

# OF SPIRITS AND VIRGINS SITUATING BELONGING IN HAITIAN RELIGIOUS SPACES IN MONTREAL, CANADA

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## ABSTRACT

So far religious encounters in migratory settings have been largely examined in relation to the pluralizing of religious cultures, the emerging of syncretisms as well as religious conversions. However, many migrants choose to live more than one religion at the same time and integrate themselves into several religious communities with different and sometimes opposing religious agendas. This article concentrates on the Haitian migrant community in Montreal, Canada. On the basis of the parallelisms between Vodou and Catholicism it first examines the parallels between different religious concepts and performances and second, the significance of particular Vodou spirits which act as mediators between different cultures. The article questions the idea of exclusive belongings and highlights the meaning of space as a differentiating factor in the diversification of religious meanings and messages in multicultural settings.

Keywords: Vodou, Haitian diaspora, space, spirit possession, syncretism, religious parallelism

## *Introduction*

The following article is a contribution to the growing body of literature on religious encounters in migratory circumstances and the role of religious spaces in acquiring and expressing cultural identities. Religious spaces can have multiple meanings both within and for migrant communities in the diaspora. They can work as areas of contact for immigrants who have recently arrived and are in need of orientation and support in a foreign country—be it in a financial, logistic, psychological or spiritual form. They appear as knots in the web of transnational lives, connecting the home country with other localities in the diaspora. Dialogue between the generations of the migrant community produces structures of communication for the transmission and negotiation of cultural values (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002; Levitt 2003, 2007; Vertovec 2000a, 2000b; Warner and Wittner 1998).

However, migrants not only reactivate their own religion and live it in a more dynamic and more fervent way; the side-by-side of different religions in multicultural societies can also lead to a pluralizing of religious cultures and imply syncretisms, conversions, or the abandonment of religious activities. This article concentrates on a phenomenon which has not received much scholarly attention yet, namely the fact that migrants frequently neither strengthen nor neglect their former religious belonging, but rather integrate themselves into several different religious settings at the same time. I am not intending to contribute

to a one-way perspective, which would imply the replacement of former religious belongings by new ones, but rather would like to hint at the multiplying characteristics of religious affiliation in the social setting of multicultural cities. The mixing, blending and the re-creation of religions in inter-cultural contexts already have been examined by researchers working on the concept of syncretism. The spatial dimension of religious performances, religious parallelisms, the fact that religious belonging can be articulated differently depending on different spatial settings, and that many religious activities in urban contexts are hidden, have received much less attention to date.

I will exemplify my ideas around the case of the Haitian diaspora in Montreal, Canada, where I carried out anthropological fieldwork.<sup>1</sup> The Haitian diaspora, particularly in the 1990s, provided a suitable case study for shifting the focus of migration studies from classical bipolar interpretations to descriptions of transnationalism.<sup>2</sup> Most of these studies have been focussing on Haitian migrant communities in the USA, particularly in Florida as well as New York. At the same time, many Haitians prefer to go further north to the francophone Canadian city Montreal, where Haitians today are the second largest visible minority group. Here, the situation and perspectives of the Haitian community so far has mainly been explored from a sociological perspective, in order to address questions of social, economical and political integration (Dejean 1990; Labelle et al. 1983; Piché 1987).

My primary focus here is on the relevance and transformation of Haitian religiosity, and particularly the spirits of Vodou, through the process of migration from Haiti to the Canadian city Montreal. Throughout the article I will concentrate on two related issues: first, the parallels between different religious concepts and performances among the Haitian community in Montreal, and second, the significance of particular spirits as mediators between different cultures. Herewith, my work contributes to current research on the continuous proliferation of “Black Atlantic Religions” (Matory 2005; Palmié 1991; Peel 2003) and provides a micro-perspective on the everyday-practice of migrants’ religious life.

In the course of my fieldwork in the Canadian city of Montreal, Rosemonde,<sup>3</sup> a Vodou priest<sup>4</sup> from Haiti, became one of my most important informants. Rosemonde came to Montreal sixteen years ago, together with her two children, Carmel and Nicolas, as well as her husband Dieudonné, from whom she separated five years ago. Today she lives with Carmel in Montreal-Nord, one of Montreal’s multi-ethnic areas with a mainly working-class population. Although Rosemonde had already made her living in her home country by means of Vodou services, she interrupted her engagement with Vodou at the beginning of her stay in Montreal. *Travay*, work, as Vodou-practicing people call the services for the Vodou spirits, needs a strong commitment and Rosemonde told me that her first months and years in Canada had been busy with all kinds of organizational questions: finding a flat, finding a job, making her life. And, like every Vodou-practicing person, in Haiti Rosemonde had already been an active Catholic (I will come back to the side-by-side of Vodou and Catholicism later) and had decided that the Catholic Sunday mass would be the appropriate moment for celebrating the sacral world in Canada, her new home. However, after a couple of years the spirits started calling her, first in her dreams, then by means of a certain disease, which could not be cured by means of western medicine. Rosemonde hesitated to turn back to her spirits, but Dieudonné told her: “Stop playing around! The spirits are calling you, the signs are all too clear! Here you go: you give them their space, you give them their things, and everything will be alright” (Field notes, interview 2002).

In the following I will describe the side-by-side of Haitian Vodou and Catholicism, as it is lived by Rosemonde in Montreal. Structurally, the text will follow Rosemonde throughout one particular day, June 27, which is usually celebrated as a special commemoration of the Haitian nation throughout the Haitian diaspora. Rosemonde's long journey across the city—which starts in her bedroom in front of her *wogatwa*, her private Vodou altar, leads her to the Haitian Catholic Mission where she meets many Haitian relatives and friends and brings her back home at night—will serve to illustrate the side-by-side of different kinds of religions in migratory circumstances. Additionally, when dealing with her Vodou spirits in front of her home altar, Rosemonde reflects upon the changing meanings and roles of Vodou spirits, who accompanied her on her trip from Haiti to Canada but who did not stay the same. This later part of my article will focus on the transformations of religious imagery in migratory settings, in order to illustrate how the belief in spirits is able to capture the specific life conditions of migrants. In the last section I will come back to the notion of religious parallelisms and elaborate on the spatial dimension of religious attachments with the aim to question former conceptualisations of religious diversity.

