritual failure, as it happened during a series of annual celebrations, which I could repeatedly videotape, dedicated to San Santiago (the celebrated entity as Catholic Saint) or Ogún Balenyó (his African-rooted equivalent): The organiser felt committed to celebrate every year in honour of this Saint because of his personal religious obligation (*promesa*) he had with the Saint, and he went on to do so when his mother died. Despite the great fame these celebrations had obtained while the organiser’s mother was still alive, after her death he was unable to manage both his obligations as a host and the implicit performative requirements. His increasingly poor performance translated into decreasing

10 Flow is a variety of trance that is connected to heightened quality of performance, and that requires a clear set of goals and progress, clear and immediate feedback, and confidence in the performer’s ability (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). More features characteristic for skilful possession are described in Schaffler (2015, in print).

financial support by the altar's devotees. Consequently, the altar could no longer be decorated in the most distinguished way, and less food and drinks could be offered to visitors and spirits respectively. During the annual feast, guests expressed their dissatisfaction by not paying much attention to the host's centrepiece possession, and by making fun of his breaks of character, his shifting eyes, wooden movements, and nervous gesticulation. His performative defeat peaked as the band of musicians mocked him by starting to play in moments when the manifesting spirit wanted to speak. Contrarily, they refused to play when the spirit wanted to dance, while many guests loudly expressed their doubts about the authenticity of the possession. When I went to film the event for the last time, the number of guests had contracted from formerly hundreds to only a few.

A local response to the material

The following section is dedicated to the perspective of José, a long-term practitioner. Born into a family of rural farmers in a remote area in the Dominican Republic's southwest, his spiritual career began early when he started reading cards. When he was eighteen years old, his lengthy initiation process into *Vodou* ended with a formal closing ceremony in Haiti. At the time he attended weekly interpretation sessions with the researcher, he was in his forties and owned an altar in a suburban shantytown, where devotees to *Vodou* consulted him while he manifested the spirits. To supplement his income, he also informally worked as a gardener.

Drawing on his rich emic commentary, much could be written about the meaning of ritual objects and actions, or about the characteristics and nature of the spirits during possession. We decided, however, to focus on his comments relating possession behaviour to parameters such as spiritual force, level of knowledge and experience, and personal traits. It should be added that José personally knew many of the filmed protagonists and their backgrounds, which influenced his analysis of their possession behaviour.

Spiritual force

To José, "skilfulness" in possession primarily depends on the amount of spiritual force pervading an individual's body while being possessed. José described the visible aspect of spiritual force as "firmness" (*firmeza*); a tensile and dynamic strength characterising posture, gesture and movement. If, on the contrary, a mounted Horse's movements were weak, perhaps even to a degree that she could not be prevented from falling down and rolling on the floor, José assumed that she did not dispose of the right amount of spiritual force to animate her body. Only individuals who were "sweet" to the spirits would dispose of the right amount of spiritual force. This

predisposition would be partly inherited and partly enhanced by cult induction (*bautismo*), as well as by regularly attending celebrations or pilgrimages where the spirits bestowed their force upon their devotees.

In particular, José picked one recorded event of possession as “very pronounced and beautiful”. It showed a woman in her thirties manifesting a female spirit called Santa Marta la Dominadora or Lubana, representing a strong and determined woman with dark skin, long hair, and a snake draped over her neck. José referred to the manifesting spirit as a “wild and unruly version” of “100% African origin” (in *Vodou*, some spirits appear in different manifestations, which are locally referred to as *siete vueltas*), thus drawing a connection between “Africanness”, “wildness”, and a high amount of spiritual force. The possessed woman’s movements were vigorous, and her firm gaze was directed to a distant point as she interacted with the ritual assistant, performing ritual salutations (fig. 1). She sharply slapped three times on the floor to give reference to the place where the spirits of her kind dwell, then swiftly rotated three times in response to the ritual assistant’s parallel movements. The possessed woman’s lips vibrated as she rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue moving it back and forth while uttering hissing noises in reference to the snake that accompanies the spirit. After putting on her purple robe and skilfully tying her turban, her gaze signalled the projection of spiritual force onto the ritual assistant whose upper body started to shake as if subjected to electrical impulse induction. José considered these movements as visible evidence of a force that was contagious and so strong that, he suggested, even the researcher must have felt it when she was filming the scene.

