

Drawing Water, Drawing Breath: *Vodun* and the *Bocio* Tradition

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Commonly referred to as Voodoo, the sacred tradition of *Vodun* often conjures up the profane and demonized images of black magic, charms, and spells. Taken out of context, it infers hoaxes and devils. At best, it is a tradition often deemed inferior and unworthy of note by many scientific and academic institutions. Though *Vodun* is embedded in the ancient religious traditions of Africa it is not a coherent and cohesive totality and the word *Vodun* cannot be defined absolutely, or literalized. *Vodun* is a direct way of knowing, a cosmology far too complex to translate into a single, corresponding word. The first known written reference to *Vodun* appeared in a 1658 text called the *Doctrina Christiana*, where the term translates as “god,” “sacred,” or “priestly,” and is mentioned “in various forms about sixty times” (Labouret and Riviere qtd. in Blier 37). A general prejudice in the West against so-called primitive cultures contributes to the misunderstanding and bastardization of the word, yet a depth examination of *Vodun* reveals it to be a vibrant and essential tradition, one that has infiltrated modern psychology, religion and art. Not only is it infused in the blueprint of the industrialized West, its religious and philosophical ideas are acutely present and prevalent in our culture. Further, as a meditative art form associated with *Vodun*, the *bocio* tradition will also be discussed.

Although scholars agree that *Vodun* is a living religion, many translations of the word have emerged over time, based on a different set of etymologies. According to Suzanne Preston Blier, *Vodun* means, “the idea of staying close to a water source, to not rush through life, to take time to attain tranquility” (“Showing”). Her interpretation stems

from two African diviners, Sagbadju and Ayido, who maintain that its origins lie in the phrase “rest to draw the water,” from the Fon verbs *vo* “to rest,” and *dun* “to draw water,” suggesting “the need for one to be calm and composed” in the face of adversity (*African Vodun* 39). My understanding, based on the nomenclature of depth psychology, is that if one is not being still she or he will fall into the hypnotic pool of the collective unconscious, the conventional consensus and the limited beliefs that subject one to the kind of thinking that does not serve one’s highest interest. According to *Vodun* precept, body mind and soul are inextricably linked. In Sagbadju’s words: “When your body is at ease, the exhaustion will leave your body, and you will be well” (qtd. in Blier *African Vodun* 39). Therefore a body must be well rested before it can draw energy from the divine pool of the unconscious.

The translations above appear to have their roots in a universal truth that has been taught by many ancient traditions. Of particular interest is that of the ancient yogis who took their cue from the *Tao Te Ching*, which states, “the highest excellence is like (that of) water” (Tzu 6). Water can be not only fluid, but solid or vaporous as well. It can be used, but never used up. As eternal formlessness, it is filled with infinite possibilities. Ancient Taoist master Lao Tzu speaks of water as a metaphor for our highest good: “The excellence of water appears in its benefiting of all things. [W]ho can make the muddy water clear? Let it be still, and it will gradually become clear” (11). Here one can make the analogy of muddy water, muddy mind. This is echoed in the essence of *vodun*, which implies the need to remain composed before drawing from the water, which can be understood as the source, or fountain, of life.

Uncovering the definitive meaning of *Vodun* is unlikely, as it has been argued that its origins are lost (Segurolo qtd. in Blier *African Vodun* 39), and it is for this reason that the term has been credited with such a diverse range of etymologies. For Benin gallery owner Gabin Djimassé, *Vodun* is an energy that emanates from the flora and fauna, a way of life that demands a respect for nature, a

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force that has the power to heal. Djimassé teaches, “if there is an illness in a certain area, you can be sure that the leaves to heal can be found in that area” (“Who Are We”). This deep reverence and respect for the earth is rooted in the primacy the West African tradition places on the feminine. Yet, Djimassé’s primary understanding of the word broadens its meaning to include the essence of nature herself. According to Djimassé, in the African Fon language, the *Vodun* signifies force, energy and spirit. I submit that it represents the most primal form of *zoe*, the biological life force, and suggests a cosmogony, a mythology, and a system of knowledge that shapes their society.

Vodun is essentially a monotheistic tradition in which the notion of God is seen as an omnipotent, all knowing, all-powerful energy from which all other types of energy originate. The idea of the divine as the source and support of life on earth is germane to West African cosmology. It governs their politics; the decisions they make; if, when, and how they are going to plant; and what they sing, dance or talk about. As Djimassé states, “The Fon call *Vodun* [...] a force that exists above and beyond everything, that is unknowable, and upon which everything that exists depends; we ourselves are nothing but the products of that force which is transmitted through breath” (8). Here he refers to the life force, which cannot be seen or known in and of itself, but can be experienced through the activity of breathing.