*At home: spirits in migration*

June 27:<sup>5</sup> Today Rosemonde gets up at 5.00 in the morning. The first thing she does is light a candle in front of the lithograph of Maria Dolorosa, one of several Catholic saints on the two *wogatwas* who represent Ezili Freda, the Vodou spirit of love and seduction. Rosemonde has been praying a novena during the last nine days for Freda and finally, today, it is Freda's day! Rosemonde enters the kitchen to prepare breakfast for herself and for Carmel, her daughter. For Freda she prepares a meal of fish, rice, pineapple and honey. Freda loves sweet and light meals. Rosemonde knows her as a romantic woman who is very much concerned with her body, with beauty and elegance, with jewellery, perfume, lipstick and glamour: with seducing potential lovers. It should be mentioned that Rosemonde is well aware that Freda will probably not be able to help her with her most recent sorrows: Carmel, who has already had two miscarriages and who is now pregnant in the sixth month; Nicolas, her son, who is again in trouble with the police. He got involved with one of the street gangs in St. Michel, a multi-ethnic area in the north of Montreal, where violent clashes between gang members and police members, particularly at night-time, are quite common. Nicolas has to appear in court the day after tomorrow and will need her spiritual support to avoid being put in jail or even being deported to Haiti. No, Freda is not one of Rosemonde's favourite spirits. She works most of the time with Kouzen Zaka, a hard-working farmer, a reliable, generous and maybe slightly stubborn old friend. While this spirit is her personal protector, something transmitted along family lines, she came in contact with a couple of other spirits, such as Ogou, Legba or the Marassa-twins during the first years after her arrival in Canada.

Haitian spirits<sup>6</sup> are called *lwas*. Their significance within the religious system of Vodou has been explored in detail (see Dayan 1998; Deren 1992 [1953]; Desmangles 1990; Hurbon 1995; 2002 [1972]; Métraux 1958). Not only in Haiti and the Haitian diaspora, but in many societies all over the world spirits and spirit possession cults are proliferating, and they are attracting the attention of social scientists because they are gaining ground particularly through processes of globalisation. Since the beginning of the 1990s,

anthropologists have been researching spirits and spirit cults which are spread all over the globe in different variations, interpreting them in the context of cultural change and intercultural dialogue. Much research has concentrated on the belief in spirits in migration contexts, describing the spirits' adaptability to new, often urban environments and underlining the extent to which imaginings about spirits contain the interweaving of global, transnational and local realities (Behrend and Luig 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993). In general, spirit cults not only mediate between human and spiritual worlds or between the individual and the collective, but also between the cultural traditions of the home country and the demands of modern life in the receiving country. Relevant to efforts to negotiate new moral orders, spirits and their transformations offer a space for debating the confrontation with unfamiliar values and morals, gender roles and political or legal systems. This article will show that, in keeping with these world-wide phenomena, Haitian spirits are also highly flexible and gentle towards the new surroundings and the unfamiliar living circumstances of their adherents.

Until now, Haitian spirits have been mainly examined under the concept of syncretism, because, in contrast to African predecessors, Haitian Vodou needs to be understood as inseparable from Roman Catholicism. In Haiti, Catholicism and Vodou have existed side-by-side since 1492, when the slaves and French colonial masters first arrived in Haiti. The slaves' different ethnic groups were systematically mixed, in order to make them lose all memory of family and origins. They had to be baptized and to believe in Catholicism. Furthermore, the slaves' religion which developed in the course of time, Vodou, was severely suppressed and persecuted during the colonial period (1492–1804), since the colonial masters perceived it as a threat to the economic and political stability of the colony (Desmangles 1990: 475; Rey 1999: 36). But after independence, particularly under the dictatorship of François and Jean-Claude Duvalier, Vodou was also persecuted and many of the spiritual leaders were tortured or killed (Laguerre 1998).<sup>7</sup> The early mixing of African and European religious elements into Haitian Vodou provided the basis for both the development and the questioning of the theoretical concept of syncretism, as it has been presented by scholars such as Roger Bastide (1960: 362–396), Michel Leiris (1981) or Melville Herskovitz (1958: 245–251). The concept of syncretism has been used for describing unequal power relations and modes of resistance, particularly in the case of Caribbean religions that developed in the course of historical creolization processes.<sup>8</sup> Some scientists, such as Alfred Métraux (1958: 187) or Micial Nérestant (1994), argue that the African slaves were simply hiding their beliefs under the mask of the adoration of Catholic saints, the processions and the sacraments. From this perspective the identification of Vodou spirits with certain Catholic elements would be merely visual and emotive. I would rather agree with the approach developed by Fritz Kramer (1987), Paul Stoller (1995) or Michael Taussig (1987), who argue that in colonial encounters in particular the process of repeating certain parts of a dominant culture, with a difference that is almost the same, is a way of re-creating it and appropriating (neo-)colonial power. In the words of Homi Bhabha (1994: 86), this cultural practice aims at producing a “transitive resistance” to that power.

In a recent article Markel Thylefors (2008) shows that we can observe in Haiti the beginning of processes of de-syncretization and re-africanization, as has happened in the context of other African-American religions such as Brazilian Candomblé. However, this article will contribute a second perspective to the relationship between Vodou and

Catholicism, since Catholicism was not only part of the ‘other’s’ religiosity, to be rejected, adapted or appropriated, but, in the course of time, became an integral part of Haitian religiosity, whether in the Haitian countryside, in the cities or in the Haitian diaspora. The spirits’ journey did not end after their arrival in the Caribbean and their encounter with Roman Catholicism. For various reasons Haitians continued to travel, and in the next section I will describe the causes and conditions that made Haitian spirits enter Canada.