Knowledge and experience

It appears that the possibility of repeatedly observing possession from a distance changed José’s view in the sense that he became fairly critical over time. The more often he saw his colleagues on a screen, that is, without himself being involved in the ritual and feeling its atmosphere, the more he began to recognise flaws in his peer’s possession bearings. After watching recordings of several possession events by the same type of spirit but “in the heads” of different individuals, José noted that they performed neither the ritual salutations nor other actions in a consistent way. He claimed that this inconsistency occurred due to a lack of knowledge and training.¹¹ Since a spirit could easily damage an inexperienced human’s body when

11 In one such instance he suggested that many Dominican Horses would profit significantly from visiting Haiti—like he did when he underwent ritual initiation—because he considered the neighbouring country a major locus of spiritual force and knowledge.

entering with much force, a Horse must be well acquainted (*preparado*) to carrying spirits. Therefore, a cult secrecy (*conocimiento*) was required, which would be transmitted during the process of initiation. Initiation rituals called “refreshments of the head” (*refrescamientos de cabeza*) would consist of pouring liquid offerings over a novice’s head so that this area of the body became inviting to the spirits. While a novice would regularly attend vodouist celebrations, the spirits themselves would supervise her, as they dance with her and offer her their gestures (e.g. the ritual salutations) to evoke imitation.¹² Novices would furthermore gain knowledge by observing their more experienced peers as they handle the spirits. Without going into detail, the following examples shall give an impression of the techniques available to manipulate the quality and timing of possession:¹³ during ritual activities, the human body and certain body parts (forehead, stomach, neck, eyes) are given particular importance. José explained that the feet are the place where spirits associated with death enter the body. The stomach is the area these spirits pass through. Other spirits, who are seen as Angels and Saints, are assumed to come down from above, and to raise one hand serves to channel this kind of spiritual force. The back of the neck, together with the head, is the area where all kinds of spirits eventually take their seat as they fully overtake the possessed. The eyes of a possessed individual can transmit her spiritual force, as does her touch.¹⁴ Vice versa, pushing the solar plexus helps to extrude a stranded spirit from below that has not been able to occupy its rightful position in the back of the Horse’s neck. The techniques used by vodouists for programming not only the moment but also the quality of spirit possession include acoustic and olfactory means, like the ringing of a small bell and drum rhythms, as well as the application of perfumes on sensible areas such as the back of the neck and the forehead. Furthermore, offerings of food and liquor (referred to as *levantamiento*) serve to attract spirits. Such actions result in increased spiritual force animating a possessed person’s body. Moreover, whether the spirits manifest inoffensively (*manso*) or ardently

12 From a cognitive perspective, this type of learning may be defined as what Mauss (2006: 81) called a “prestigious imitation”, also mentioned in Bandura’s “observational learning” (Bandura 1979). For an analysis of cognitive processes during rituals of possession, see Halloy (2012a).

13 It should be added that José was not the only person on whose information the authors relied, and that other Horses and also (video) observation itself confirmed what José told us about knowledge and training.

14 Since the forehead and the hands are seen as inputs and outputs of spiritual force, trance is often induced by tactile sensations on the forehead. From a psychological perspective, this compares to the technique of inducing hypnosis through touch.

(*caliente*) may be manipulated by the kind of libations offered at the beginning of a ceremony.¹⁵

Authenticity

Many of José's censures had moral implications, and some of them went as far as to question the authenticity of possession. Since, according to his moral and cosmological understanding, the spirits would not engage in morally inadequate behaviour such as "dancing too close with devotees", "having a sexualised appearance", "executing gay movements", or a "vulgar language", he concluded that such occurrences must result from the filmed individuals' personality which "filtered through" their possession. He noted that apparently, during what above has been described as centrepiece possession, the possessing spirits would repeatedly leave the human body. In such cases, performers would fill these temporal gaps in possession by imitating the spirits' habitus, however with "voice tone and prosody purely resembling that of the *caballo* instead of the spirit". He called this *mímica* ("mimic").