It is perhaps this shackled breath that creates both contempt for and fear of *Vodun*. In his book, *The Magic of Ritual*, Tom Driver stresses the importance of communication between our bodies and our instincts. Sorely lacking in physical and spiritual grounding, without connection to our most essential breath, modern westerners are often detached from their bodies, and consequently, from their instincts. In order to maintain our “contemporary” hyper speed pace, activities such as work, sex, play, and art have become not only secular, compartmentalized happenings, but are often notated “reminders” on our blackberries’ “to do” lists where breathing seems not required. On the other hand,

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breath plays an important role in many nonwestern traditions, including Zen Buddhism. It was when I was introduced several years ago to a master of the esoteric style of Jujitsu, who trained under the guidance of a reclusive Zen master in the mountains of Japan, that I witnessed firsthand an embodied yoga practice called “formless form.” Although I had been practicing yoga since I was eighteen, I had never seen “raw energy” move through a body, as if being possessed by an animal. His movements were never rushed, and his breath formed what looked like ripples of water in the *tanden*, the abdominal spiritual center where the life force—what the Japanese refer to as *ki*, and the Hindus and Buddhists call *prana*—resides. He told me then if one rushes, one cannot feel the movement of the breath, which he likened to water. In this state of complete relaxation, he was at his most powerful.

Here I draw an analogy between the connection between body and breath, and body and “pool.” As Blier states, “before bringing back the pure water one waits at the edge in silence for a short time. In part this serves to underscore the vital connection between each person and spring, the latter being particularly important because this is where human conception is said to originate” (*African Vodun* 40). In this way, the importance *Vodun* places on the need for relaxation before drawing water, as noted above, parallels the necessity for calm before drawing breath from the Creator, the source of life on earth.

Blier’s above statement about “waiting at the edge in silence” points out the liminality of these transitional states. Betwixt and between two worlds, edges metaphorize, being in a liminal state of consciousness in which one has left the ordinary realm but not yet entered the divine. At the crossing of the threshold, the edge is inherently a paradoxical place where all is in flux. The shore in particular represents such a threshold, which W. F. H. Nicolaisen says is “the seam between land and sea and a metaphor for the border between the known and familiar, the firm land, on the one hand, and the

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threatening or at least unpredictable, the infirm sea, on the other. It is a place of ambiguities [where] less peaceful encounters with the supernatural are a constant threat” (8). Nicolaisen alludes to the universal association of the sea with the unconscious, at once forbidding and alluring, for one has to go through the liminality experience before one can emerge on the other side as a constituted ego. Blier understands this concept as the need to be calm and composed before drawing water from the “pool below” (*African Vodun* 40).

For scholar Bruno Gilli, *Vodun*’s linguistic roots stem from the Ewe influence on *Vodun* in the Ouatchi area of Togo, suggesting that the prefix *vo* in *vodu* (*vodun*, *vodoun*) in the Ewe language means “hole or opening,” and he interprets its meaning as “a symbol of the hidden, the secret of what we cannot explain but which troubles us and makes us uneasy” (Gilli qtd. in Blier 39). Clearly, his idea of the invisible as a divine support of life is at the heart of *Vodun* philosophy. According to Gilli, the second radical, *dun*, “has grounding in the term for Fa (Afa) divination sign (du)” and “each *dun* (du) carries the significance of “messenger” or “sign” (38). While Blier finds the etymology of the latter “problematic,” I find it interesting that such a meaning is attributed to the word, for the motif of the great secret is a theme that runs throughout the history of alchemy.

According to Jungian analyst Marie-Louise von Franz in *Alchemy*, alchemy is itself a vessel of images and symbols depicting the motif of the “great secret which cannot be just scientifically told and imparted from one individual to another” (67). Blier suggests that it is largely accepted in the West and near East that roots of alchemy originated in Egypt (*African Vodun* 206). As the story goes, Egyptian Prophetess Isis is given the secret of alchemy from an angel at a particular hour associated with the arrangement of the stars on the condition that she share it only with her son and her closest friend. Von Franz speculates that “it simply means that the person who imparts that mystery to the

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other person fulfills at the same time the mystical union, the sacred marriage between mother and son, Isis and Horus, or that between the angel and Isis, because each time the mystery is told the two also become one” (47). Von Franz draws an analogy from the fourteenth plate of the *Mutus Liber* of 1677, “Sign of the Secret,” between the alchemist and his assistant and what occurs in a relationship between two people (67). The *Monas Hieroglifica*, a composite of various astrological symbols which resides inside the vessel between the alchemist and his assistant, thus represents their union, as well as the unity of the Cosmos. According to Maya Deren, a similar union takes place in *Vodun* possession rituals, during which divine spirits known as *loa* temporarily inhabit, or “mount” individuals and in so doing, may “displace the *gros-bon-ange*, [or soul] of a living person and become the animating force of that physical body” (29). In this way, the *gros-bon-ange*, also called *les Mysteres* (the Mysteries) by Haitians, may be seen to signify the alchemical “great secret.”

