Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken

Spirit Possession in French, Haitian, and Vodou Thought: An Intellectual History.

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Noting that in Haitian Creole there is no term designating the totality of practices that outsiders call “vodou,” nor a single word to describe the phenomenon of “possession” (expressed in Haitian by the circumlocution “*lwa monte mwen/li*,” the spirit has mounted me or him/her), Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken undertakes the ambitious adventure of pulling together a religious system, French currents of philosophy and ethnology, and Haitian, literary, and post-colonial Studies. *Bak la chaje* (“that’s a heavily loaded boat!”), one would say, so let’s pray to Agwe that it doesn’t overturn. But Benedicty-Kokken is a good post-modern sailor and she succeeds in opening up and relating a stunning diversity of resources that reflect on the phenomenon of “possession.”

Observing that the very use of academic language and tools means that she is participating in a Eurocentric, necessarily racist, and reifying discourse, “one that hurls the ‘other’ into what Michel-Rolph Trouillot called ‘the Savage slot’” (p. 1), Benedicty-Kokken still tries to have “North” and “South” meet in order to achieve as much as possible the “entanglement” (p. 21) defended by Achille Mbembe. As an attempt to give the concept of possession its full thickness and complexity, she moves through some of the post-World War II European philosophical propositions, particularly the French, represented by thinkers interested in the phenomenon of possession (whether in Haiti, Africa, or France)—notably André Breton, Michel Leiris, Alfred Métraux, Georges Bataille, and Michel Foucault—in order to open the way to an analytical reading of late twentieth-century Haitian fiction written by some of the country’s most renowned writers such as René Depestre, Frankétienne, Jean-Claude Fig-nolé, and Kettly Mars. To her credit, Benedicty-Kokken calls on the vast fields of Haitian and postcolonial Studies, notably writing by Colin (Joan) Dayan, Trouil-lot, and Achille Mbembe. Reminding readers that she is not an anthropologist, she undertakes a detailed interrogation of characters whose historical interest she senses.

The book consists of 15 short chapters organized in four parts, and a third of it is devoted to a careful dissection of Haitian fiction. It argues for an active reading of possession, seen as a mode of self-repossession through the critical discourse on the world it opens up. As an answer to trauma (“a way to process suffering” [p. 5]), possession—part of a system both philosophical and practical, where thought is literally incorporated—makes possible the resolution of psychical conflicts, as a kind of collective and public psychoanalysis. Possession, then, becomes a way of “reclaiming one’s space” (p. 16) in

response to slavery or, more recently, extreme poverty. Recalling Giorgio Agamben's reading of the production of "sacredness" in its relation to degradation (pp. 60–62), Benedicty-Kokken addresses the "contemporary global dispossession" with respect to humanitarianism, the promotion of democracy, and the war on poverty, with useful insights and a remarkable fidelity to Dayan, Trouillot, and Mbembe.

The book stresses the role played by Haiti in Francophone philosophical production, as a central pivot in a reflection on possession and the relationship between body and mind. Far from peripheral, Haiti is shown to be a central vantage point from which to consider Western thought of the twentieth century, while Europe is presented as another center for the history of possession, through the work of Michel de Certeau and Michel Foucault on Loudun's diabolical possession in seventeenth-century France. Before them, Michel Leiris and Alfred Métraux had repeatedly met, trying to understand and articulate *zar* and vodou systems of possession in a way that "produces a nondegrading discourse on possession," Leiris considering "possession as (morally, aesthetically) superior to Greek catharsis" (p. 136). This is quite a refreshing turnaround in the way we see the Franco-Haitian relation. The book's other originality is in breaking through the isolation of variously sited theories and bringing them together in a comparative, transdisciplinary approach, offering an analysis of the way possession as a concept circulates through spaces that are a priori distinct and opposed. The book opens promising paths in that sense and we must salute the audacity of the author's multicentered reflections as well as her erudition. It also encourages a much-needed interrogation of our methods, assumptions, origins, and cultural influences, though it cannot go as far as to disqualify its tools without alienating itself. The only downside may be the repeated reference to Pascal Bruckner, a polemical essayist who, while certainly a visible public intellectual in France, seems a bit out of place here. As to the "resistance to postcolonial theory" in French universities, that phrase certainly deserves a discussion.

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