A pronounced example of what José identified as incomplete possession showed a wealthy woman from the capital city that came to visit a public celebration organised by a well-known spiritual leader. She arrived in the early afternoon, carefully styled. The moment she took the bell from the altar and rang it to greet the spirits, her posture started to signal possession. However, her performance appeared stilted and powerless, and not too rich in symbolism. Although she embodied a male spirit, her limbs hung loosely. As the ritual assistant took off her shoes to enable the spirit to enter her body with force, she stretched her feet towards him. Since in an initial state of possession, the spirits do not care about their surroundings, José identified this as very untypical gesture. He moreover found that the woman did not appear mentally absent at any time, which he took for further evidence of her incomplete possession (since "human consciousness" would not stay in the body during possession). José did not necessarily consider incomplete possession a means of deception, despite the fact that some individuals would certainly feign possession in order to make themselves appear in a better light. Most of the time, incomplete possession would occur due to taking a state of "being touched by the spirits" for a successful possession. In the particular case, ritual participants actively contributed to the

15 To translate this kind of interaction into psychological terms, we may also speak of suggestion (in cases where one person applies the ritual means to guide the thoughts, feelings, or behaviour of another) or auto-suggestion (in cases where the ritual means are applied by the invoking person herself).

woman's delusion because nobody gave her proper feedback on the (lacking) quality of her performance. José added that in general, little would be said about the issue of incomplete possession. Instead, *servidores* would help their inexperienced peers with their spiritual development until they could manifest the spirits successfully.

What the archivist sees

At the Vienna Phonogrammarchiv, archivists are assigned to certain projects, if possible, in a way that their respective language proficiencies, areas of research and interests overlap with the material and objectives of the material's collector. In the case of the material presented in this paper, the musicologist is not only proficient in Spanish (albeit experiencing some passing difficulties with Dominican particularities of pronunciation and expression) and disposes of some basic knowledge about ritual affairs, but his fairly close acquaintance with the researcher goes beyond the usual modalities of communication during archival work.

That said, when first confronted with the video recordings treated here, the archivist had already been familiar with the social and cultural context and some of the researcher's ideas about possession and performance; however, I had never *seen* the processes of possession as outlined above. This first visual contact turned out to be a staggering experience indeed: I was instantly mesmerised by the depth of the researcher's camera position with respect to the filmed characters. Her long-time familiarity with her local research associates, including many ritual and possession specialists, allowed her almost intimate shots at the protagonists' actions and expressions. The frequent close-up recordings of ritualists—either entering, experiencing, or exiting states of possession—resulted from both the researcher's interest in an interactional analysis and the situation of the event as well: in a small, crowded place hosting such ritual action, it would either be possible to film "from the outside", providing a totalised view of what was happening in the whole place but thereby losing most of the interactional facets only available from up close; or, as the researcher preferred, filming the latter while losing most of the first.

The fascination emanating from these particularly intimate pictures of shifting personalities was complemented with my conscience of being an archivist: working on indexing recordings, producing content logs and contextualising these with metadata included the imagination of other researchers' possible perspectives, persons who may access the archived material in the future. For logs and metadata, I tried to find out not only names and short bios of the filmed ritual specialists (as well as initiates, and other participants) but likewise those of the summoned spirits (*misterios*).

This was due to personal interest¹⁶ as the point of initiative, but similarly taken up in order to provide a comparative seeing of the material when offered, for example, to browse all recordings showing possession by San Miguel (the spirit as Catholic Saint and Archangel), or Belié Belcán (Saint Michael's African-rooted equivalent) when searching for the corresponding terms, bearing also in mind to help the researcher with this kind of index.

The naming and registering of non-human protagonists in recordings also caused some confusion among fellow archivists: is it legitimate to include Saints and spirits in the list of recorded persons? Is it too much to fill in "misterio" in the database's entry for "profession", or requesting "St." to be included in the list of titles and grades? Alongside with such administrative uncertainties, further challenges emerged when transcribing the log-files and registering the protagonists: in some cases, San Miguel came forth clearly and explicitly, being greeted with his name and worshipped with a "San Miguel-song" performed by the *palo* ensemble. However, in many instances it remained totally shrouded for the uninitiated if there was actual possession taking place or only rather uncontrolled trancing. In any case, my identification or guess had to be cross-checked with the researcher, including herself consulting her notes from interpretation sessions with José. At any rate, from my prior and present theoretical work (Brabec de Mori 2013 and 2015), I considered the manifesting *misterios* a concrete occurrence, an empirically observable motif for action and interaction, and therefore I ascribed agency to them. The quality of agency and the competence of action they embodied seemed to depend on the coherence of the *misterio* and the Horse's disposition at the moment of possession; what José called "force" (*fuerza espiritual*).