The motif of the great secret is a theme that runs throughout the history of alchemy, as Blier points out when quoting Martin Luther’s observations of European alchemy in the sixteenth century: “The science of alchemy . . . is truly the natural philosophy of the ancients. I like it not only for the many uses it has in melting and alloying metals, and in distilling and sublimating herbs and extracts . . . but also for the sake of [its] allegory and secret signification” (Needham qtd. in Blier *African Vodun* 223). As a practical matter, the study of chemistry and the knowledge of how to make alloys were often kept hidden for personal or financial rewards. In addition to the monetary gain, the power of these “extracts” to transform the soul was also concealed.

The notion of secrecy is equally apparent on the battlefield in West Africa, where Kings used royal *Fa-bocio* sculptures to protect themselves from defeat in war (Blier 319). These royal sculptures were taken up in conjunction with a range of *bo* empowerment objects, which the king made himself for his own benefit and the benefit of his families and supporters when coming to the throne. He also

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employed a very exclusive group of *bo* makers known as *kpamegan*, “chief of secrets” or chief of the enclosure (*gan*: chief; *kpame*: secret, literally, inside the fence”) to provide him with these sacred art forms (Blier 319). In comparing the West African and European cultures and their containers of secrets, the meaning of the above phrase “inside the fence” seems to find its equivalent in the now widely used European term “alchemical sealed vessel.”

In an analytical situation, alchemy presupposes that transformation of the soul is as much a secret as the formulations of medicines. While discussing numerous case histories in her practice, von Franz observed that this secret is also found in the material the patient brings to the therapist (what is inside the vessel), and in the relationship between the patient and the therapist (the vessel). Often, this secret knowledge must be kept between patient and therapist, because even the people closest to the patient cannot understand the alchemical process and can unwittingly halt its operation. Similarly, regarding powerful emotions communicated in empowerment objects, which cannot be publicly expressed, French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari remark, “The becoming of the secret compels it not to content itself with concealing its form in a simple container The secret, as secret, must now acquire its own form.” (Deleuze and Guattari qtd. in Blier *African Vodun* 115). This underscores the importance of sequestering the potency of the raw materials used in the composition of the form.

Blier recognizes the complexity of sacred art forms and their role in shaping cultural meaning. One such powerful West African art form is the above mentioned *bocio*, which, according to Djimassé in “Vodun and Fon Culture,” is a term translated from Fongbe (the Fon language) as “cadaver that possesses divine breath” (“Vodun and Fon Culture” 8). While there are two distinct *bocio* traditions, one being the state royal arts strongly marked by Yoruba influence, I will now focus on the other, more common form of *bocio*, identified with “rural residents and commoners” (Djimassé 10). Used as

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a medium for empowerment, Djimassé suggests “anyone can gain access to the unknowable divine power by using the closest intermediary at hand, an intermediary through which breath is manifested. *Bocio* is one such object” (“Vodun and Fon Culture” 8). In this way *bocio* compares to the transitional states of breath meditation described above. Interestingly, just as the divine is approached in *Vodun* using an intermediary such as *bocio*, depth psychology draws on tools such as active imagination, dream work, drawing, and sculpture to connect with what Jung calls the Self.

Bocio, a collaborative process of co-creation with its carver, its other makers, and its user, elicits its meaning from the myth in which it is experienced. As a medium which coalesces the sacred and the profane, *bocio* codifies a relationship between art, divination and therapy. Blier points to the Eveh creation myth, which explains that “at the time [God] formed man he also created magic [bo], . . . because he himself . . . is too far away for man to go to him and ask for help” (Cudjow qtd. in Blier *African Vodun* 105). *Vodun* is a religion where there is a close link with the world of the spirit and the visible world and *bocio* serves as mediator between the two. This essential element of the West African mythic tradition empowers the people to protect and help themselves.