### *Haitian religiosity in Canada*

In Montreal today there are an estimated 50–70,000 Haitians, who came to Canada in three major waves of migration.<sup>9</sup> From the mid 1950s they were fleeing political persecution, structural violence and *lamizè*, the increasing poverty in the poorest country in the western hemisphere. The first wave which arrived in Montreal consisted mainly of intellectuals or political activists, who were fleeing the Duvalier dictatorship (1957–1986). It was with the next wave, which arrived in the 1970s, that Haitian immigration became strongly recognisable in Quebec. Mainly blue collar and semiskilled workers of the lower classes, their arrival was facilitated by permissive immigration laws in Canada, while the first boat-people landed in South Florida. The third wave, during the 1980s, again brought thousands of people mainly from working-class backgrounds (Dejean 1990; Piché 1987).

Like many post-slavery societies, Haiti still carries many dichotomous perceptions about the interrelation of class and race (Basch et al. 1994: 183–198), which are expressed in religious concepts and performances. While Vodou belongs to the countryside and farmers, to the black, illiterate, Creole-speaking and politically marginalized parts of the society, the educated, lighter skinned, French-speaking middle and upper-classes subscribe more commonly to Catholicism. Due to these class-based assignments, I faced substantial difficulties in finding access to Vodou practicing believers at the beginning of my fieldwork in Montreal. Asking Haitians about how to find cult communities, cult sites or individual Vodou believers who might eventually be ready to introduce me into the world of spirits, dolls and zombies, I regularly heard statements comparable to the following: “Yes, we have Vodou here. Montreal is full of it. Vodou is important for our country, it’s our traditional religion. Many people still do it. Me, however, I am Catholic, I don’t have anything to do with Vodou” (field notes 2002). It becomes obvious that this class and race-based assignment to the religious spectrum and its spatial dimension does not end, but rather multiplies in migratory settings where Haitians are faced by a complex spectrum of different world and subaltern religions, and many of them either enter new religious congregations or re-affirm former religious belongings (Brodwin 2003; Richman 2005, 24). Nevertheless, as I intend to show, religious parallelisms do not describe exclusive belongings but should be understood as representing overlapping inter-related spheres that need to be negotiated according to subjective identity-politics.

In Montreal, the parallelism of Vodou and Catholicism was clearly observable. Many Haitians repeated a Haitian proverb mentioned decades ago in the classic text of Alfred Métraux (1958: 323): “*pou sevi lwa yo se pou w bon katolik*” (‘you have to be a good Catholic to serve the spirits’). Every *Vodouisant*<sup>10</sup> knows that if you have any severe problem and you need the help of a Vodou priest, you have to be baptized in a Catholic congregation. However, in the case of severe problems,<sup>11</sup> most would consult a Vodou priest, a *manbo* or

an *oungan*, in secrecy. Rosemonde uses the following words in order to describe this religious assignment: “the darker the night, the richer my clients”, thereby alluding to the meaning of class affiliation in the Haitian religious continuum which prevails even in the diaspora. Due to these conditions, Haitian Vodou in the diaspora implies a tendency to hide personal religion within the private sphere, the main aspects of it being performed in secrecy, and only parts of it in public. Vodou belongs to the individual’s private, confidential and intimate sphere of personal life.<sup>12</sup>

This spatial dimension of diasporic Vodou can be interpreted as a continuation of the dynamics between temple and domestic Vodou in Haiti, which have already been described in the classic text of Alfred Métraux (1958: 52) as well as by Laënnec Hurbon (2002 [1972]: 88–100). Karen McCarthy Brown in her book *Mama Lola* (2001 [1991]), provided insight into the different spatial aspects of *travay*, as spiritual labour is called in Haitian creole, and its adaptation in diasporic circumstances. In her descriptions of Vodou ceremonies in New York she underlines the significance of assembling a cult group for carrying out the ceremonies for the *lwas* properly. Particularly in the diaspora, the assembled group serves to replace a social structure which in the home country also lives and works together on the land. Brown concludes that Vodou ceremonies in the diaspora can serve to recreate a shared sense of a family, and therefore construct familyhood in transnational life worlds (Brown 2001 [1991]: 47). Other studies of the dynamics between migration, transnationalism and Vodou have also shown that religion, in the case of the Haitian diaspora, has played a key part in establishing both migrant community life abroad and networks that cross the distance between old and new homes. Elisabeth McAlister’s *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora* (2002) is especially worthy of mention in this context, since it focuses on the mobile aspect of Haitian religiosity. From these two perspectives, Haitian religiosity can be seen to lend itself well to establishing support systems on a micro-level as an alternative to state-regulated aid, but it also sustains an active life that links up to several locations at the same time. Religiosity is part and parcel of Haitian transnationalism.

In the following I will illustrate the fact that religiosity not only becomes multiplied in multicultural settings, but that the spirits can also manifest themselves in different spatial contexts, and that their meanings and messages vary a lot between these different sites.

#### *At the mission: Haitian localism*

June 27 is one of the most important days of the year for the Haitian community throughout the Haitian diaspora.<sup>13</sup> Every year on this day they celebrate the feast day of the patron of the Haitian nation, the Catholic Saint Notre Dame du Perpétuel Secours. This Catholic Virgin, after having vanquished, through miraculous intervention, a severe small pox plague in 1882, was elevated to the status of national patron of Haiti in 1942 by the Catholic Orthodoxy—in those days also with the intention to suppress Vodou (Rey 1999: 162–175).<sup>14</sup> Due to this historical background Notre Dame du Perpétuel Secours has a particular meaning not only for Rosemonde but for the whole Haitian community in Montreal. It is a Haitian duty to honour her on this day.

Rosemonde starts her long journey across the city to the church at 9.00 a.m. She arrives at the Mission Notre Dame d’Haiti, Rue St. Denis, where she meets many of her friends,

all of whom have also made time-consuming trips in order to attend the mass. Many Haitians who frequent different parishes in Montreal and its suburbs for their regular Sunday mass come to the Mission for this special event. The Mission is integrated into a Quebec parish and is nearly invisible most of the time except for a little sign close to the main entrance, which reads: *Misyon Notredam Dayiti*. The Haitian community has rented this Quebec space for a couple of hours per week; there are also some special days throughout the year when the space turns into a Haitian space, as it is about to happen today.