Choreographies

One point I want to make is about the choreography of the celebrations in question. As a musicologist, I intuitively paid much attention to these aspects. Although apparently any participant may wander freely anywhere during such a party setting, I witnessed that in a spatial sense, an implicit choreography guided these ways in a rather strictly defined dedication of place: around the main altar, the "owner" of the celebration was most often present along with her or his assistants (the *plazas*), interacting with the Saints on the altar and with the invited guest specialists. Around these, their

16 Motivated by my own engagement with agency, ontologies and an anthropology beyond the human (Latour 2013, Descola 2005, Kohn 2013); in July 2015, I organised a round table discussion at the 43rd World Conference of the International Council of Traditional Music entitled "The performance of spirits: an auditory anthropology of creating movement and sound".

pupils and kin people circled the scene, while not-so-involved devotees and finally bypassers and onlookers built the perimeter of ritual action. The musicians (usually four of them, playing three differently sized cylindrical drums called *palos*, a metallic scraper called *güira*, and singing in a lead singer/response style) were placed at the perimeter, too, maybe for reasons of space: they needed some free square metres to set up their battery.

In a temporal sense, the music played was not arbitrary either. The devotional *palo* songs were performed most of the time, but breaks were frequent and sometimes rather long, allowing for breaks in the whole scene of action. At the beginning of a celebration, breaks tended to be longer, musicians appearing to “test” the social environment, how people responded and which tunes received most attention (participants were allowed and often encouraged to sing along). In some of the recordings, I witnessed phases in the middle of the festivity, after the first possessions had already taken place, that the ensemble played dance music (*merengue* in one case), and people seemed to switch from a sacred dancing ritual to a common dancing party and back again after maybe half an hour, as the music style changed again.

On a more micro-musicological level, it caught my attention how much interaction was involved between the musicians and the ritual specialist while performing the ritual action. Although never obviously so (note that often no free line of sight was available between ensemble and protagonists), the synchronisation of musical actions like changes in the sung lyrics, rhythmic patterns, or short interludes coinciding with the choreography of entering possession states was intriguing.¹⁷ During well-working performances, the music suddenly stopped the moment the possession was completely manifest, when the *misterio* started to speak. The phases in which the manifest *misterio* interacted with the altar and the devotees were musically silent, but when the music started again (with songs specific to the manifest *misterio* or related in content) the *misterio* turned to more “mundane” actions like smoking a cigar, walking around blessing the room or interacting with people in a more informal way. The synchronisation of the musical performance with the state of possession opens up a new field of inquiry, which however is beyond the scope of the present paper.

17 In Dominican *Vodou*, however, rhythms are rather constant and probably unrelated to the entities addressed in the lyrics. Unlike in Brazilian *Candomblé*, in *Vodou* there are no specific rhythms dedicated to specific entities (Daniel 2005: 13; Lühning 1990).

The celebration setting

The manifestation of the *misterios* was treated in a rather unique manner by participants at the festivities and fellow specialists present: total normalcy. It was surprising to see an event occurring that resembled a fairly usual dancing and having-fun party, where people brought along their children and babies, a feast including eating and drinking, socialising and flirting; and at some moment a person was thrust to the ground by a sheer convulsive force, shivering and shaking, and—although people did take notice—they carried on with their current activities, laughed, and lightly commented on the event in a mostly quite good-humoured mood. The direct implication of practised religion within a party setting where people behaved in a way usually not associated with ritual life is specific to Dominican *Vodou*. Likewise, a high degree of sexual symbolism meets the eye of the observer: both among people flirting and dancing, from young boys making fun of the wobbling breasts of a woman falling into trance, to the very behaviour of certain *misterios*; for example when a young woman was possessed by *Indio Bravo*, the “savage Indian”, exerting the stereotype of a primitive, sexualised Indianness, or in cases male Horses were being “mounted” by a female *misterio*, for example by Santa Marta La Dominadora, who, as hinted at above by José, can be associated with a likewise stereotyped imagination of “wild” Africanness. This interconnected performance of the sacred, the (trans)sexual, and entertainment, possibly including excess in some later phases of the celebrations, within a framework considered totally “normal” by local participants, caused a largely surprising experience when watching the recordings from an external point of view. Note that both the researcher as well as the local expert did not comment on these points, because they seemed to be caught within the mentioned aura of “normalcy” of these ceremonial settings.