According to Djimassé, *bocio* can be translated from Fongbe (the Fon language). Returning to the primacy of breath, he believes that *bocio* means “cadaver that possesses divine breath,” with the suffix, *cio*, meaning cadaver, and understanding the prefix, *bo*, to mean “breath” or “power.” A sculpture or statuette does not at first possess life: it is thus a cadaver, *cio*. But when a human being, whose body converts breath into energy, sculpts the statue, breath enters into it and gives a life force to the cadaver. This is what he means when he calls *bocio* “a cadaver that contains a force” (8). A similar observation regarding the alchemical operation is made by Jung: “Whatever the alchemists’ other intentions, they necessarily also project features of their own unconsciousness onto the understanding of the materials with which they are working” (Jung qtd. in Blier *African Vodun* 206). In so doing,

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“the alchemical opus deals in the main not just with chemical experiments as such, but with something resembling psychic processes expressed in pseudo chemical language” (Blier *African Vodun* 206).

Bocio may thus be seen as a conduit for the direct experience of a *bodily way of knowing*, essential for transformation.

Ignorant of the religious and philosophical ideas embedded in *Vodun*, the Western bastardization of voodoo and its adaptation of the so-called voodoo doll are devoid of the awe and spiritual reverence. Even so, in Benin and Togo, *bocio* remains a living art for those trying to improve life, avert danger or illness, and even change destinies. While *bocio* sculptures do not “represent, symbolize, or signify the *vodun*, they are [rather] closely identified with *vodun* power, religious tenets and philosophy” (Blier *African Vodun* 5). Fon *Vodun* priestesses and priests use sculpture to empower and protect individuals, families, and societies. Often these totems, created from wood and an arrangement of supplementary materials, function as religious mediators between deities, important ancestors, and various elements of the natural world. But *bocio* also serves as a therapeutic mediator. Blier concurs when she states, “art assumes a critical role in psychotherapeutic practice, [allowing] personal difficulty [to be] widely promoted and worked out at the level of ritual and the psyche rather than through interpersonal means” (14). It is the power of *bocio* that activates the psyche and facilitates healing.

Many *bocio* figures depict physical dismemberment, disempowerment, and voicelessness, echoing the suffering and traumatic stress induced by war, poverty, and loss of freedom of its practitioners. *Bocio* thus personifies the pain of the individual and the collective unconscious, the “pool of water.” It is, in Jungian terms, a reflection and illustration of living dreams, as well as a form of amplification and active imagination that defies literal interpretation. In Jungian analysis, tools such as sculpture, dance and various forms of artistic expression are invoked to interpret dream images,

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which Jung believes can be used to decipher unconscious psychological complexes. Just as Jungian analyst Robert Boznak views the practice of amplification in dream work as “not primarily concerned with the meaning of images” (109), Blier stresses the unknowable meaning of these forms, their complexities and contradictions “resistant to interpretation” (*African Vodun* 2, 14). Many such parallels exist between depth psychology and *bocio*.

Bocio may also be understood as an act of what James Hillman calls “soul-making” because of its depictions of potent images containing symbolic meaning (*Healing Fiction* 49). It is an art that expresses the deep fears and dark emotions of its culture, embodying and apprehending its daemons as psychic beings to which its people become wholly available. As Hillman states, “When these Gods and daemons are not given their proper place and recognition, they become diseases—a point Jung made often enough” (*Re-Visioning Psychology* 14). Left unattended, unpersonified, and unconscious, emotions such as fear, anger, and shame are our most ardent saboteurs. In that they are totems of these silenced voices, *bocio* serves to mitigate these daemons, becoming a tool for reconnecting with the divine—as much art as it is a religious symbol.

The power of *bocio* is evidenced by its psychological and ontological and epistemological impression. The traditions of *Vodun* speak to the complexities of indigenous African societies and their role in shaping meaning. As an artistic medium, *bocio* addresses the relationship between art and slavery, body and soul, and matter and spirit. The potency of this art form is hidden within the objects themselves. It is precisely because there is no avenue for a correlating form of expression in the West that I believe *Vodun* has been demonized, for we tend to demonize what we don’t understand. Given that so much of the work in depth psychology hinges on “confrontation with the unconscious,” it is curious that Jung and his successors did not research or explore this form of religious artistic expression and, more importantly, that African myth has not been brought into the forefront on equal

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footing with the Greeks. After all, these images, which resonate with our deepest fears of the unknown, are a haunting portrayal of an underworld, which we have difficulty with from a Western Christian perspective. For these reasons, it behooves us to come to a better understanding of *Vodun*, for nowhere are the theories of depth psychology better illustrated than in these sacred arts.

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