As I enter the church I am at once recognised as the only white person present. There are maybe slightly more women than men and also quite a lot of children and young people, dressed in more conservative fashion and hair styles than in their everyday life: boys wearing dark suits and ties, girls dressed in white and pink dresses. They have brought typical Haitian meals, which they will share after the mass. They have been decorating the main hall with flowers in the national colours of red and blue. Before the mass they celebrate their nation together, singing the national anthem in front of the Haitian flag. The whole mass is held in Haitian Creole. In his sermon the priest tells us about Notre Dame du Perpétuel Secours who takes care of Haiti, the beautiful pearl of the Antilles, which all of them were forced to leave and which has been suffering from so many quarrels and miseries for centuries. He talks about the economic crisis and the corrupt government. He also refers to recent events like the assassination of a popular journalist in Haiti and the arrival of new boat-people on the coast of Florida. Then he repeats the story of the miracle: how a painting of the Virgin arrived in Haiti at a moment when 100,000 had died already of the plague, how a nation-wide novena was interrupted by heavy rains which brought an end to an unusually long drought, which was understood as the purification of Port-au-Prince, and how she finally ended the plague. Periodically during the sermon the congregation sings devotional songs and prayers dedicated to the Virgin in Haitian Creole.

Notre Dame du Perpétuel Secours is the patron not only of the country, but also of a certain region in Haiti. Cavaillon, a small rural area on the Haitian coast, has, like most of the regions in Haiti, a strong connection to one particular Catholic saint, whom the people of Cavaillon admire and worship and who takes care of Cavaillon and also Latibolière and Lamontagne; St. Jacques is responsible for Plaine du Nord and Kenskoff, and Notre Dame du Mont Carmel for Bas Limbé, Saut d'eau and Cayes-Jacmel. There are many more examples. Haitians have a strong sense of home, which becomes attached to certain physical places. The loss of contact with their proper homeland, first Africa, later Haiti, was a continuing traumatic experience and resulted in the transformation and spiritualization of the home of their spirits, who will always stay linked to the home ground of the family. This land is inseparable from the earth where the ancestors of the family are buried and in this way has become a strong symbol in religious imagination. *Pays*, the French word for country, has a different meaning in Haitian Creole. "*Se ki peyi ou soti?*" (literally 'where do you come from?'), does not refer to the Haitian nation-state, but to the village and to the physical ground where the person's family spirits are still located.

I would also stress that Haitians, in the moment of reassembling to revere their local saint, negotiate particular identities linked to fragments of their migrant community. The 'Cavaillonais' are different from the people from Cap Haitien or Port-au-Prince. Those hometown associations unite people of common interest, who wish to differ from other sub-groups of the migrant community by means of many different factors.<sup>15</sup> Therefore,

“*Mwen Kavajon*” (‘I am from Cavaillon’) among Haitian migrants does not only express attachment to a certain physical locality, but also a certain way to connect oneself to the migrant community.<sup>16</sup> This idea is also linked to the fact that most Haitians who live in Montreal have not seen their home country for many years. Haiti gradually becomes an imagined construct, the Haitian community becoming directly linked to what Thomas A. Tweed in the case of Cuban exile calls “geopiety” (Tweed 1999: 132). This attachment to the imaginary natal landscape includes “feelings for the natural terrain, the built environment, and the mental map of neighbourhood, town, province, and country” (Tweed 1999: 132). McAlister’s (2002) work on Haitian religiosity in New York provides a comparable perspective, when she describes how religious pilgrimages, processions and rituals express the migrants’ continuing attachment to their home country.

Due to mistrust of the Haitian state<sup>17</sup> and to their close attachment to the ground of the family, by worshipping the Virgin Mary Haitians in the diaspora either express their common roots in contrast to a highly fragmented life in the city, or they stress their sense of alterity, their subjective difference in contrast to the urban, homogenized life. This particular kind of Haitian localism, expressed and performed in the sacred space between Haitian Vodou and Catholicism, is related to cultural styles of display and communication and is about the inscription of difference on social relations. In this sense, it will depend on the situation and its participants whether the Virgin symbolises the Haitian nation, the country or the village Cavaillon.<sup>18</sup>

One of the most important moments during this annual mass is the procession around the church, when a big painting of Notre Dame du Perpétuel Secours is carried through the surrounding streets and displayed before the local neighbourhood. At this moment it does not matter whether the icon represents the spirit Ezili or the Virgin Mary. More important is the fact that the *Misyon Notredam Dayiti* and its surrounding neighbourhood are turned into a religious borderland. The Virgin is carried by two male Haitian Catholics. Her path serves as a marker of the ethnic border between this community and the watching bystanders, who belong to different black, coloured, Latino or Quebec communities.

Haitians perceive themselves to be historically and culturally distinct from Black Canadians, and most of them stress that they do not share much with people from other coloured immigrant communities. According to them, their blackness is linked much more to an African history or to France. In speaking French in contrast to most of the other immigrant communities they display the foreign-born status that is a marker of the upper-class in Haitian society.<sup>19</sup>

Religious events such as the Catholic procession and its interplay with the religious objects displayed, offer migrants an occasion for a performative exhibition of their national consciousness. Herewith, they react to the stereotypes existing in Montreal’s public, which might link the Haitian community to social problems such as drug trafficking, gang criminality, domestic violence or the spread of HIV/Aids (see Richman 1992). The procession of the Madonna provides a welcome positive counter-example to the clichés circulating within the receiving society. Meanwhile the procession also serves as a pointer to the fact that they, as Haitians in exile and in contrast to many other migrant communities, still honour their home country and maintain solidarity among themselves. Another motive is also relevant; to show that Haitians are reverent Catholics, not *Vodouisants*. By carrying their conservative Catholicism, the ardour of their prayer and the suffering of their nation

into the surrounding neighbourhood, they demonstrate a part of their own ethnic as well as religious identity, which is accepted and appreciated from a Catholic perspective.