In such a setting, the effect of the *misterios*' agency among the participants becomes more tangible: the spirits are involved in “real life”, they manifest in the same place and at the same time as such essential processes of life like socialising, eating, drinking, having fun, flirting, musicking, and praying and singing take place. The *misterios* are never detached from the believers, in the way Saints are from a European Catholic: one of the latter's main task of being a “good” Catholic is to faithfully deal with her or his own uncertainty about God's and the Saints' existence and actions. The participants in Dominican *Vodou*, on the other hand, are always beyond doubt: they feel, see, touch, and are touched (physically and emotionally) by the manifest Saints and other spirits (see fig. 2). Therefore, the system in which these celebrations take place should not be understood as a social field including some detached “belief”; the devotees' belief approaches

certainty. This certainty constitutes a basis for the life conduct of devotees, they orient their practical actions outside ritual based on their experiences of the spirits' agency during celebrations. Therefore, what the spirits do and say in ritual becomes relevant far beyond the celebration's framework and shapes a system of orientation for devotees. As William Sax suggested for Indian curing rituals, "In any case, nonhuman agents are crucial for the functioning of the system, which would lose its coherence without them" (Sax 2009: 134; see also Blanes & Espírito Santo 2013). It becomes a crucial task, under these circumstances, to understand the gradual differences between performances where a practitioner or an inexperienced trancer intends to impress those present or to fulfil some role expected by the local collective,¹⁸ and these performances—at some point crossing a threshold of meaningfulness—where the performance becomes so convincing that devotees perceive the Horse as being actually mounted by a spirit.

Human and non-human protagonists

By registering the possessing entities as recorded characters, I became aware of certain preferences: it seemed that experienced priests had "favourite" *misterios*. These were also visually prominent because of the central placement of corresponding statues or icons on the main altar displayed at the ceremony. San Miguel, for example, seemed to be the central *misterio* for a female specialist who tended to embody him with considerable vigour, while one male *caballo* who often appeared in the recordings seemed to be especially fond of Guedé Limbó (San Expedito), a *misterio* characterised by "incorrect" moral behaviour (see fig. 4). This one was likewise embodied with much dedication and attention, and in both cases, an observer may have the impression that the person (as both *caballo* and *misterio*) very much enjoyed the whole situation. Especially such impressive performances lead me to intuitively judge the quality of possession: I found, based on my own intuition, that there were "good" (in an artistic rather than a moral sense) possessions that caught the eye and breath of the observer, in contrast to less spectacular or even failing possessions. These "good" performances, when cross-checking, tended to be exactly those regarded as skilful by the researcher and as charged with much "spiritual force" by the practitioner José. In this context, the researcher told me that initiates are being "baptised" for one central spirit who will then be, as I would call it, the practitioner's "favourite" (*misterio de cabeza* or "Spirit of the Head"),

18 Note here that also locals, as can be seen in José's commentary, do perceive and discuss this gradual distinction between "being touched by a spirit", mimicking possession, and actual "authentic" possession.

although later in her or his life, more *misterios* may be added to this category. Which *misterio* is chosen to be a novice's "Spirit of the Head" primarily depends on the mentoring peers, who seek to read their protégé's personality, and thereby recognise his or her true identity based on a deep connection with that spirit, which is usually also the first entity that takes possession.¹⁹ When watching and pondering this, I also wondered about gender roles. The dense sexuality and transgender aspects mentioned above were a foregrounding feature and led me to observe who embodied whom at such celebrations. What caught my attention were the many young females falling into inexperienced (or "wild") trances during the earlier stages of the festivity as compared to males.²⁰ Such uncontrolled trancing seemed to be almost their very own domain. This leads to a few of them being initiated, and some of them are then bound to an *Indio* as their "favourite" spirit. This suggests that rituals can provide an extensive room for experience to young females who may be otherwise restricted in their freedom of action within a society with pronounced *machismo* as is the Dominican mainstream.²¹

Among the initiated and experienced practitioners, I had the impression that the "favourite" *misterios* were not arbitrarily chosen either. José indicated that the personality of the practitioner and the *misterio* have to be "in tune" in a certain way. I think that this is due to the mentioned "favourite" or main *misterio(s)* a practitioner is "baptised" with. If this central spirit is wisely chosen during the initiation process, this correspondence will be "automatically" available, and the *caballo-misterio* person can enjoy her or his possession performance. Here it caught my attention that despite a probably equal distribution of gender among the *misterios* available in total, a cross-gender preference seemed prominent. Very often (in "good" performances), female protagonists embodied male spirits, while

19 See also Schaffler (2009: 48f.).

20 These predominantly female young trancers were accompanied by likewise female devotees (who did not fall into trance, most often being clients of the main characters of the celebration). There were male devotees, too, but I had the impression of a female majority again. The researcher, however, explained that this seemed to be an artefact created by the specific groups of people she mainly worked with during her recording sessions. Among other groups, males were more predominant, which in a quantitative survey resulted in an equal gender ratio among 47 participants (Schaffler et al. 2015, in print). Note that Piper (2012: 513) recognised an increase in the number of male spirit mediums. It may be noteworthy here that there are urban middle-class gay communities attending specific altars (which are male dominated then), a notion that can also be connected to the following (see especially next footnote).

21 This goes well with Kubik's (2003) ethno-psychoanalytic approach to what he calls *conversion phenomena* ("Konversionsphänomene")—implying a connection between suppressed female sexuality and predominance of "possession" episodes.

male practitioners enjoyed “being” a female spirit. Inquiring about this, it appeared that a significant percentage of male practitioners are “known” to be homosexual,²² though none of the females are considered lesbian.

Other hints at the coincidence of personality traits and the known qualities of spirits could be found in the emic categorisation. On an altar, one can see the morally “good” Saints placed on top (*la división blanca*), while there are also statues or icons placed below the table, often covered with a blanket; these are the dark ones (*la división negra*). There are also some in-betweens, like the *Indios* (the Indians, who are associated with water and are most often placed in a basin besides the main altar). It was again surprising how indiscriminately ceremony participants reacted on who is embodied by the protagonists. Saints were well received, but likewise invocations of dark ones, or “Indians”. Here, especially the sub-section of the *guedés*, a section of “dark” (but not necessarily “evil”) spirits, is of interest. There were practitioners who showed funny, often ironic attitudes in everyday life, who seemed to prefer *Guedé Limbó* as their “favourite” *misterio*. *Guedé Limbó* excels in tricksterish behaviour, in sexual promiscuity, gluttony and a general tendency to ridicule session participants. These especially contributed to the aforementioned atmosphere of “having fun” at the sacred opportunities of ritual celebrations, and they have a big advantage for gaining much attention.²³ Some specialists excelled in entertaining people, not only via embodying trickster spirits, but also by making fun in general, mocking other protagonists, obviously mimicking failed possessions, and applying any other devices of entertainment. You can be fairly sure that their “favourite” *misterio* was not one of the noblest Saints.²⁴

22 Their homosexuality may be hinted at, they most often do not out themselves, which, in Dominican mainstream society, is still considered something highly problematic and comes accompanied with social stigma.

23 It deems rewarding to more profoundly investigate on fun performed in the given context (see also Piper 2012, who noted an accentuated dance and party orientation in the contemporary ritual music) and in ritual in general. I proposed an “anthropology of the fun factor” in my recent book about Western Amazonian indigenous music (Brabec de Mori 2015a: 206ff.). The Dominican *Vodou* setting seems to be particularly suitable for such an endeavour since interest in drink and festivity increased during the last decades. This went as far as spiritual leaders starting to complain that *fiestas* had been corrupted by alcohol and were losing their religious focus (Piper 2012: 517f.).

24 Also Mischel & Mischel (1947) have noted with regard to the Shango cult in Trinidad that possession behaviour cannot be rigidly separated from the person’s secular roles as it sometimes involves an extension or distortion of everyday behaviour. A person’s identity, his/her self-concept and social roles are influenced by the kind of Horse he/she is, and by the spirits who most habitually possess him/her.