The mass, the procession and the icon of Notre Dame du Perpétuel Secours are important stories Haitians in the diaspora have to tell about themselves: about the concept of the family and locality, about suffering and spirituality, about women's devotion to the nation and about their sense of difference and exclusion. These performances can be understood as a strategy for designing the border against the Quebec society and as a means of disaffiliating from black cultures in North America. The 'imagining of a community' (Anderson 1983), here, means both the creation of a common history and of common experiences of a group and the individual's attachment to places, imagined or real. Haitians in Montreal are constantly commuting between these different or even opposed spaces, which are highly symbolic. Time, space and memory are interwoven in these culture-specific concepts of belonging because the tradition of the rural past can be re-created and transformed in the urban present. In fact, narratives concerning symbolic representations of space and belonging contain multiple coexisting images of the urban and the rural.

In summary, the participation of Haitian migrants in this Catholic occasion is fed by a multitude of social, political and religious motives. This illustrates the fact that Notre Dame du Perpetuel Secours not only serves as a uniting symbol but also hints at the fissures and gaps within the Haitian community. The reproduction of a Haitian identity in Montreal is a twofold process occurring first by means of the reflection of intra-group differences, since the people from Cavaillon draw a dividing line between themselves and other fractions of the Haitian community, and second, by means of the discourse about the conservation of Haitian traditions and solidarity as well as collective evocation of Haitian suffering; thus, to outsiders the Haitian community is demonstrating its cultural difference as well as its historically grown national pride. Those two levels of articulation are also expressed by the migrants' physical-spatial assignment: the confrontation within the Haitian ethnic community takes place within the church building; in the moment of leaving this building, the dialogue with the pluricultural environment becomes more apparent.

*Back home: spirits transforming culture*

When Rosemonde comes home at five, tired and hungry, she is aware that there are still many duties to be fulfilled to meet Freda's requirements. She finishes her day with certain prayers in front of her private *wogatwa*; she lights candles and offers expensive liquor and perfumes. In the following account we see that the private religious practice is directed towards different needs than the devotion to the Catholic Virgin. While Rosemonde honours the Virgin Mary on this particular day with reference to issues mentioned above, her devotion to the spirits addresses other worries.

From her morning prayers we already know that, for Rosemonde, Ezili Freda is not one of the most important *lwas*. Like most other female *Vodouisants* I met in Montreal, Rosemonde perceives Freda to be too luxurious, materialistic and spoiled, and her way of communicating—with men as well as women—to be too sexualised. Most of the Haitian women I talked to did not favour Ezili Freda, but still, Freda is responsible for any question or problem related to the big issue called 'love'. Due to this, apart from her direct attachment to the Virgin and her symbolic reference to the nation, who would dare get into conflict

with her? The women's distancing of Freda is especially interesting when compared to the popular reception of Ezili Freda in Haitian peasant culture, as described by Terry Rey (1999). In Haiti this particular spirit serves as an embodiment of insatiable human desires for an unreachable ideal of life and should be understood in reference to the socio-economical environment of the Haitian rural area, which is formed by poverty and political exclusion (Deren 1992 [1953]: 158–161; Desmangles 1992: 132; Rey 1999: 203). However, in Montreal this positive perception of Ezili Freda has been transformed into a more sceptical view. As described above, most of my female interview partners described Freda as being too individualistic, not reliable enough for serving their needs. Meanwhile, every Haitian woman in Montreal knows that Rosemonde has to address Ezili Dantò, Freda's black counterpart, if she needs help with Carmel's pregnancy. This is also due to the fact that Dantò is a black woman; she is perceived as being single and as hardly entering into relationships with men; she is faithful and loyal to her devotees. Furthermore, she does not speak because she has lost her tongue in a fight to protect her child. Many say that Ezili Dantò is violent, furious and brutal. But Rosemonde, like most of the other female Vodou believers in Montreal, told me that actually it is Freda, the white, French-speaking one, who is a nasty female spirit, a spirit who will always betray her adherents if she wants to have a man and who will never give them a child.

At this point it should be mentioned that *Vodouisants* do not choose their spirits, but the relation between believer and *lwa* is rather established the other way round: ritual offerings as described above offer a space and a moment for communicating with the spirits who then choose whom to possess. Usually, the sudden possession of a person who has never served this particular spirit before is interpreted as a strong sign of spiritual contact and the person is then supposed to attend to the needs and demands of this particular spirit throughout his or her life.

In Montreal most Haitians prefer the Catholic lithograph of Notre Dame du Czestochowa, the image of the Polish black Madonna, to represent Ezili Dantò on their *wogatwas* because this image unites two of Dantò's main iconographic details, the scars on her face and the child in her arms. Ezili Dantò has not received much attention in the academic literature yet, which could be due to the fact that in Haiti Ezili Freda is much more popular (Métraux 1958: 97; Deren 1992 [1953]: 155).<sup>20</sup> However, in the diaspora Haitian women admire Ezili Dantò, because she represents for them the single mother, who creates her life in an autonomous, independent and self-conscious way. With these morally impeccable characteristics she stands in direct opposition to the worldly and coquettish Ezili Freda.<sup>21</sup>

It is mostly men, not women, who admire Ezili Freda, who get married to her and who are visited by her in their dreams. Women prefer to go with Ogou. And Rosemonde knows that it is Ogou Feray who will help her with her son's legal problems. Ogou is a military spirit, a successful warrior and a politician. His origins lie in West Africa's Ogun, the god of the iron, related to weapons, power and war.<sup>22</sup> Ogou has a hot temperament: he prefers drinking rum the whole day, loves meals of red meat and hot pepper, and male black pigs and cocks are sacrificed for him. On Rosemonde's *wogatwa* he is represented through the lithograph of Sen Jak Majè, St. James the Elder. In contemporary Haiti, Ogou evokes reference to Haitian military culture heroes, such as Toussaint Louverture or Jean-Jacques Dessalines, both of whom are commemorated as national heroes because of their heroic

achievements during the Haitian revolution (1791–1804). At the same time, Ogou is not only a military, but also a political concept: In addressing Ogou, Haitians in Montreal reflect on the political history of the country, the 200 years of abuse of power since its independence as well as the political, economical and ecological destruction of the country today.<sup>23</sup> When Haitians in Montreal told me about Ogou's heroic deeds, it was easy to draw the link between issues such as the Haitian revolution and the separatist movement in Quebec. In explaining the character of Ogou Haitians told me about the purifying power of blood, which is necessary to achieve successful independence, and complained about the 'referendum-syndrome' in Quebec, which aims at reaching independence by democratic means.

Additionally, particularly in my interviews with Haitian men in Montreal, Ogou showed his other side. In their reflections about the Ogou-related issues mentioned above, Haitian men not only ruminated on the ecological and political decline of their home country but also on the loss of their home, understood as the place of refuge and protection. Contrary to the overall issues raised by Haitian women in their descriptions of Ogou's character and meaning, Haitian men in the personal dialogues developed an image of Ogou which related not only to confrontation and aggression but also to his caring qualities. These ideas made my male interview partners reflect on their childhood as the better part of their lives. They also talked about the loss of prestige and of their influence within their social surroundings as well as the loss of their economic security through the process of migration. Finally, Ogou made Haitian men reflect about their desire for an eventual return to their Haiti, their home country.

For Haitian men as well as women, not only Ogou and the Ezilis are of significant importance, but also the Marassa, the sacred twins. Rosemonde, for instance, addresses them in order to ask them to protect Carmel's un-born child. Every female *Vodouisant* has a symbol of the Marassa, who are represented by the Catholic Saints St. Cosmas and St. Damian, included in her private *wogatwa*.<sup>24</sup> The Marassa twins are classical symbols of fertility and reproduction; they live close to children and serve as their protectors. Their characters are child-like: they love sweets, syrup, popcorn and funny toys and love to crawl on the ground and to annoy the 'adult' spirits during their possession-performances at a ceremony. In order to make them accept the offerings on the altars, but also to keep them away from everyday bustle, the Marassa offerings are placed in a secret spot, usually found at the bottom of the altars, often hidden with a piece of cloth. But it is necessary to be wary: contrary to my first impression, the Marassa are not only cute and playful. Most of my Haitian interview partners described them as also being malicious and mean. The Marassa "work with both hands" (explained below) and therefore can bring their devotees prosperity and a blessed future but also destruction and misfortune. In this context the expression alludes to the dynamics between a morally impeccable Vodou, which aims at healing and reconciling, and the power of magic, which can also harm other people (Hurbon 2002 [1972]; Richman 2005).

In order to understand the first generation's imaginings about their children, which became apparent through descriptions of the Marassa twins, one should consider the connection between biological reproduction and material security, which are usually transmitted by twin cults. For the first generation of Haitian migrants in particular, confronting their children's problems means questioning their own migration project since

the wellbeing of their children, in most cases, is the reason and the goal of the first generation's migration. Via their educational as well as professional successes, together with the conservation and continuation of the culture of the country of origin, migrants very often attach their personal successes or failures to their children's destiny. The twofold meaning of the Marassa reflects the parents' perspective, to see in their children the embodiment of their hope for a positive future as well as the threat to the fulfilment of their lives.

These few examples<sup>25</sup> have shown that the Haitian spirits, who migrated with their adherents not only from Africa to the New World but also from Haiti to Canada, once more have adapted to the needs and demands of contemporary life. While the spirits perpetually and contextually become reconfigured, Haitian migrants discuss their own adaptations to new living circumstances and reflect about the changes in reference to their own identity constructions—personal as well as collective.

In their descriptions of the spirits' characters and functions, my Haitian interview partners constantly reflected on their desire to position themselves in relation to the surrounding different—and sometimes oppositional—cultures of reference. This should not be seen as representing a dichotomous or polar opposition. However; Haiti represents the nation state as well as the family, the family represents the transnational community as well as the Haitian community in Montreal, Montreal represents North American modernity and the urban way of life but also modernity's efficiency and world-wide success.

In order to fulfil her obligations towards the other spirits, in order to bring back some order into her constant movement between home and host society, between public and privacy, between Canadian Catholic space and Haitian Vodou, in order to separate these different worlds she is taking part in, but which should be kept separated, Rosemonde every night acts as an artist: she arranges the *nasyons*, the different branches of the Vodou pantheon, on two altars in her bedroom, positioned on two opposed walls. The two most important *nasyons* are *petwo* and *rada*.

The spirits belonging to the *rada* branch are sweet-tempered. Ezili Freda has to share this shelf with Legba, Kouzen Zaka, Damballah and some others. They are the *lwa rasin*, which means *lwas* of the roots, from Africa, Dahomey, the authentic land of the family. Their colour is white; they are perceived as being pure and their origin lies in *ginen*, the ancestral African homeland. *Ginen* holds a central position in Vodou cosmology and has been described in detail by most scholars working on Vodou (Brown (2001 [1991]: 29, 273ff; Deren 1992 [1953]: 50; Hurbon 2002 [1972]: 97–98). Serge Larose (1977: 86) has provided a particular lens and described *ginen* as: “tradition, unswerving loyalty to the ancestors and the old ways and ritual they brought from overseas (...) a particular form of social authority (...) through which power is legitimated”. Karen Richman, in her fascinating study on the dynamics between Vodou and transnational family networks, concentrated on the opposition between *ginen* on the one hand, and *maji* (magic), on the other. Working on long-distance Vodou Richman interprets these antagonistic discourses as a sign of ambivalence to capitalist intrusion. Her analysis of a metaphoric opposition between a family-based Vodou which was inherited from Africa and *maji* suggests a changing frame through which accusations of neglect and responsibility can be made (Richman 2005: 150–154). These descriptions can also be assigned to the situation in Montreal, where a strong moral judgement of the differences between a commoditized Vodou and a Vodou serving the migrants' needs on a simple, non-profit and private base was clearly observable.