Fig. 4: Manifestation of the burlesque divinity Guedé Limbó (left). Photograph by Yvonne Schaffler.

Conclusion

The present article considered the ritual setting, performance modalities, and interaction during events of spirit possession in Dominican Vodou from three different perspectives.

Nowadays public celebrations are characterised through a party-like atmosphere, including drinking, fun, and flirting, allowing people to switch from a sacred dancing ritual to a common dancing party and back again, particularly as in the afternoon the music style sometimes changes between *salve* and *merengue*. Cross-gender possession frequently happens and contributes to varied images of sexualised habitus during the celebration. The later the point in time, the higher the number of guests, with the frequency of events of possession also increasing. While at the beginning of a *fiesta*, the stage rather belongs to inexperienced trancers, more experienced Horses tend to time their performances when the *fiesta* is already crowded to stir a maximum of attention from those around. At the heart of a *fiesta*, the organiser masters the difficult task to embody the spirit(s) that are celebrated on the very occasion under the critical eyes of peers and bystanders.

To analyse the varying quality of possession behaviour, the researcher engaged in a psychological paradigm, using the concept of trance or dissociation, which can have different degrees of depth; she also stated that the effect of training would make a significant qualitative difference. Successful possession would not only require the skills to perform cultural codes in a way aesthetically satisfying and intelligible to others, but also circumstances

(including positive feedback from the surrounding group and a good balance between perceived challenges and own perceived skills) suitable for lending oneself to an uninterrupted state of trance or in case of an optimal experience: flow. By contrast, ritual failure would be characterised by a lack of focus on the spirit role as a result of excessive demand and a lack of group support.

Parting from an emic perspective, the local expert José ascribed the major cause for successful possession to the right amount of “spiritual force” animating the body of the possessed subject. On the one hand, the intensity of that force would depend on factors such as virility or “wildness” of the possessing entity, while on the other hand, some humans would be more attractive to spirits than others, their “sweetness” fostering intense spiritual contact. To master the danger of being overwhelmed by a force too strong to manage, certain techniques for controlling the moment and the intensity of possession would be acquired during the process of ritual initiation. Like the researcher, also José recognised that successfully possessed individuals would experience an altered state of consciousness. However, he saw it as a mere symptom that human consciousness had left the body to give way to a possessing spirit.

When the ethnomusicologist archived and watched the material, he felt, like José, a desire to judge possession for its quality. He found that the most prominent “good” possession performances, specifically what the researcher called “centrepiece possessions”, seemed to be those where a practitioner manifested her or his “favourite” spirit. To him, José’s observation that the invoking human’s personality would influence the performance of possession was a logical consequence of the installation of one particular spirit into the central position of the initiate’s future possession behaviour during the initiation process (or later, as other spirits make deep connections, too).

The interpretation of the archivist follows an actor-network-based approach that treats the spirits as social agents who actively contribute to keep alive the system of references that devotees use for orienting their decisions during practical life outside ritual. This third view attempts a position in between the rather personalised and psychologically grounded approach of the researcher and the spiritual, belief-centred view of José: by parting from the notion of symbolic action and instead attributing agency to the embodied entities (cf. Blanes & Espíritu Santo 2013), the personality of these entities can interact with the Horses’ personalities and thus co-create the atmosphere typical for convincing religious experiences.

All three interpretations circle around the question whether a specific trance, a situation of possession, can be considered a skilful (researcher),

forceful (José), or good (archivist) possession performance. What can certainly be deduced from the three approaches to the material in question is that for such a convincing possession to happen it is not sufficient that the acting practitioner does well. The whole of the ceremonial setting interacts, starting with the spirits who may do well—or not—, too, to the musicians, the ceremonial assistants, the invited specialists, the devotees present, to even the “correct” decoration of the ritual space, specifically of the altar where the placement and iconic representation of the Saints has to be in order. Maybe most promising for future research, this indicates not to interpret trance as an internal state of the specific practitioner but as a social phenomenon: for a successful trance to happen, the aptness of the trancer is but a prerequisite which would be insufficient on its own; the trancer has to be in good standing not only with the spirits (and here it is not important if these are understood as literal Saints, as social agents, or as representations of inner states), but likewise with the whole of the social and collective agencies that constitute the ritual celebration.

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