While *ginen* and *maji* constitute a central antagonism in Haitian Vodou, the counterpart of the *rada lwas* are those from the *petwo* branch. The *petwo* on the opposite *wogatwas* consist of creolised spirits, creations of the new world, which were born as reactions of the slaves against the cruelty of their masters. The *petwo* spirits like Ezili Dantò, Ogou Feray and Simbi are known to be still in the spirit of the revolution: very aggressive and dangerous on the one hand but powerful and strong on the other.<sup>26</sup>

In Montreal, Rosemonde explained to me, she preferred to work with the spirits from the *rada* branch, which make her remember Haiti, her country of origin, and the family members she left behind. She told me about her difficulties in sending remittances back home and the conflict with her children, who complain that she has spent so much money on people they hardly knew. Sometimes, when she felt too much in conflict between those family members in Montreal and those in Haiti, she solved her inner conflict in making a sacrifice on her *rada wogatwa*. But with severe problems she regularly needed the spirits of the *petwo* branch, simply because they are more efficient. In her dealings with the spirits on this *wogatwa*, she has to be careful and diligent, but in the final analysis she knows that she can count on them and that they will help her out of trouble, should she need them.

In their discourses about the *lwas*, Haitians who live in the multiethnic city of Montreal clearly maintain that ethnicity is not a clear distinguishable marker. The different kinds of Ezilis, Ogous or Marassas are symbolic creations of ethnicity, race, class, gender and generation and refer to a mythological past as well as to contemporary everyday life in Montreal. During my work it became obvious that while the personal altars and the Catholic lithographs they talk about may stay somehow the same, be it in Montreal, in Boston, Miami or Paris, the individual interpretations are different, referring to individual readings of different historical or contemporary issues.

This process of designing, creating and constructing private ceremonial altars should be understood as a very intimate sign of devotion, maybe stronger than the collective ceremonies themselves. *Rada* and *petwo* are brought back into harmony through the aesthetic arrangement and with visual semantic density. The never-ending practice of the making strengthens the bonds and the obligations between *lwa* and devotee, the artist renegotiates her connection to and position between the complex worlds she takes part in every day through interchanges of aesthetic evaluation and iconographic interpretation.

#### *Religious parallelisms in migration*

Rosemonde's work with the spirits serves for mediation in more than the traditional religious sense. The spirits do not only mediate the world of humans and ancestors, they also mediate between individuals and community, between the Haitian countryside and the Canadian cities, between black and white and between Haitian Creole and the French language representing the dominant social class. Haitians, in their ways of discussing the characters and ambivalences of these religious spheres, refer to questions of race, class and gender, and identify clearly the fissures and fractions in their communal life in Montreal.

Rosemonde, like many Haitians I met in Montreal, moves back and forth between her private sphere of Haitian Vodou and the Catholic spaces at least three times every week. She knows when to go where, she knows all the different churches throughout Montreal and its suburbs, which are devoted to which Catholic saint and she knows which day in

the year belongs to which Catholic saint and to which Vodou spirit. Haitians, in their habit of moving through these different private and public spaces, manage to participate in different worlds without bringing them into conflict. By means of being part of a Catholic space, they express their attachment and their solidarity vis-à-vis multicultural Quebec, whose population, contrary to the rest of Canada, mainly consists of Catholics.

By means of continuing to practice Haitian Vodou in their private homes, they show their attachment to the Haitian nation and their special relation to the ancestral territory. These religious performances furthermore pinpoint the most relevant issues from a migrant's perspective: the spirits as well as their Catholic counterparts tell us about the meaning of the nation, the country and the family, about changing gender roles and the differing perspectives of women and men, about the significance of Haitian history for contemporary Haiti as well as for its diaspora, about the conflicts between generations and the meaning of children for immigrant communities.

Haitians in Montreal live a much more marginalized life than that of many other immigrant communities; for instance in comparison to lighter-skinned immigrant groups such as Europeans. But their appropriation of the religious spheres demonstrates that they position themselves in the centre of Montreal's multiethnic environment and that they actively take over those spaces in order to understand and to take part in the postmodern urban way of life. Seen from the margins the world does not seem to be further away but, rather, more complex, because this standpoint allows insights into other centers and peripheries.

In current anthropological discourse we have for some time seen a competition between concepts like syncretism, creolization, bricolage and others, and I do not want to favour one of them here. All these concepts and their allusions to biological, cultural, historical, linguistic or religious processes manage to include paradoxes, contradictions, frictions and polyphony. Important for an understanding of the situation in the Haitian diaspora is the fact that through the process of migration religious sites are multiplied, rather than replaced, and that we observe not mixing and blending, but a situating side-by-side of religious references, representing the different worlds and the desire to participate in both, or all of them. In fact, the concept of syncretism as described in the second paragraph, implies an active encounter between two or more religions ending in the production of a new religion. However, the description of Haitian religiosity in the diaspora offered here illustrates the desire to keep religious fields separated and to differentiate carefully between different religious spaces and their respective meanings for everyday life. Religiosity, in the Haitian community, is part of what Arjun Appadurai (1996) would call "religio-scapes", and it contains multiple levels of meaning for various audiences. Minority groups tend to use different religious concepts and discourses to express situated belongings to different, sometimes even opposed settings. The classical notion of 'oscillation' between two different worlds implies the obligation or the need for a contextual choice. But Rosemonde's movement through space and time demonstrated the egalitarian side-by-side of different religious concepts and the negotiation of different competing identities within the Haitian community in Montreal, which questions former exclusive concepts of religions. The different ways to live spirituality parallel in different spaces are mutually dependent and imbued, without judgement, self-evident, uncommented. They belong to each other without being the same.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The following descriptions are based on anthropological fieldwork, which was carried out in Haiti and the Canadian city of Montreal in 2000, 2002 and 2003 (between two and seven months each time) and generously supported by a doctoral scholarship from the Land Hesse (Germany) and the Centre d'Études Ethniques (CEETUM) at the University of Montreal (Canada). My project discussed the images of, and discourses on, Vodou spirits, which constitute a vital system of reference in the Haitian migrant community in Montreal. For the content and methodology of the research, see Drotbohm 2005. I would like to thank Mark Münzel, Fances Pine and João Pina-Cabral as well as three anonymous reviewers from Suomen Antropologi for their comments on earlier drafts of my text.

<sup>2</sup> Transnational is generally taken to refer to people commuting between different countries (see for example Basch et al. 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Personal names have been kept anonymous.

<sup>4</sup> Haitian Vodou borrows numerous terms from Christianity, such as *prèt* (priest), *temp* (temple) or *mès* (mass). However, there are very few structural similarities between Christian institutions and those of Vodou, and most of the terms used in this text should be understood as indigenous concepts from the realm of the polytheistic non-dogmatic universe of Haitian belief. The position and role of priests, *mambos* (female) and *houngans* (male), is that of mediumistic religious specialists who promote dialogue between human beings and Vodou spirits (*lwas*).

<sup>5</sup> The religious particularity of this day will be repeated each year on June 27. Therefore the following description could refer to any year.

<sup>6</sup> While in Haiti besides the term *lwa* a range of other terms exist (i.e. *misté*, *sanj*, *sinvisib*, *sén*), *lwa* could be translated into English either as 'spirit' or 'god'. The former suggests roots in West-African Vodou, the nature-like and localized character of the *lwas* (Blier 1995), the latter focuses on African origins in a wider sense, comparable to other polytheistic religious concepts or the syncretistic blending of African and Catholic religious elements (Kubik 2000). I chose the translation into 'spirits' because most of my (mostly French speaking) interview partners switched between the terms *lwas* and *esprits*.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Bertrand Aristide, president of Haiti until 2004, published a decree in April 2003 which officially recognized Vodou as a religion which thus should be entitled to the same rights and obligations as Catholicism and Protestantism. See <<http://www.haiti-reference.com/religion/vodou/vodou-decret.htm>> (last accessed 30.1. 2008). I thank Markel Thylefors for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>8</sup> In the meantime, the concept of syncretism has been severely criticized, because it might suggest the existence of 'pure' religions in contrast to mixed ones and neglect the fact that any kind of religion undergoes constant changes and modifications (Droogers 1989; Stewart and Shaw 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Approximately 1.5 million people of Haitian origin live outside Haitian territory, many of whom have obtained the nationalities of the receiving nation states (Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001: 12). Besides the Haitian community in Montreal there are bigger communities in the USA (450,000 altogether, 150,000 in New York City as well as in Miami, 30,000 in Boston) (Stepick 1998: 5) and 10–15,000 in Paris (Delachet-Guillon 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Believers in Vodou will be referred to with the indigenous term *Vodouisants* throughout the article, in order to underline the significance of the act of performing the religion.

<sup>11</sup> These problems can range from physical or mental diseases to questions of love affairs, financial or legal difficulties, conflicts within the immigrant community, etc. For more details and case studies see Drotbohm 2005.

<sup>12</sup> However, it should not be forgotten that in Haiti as well as in the Haitian diaspora, during the past ten years Haitian Vodou has been slightly re-evaluated and re-established and therefore can serve in some contexts, especially among the younger generations, as a means for reconstructing traditional roots and 'ethnic' authenticity.

<sup>13</sup> See for instance McAlister 1998: 126 for the case of New York City where Haitians use a different date of the year to celebrate their national icon: July 15.

<sup>14</sup> For the history of the process of blending of the Haitian patroness with the Vodou spirit Ezili Freda see Rey 1999.

- <sup>15</sup> For instance they can be of different political affiliation, from different educational or professional backgrounds or belong to different social classes. See also Levitt 2001: 182 for hometown associations.
- <sup>16</sup> This observation has been underlined by the fact that many of my interview partners, who participated in the Cavaillon celebration, neither came from this area nor had family or friends from Cavaillon. However, they had friends in Montreal who came from Cavaillon, and had been invited to participate at the feast.
- <sup>17</sup> About the distant, conflictive or non-existent relationship to the Haitian state see Fouron and Glick Schiller 1997.
- <sup>18</sup> For other examples of Haitian localism in the Haitian diaspora see Basch et al. 1994:182; and for the role of Haitian hometown associations in particular see Fouron and Glick Schiller 1997: 142–147; Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001: 231.
- <sup>19</sup> This is comparable to the situation in the USA. See for instance: McAlister 1998: 148.
- <sup>20</sup> Joan Dayan (1998) has provided an excellent historical analysis of Haitian spirits, paying particular attention to the opposition between Ezili Freda and Ezili Dantò. According to her, the spirits are part of a ritualized narrative of Haitian history with these particular two female spirits representing antagonistic images of female life in the Haitian plantation system, where women were seen and used as objects to be desired or feared (Dayan 1998, 59).
- <sup>21</sup> For a more detailed interpretation of this shift in meaning see Drotbohm 2007.
- <sup>22</sup> Barnes 1997a [1989] on the transformation of Africa's *Ogun* during his journey into the new world.
- <sup>23</sup> See Brown 1997; Cosentino 1995b, 1997.
- <sup>24</sup> For the meaning of the Marassa twins in Haiti see Houlberg 1995.
- <sup>25</sup> For a detailed analysis of the transformation of the spirits' appearances, characters and roles in Montreal, see Drotbohm 2005: 241–412.
- <sup>26</sup> There is no consistent interpretation of the roots of *rada* and *petwo*. Most scholars link them to the different African ethnic groups, which form the human ground for the Haitian people. However, significant differences can be found in terms of their regional affiliation. Brown and Blier link *rada lwas* to the ethnic group of the Fon, while others, such as de Heusch, link them to the Yoruba. The spirits of *petwo* are mainly interpreted as creolized creations of the New World, but de Heusch ascribes them to the Bantu-cultures (de Heusch 1989; Métraux 1958: 74; Brown 1997: 67, Brown 2001 [1991]: 188–190; Blier 1995).

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