Vodou, Illness and Models in Haiti: From Local Meanings to Broader Relations of Domination

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ABSTRACT: Anthropological research concerning the relationship between Haitian vodou and illness shows that vodou practitioners’ explanatory models of illness contain two levels of causality. One presents the sick as victims of magical-religious procedures and illness as being the result of agents directed at the victims. The meanings for the origins of such illnesses are rooted in Haitian social reality, which Haitians perceive as dangerous and threatening. A certain representation of self and social reality underlies these illness models in vodou and in vodou-inspired Haitian folk knowledge. An anthropological analysis of illness must identify local meanings that may shed light on certain cultural constructions of illness, as can be achieved by examining explanatory models structured around origins, causes, disease agents and other sources of illness found in Haiti. But the analysis must go beyond local meanings and question the representation of self and of social reality that goes along with these models and makes them intelligible for Haitians. In doing so, we note that this representation is the result of a process of subjectivation that is bound up in power relations between Haiti and the West. A cultural approach to explanatory models of illness in vodou is incomplete without a critical anthropological approach that addresses the relations of domination to which Haiti has been subjected. This article draws on these two anthropological perspectives in analysing illness in Haiti. It demonstrates how a meaning-oriented micro-social analysis of illness can be combined with a critical, macro-social approach in medical anthropology.

KEYWORDS: Vonarx, Haitian vodou, illness, local meanings, process of subjectivation and domination

Analysing vodou-inspired representations of illness can help in understanding the main patterns and logics in explanatory models of illness commonly found in Haiti. Yet however important it is to understand the representations of illness in vodou and in spite of the amount of research that has been conducted on vodou generally, this remains a relatively unexplored topic. With the exception of an article by Méttraux (1953), the literature contains only scattered generalities and repetitions. I conducted research in Haiti to document vodou models of illness and thus contribute to our understanding of this neglected theme. My research suggests two levels of causality. The first presents the sick as victims of magical-religious procedures and illness as the result of agents directed at the victims. The meaning of the origins of such illnesses is rooted in Haitian reality, which Haitians view as dangerous. They
consider themselves to be continually at risk of attack by a person driven by hatred, jealousy or envy. A certain interpretation both of reality and of self therefore underlies these illness models in vodou, which are found in broad outline in Haitian folk knowledge.

As anthropologists interested in explanatory models of illness in vodou, we must identify local meanings in order to discover the cultural dimensions of such models. This is a fairly classical anthropological undertaking that emphasises an ethnographic and micro-social approach to knowledge and practices as well as proximity to the research subjects. An analysis of illness meanings in vodou based on this approach shows that statements about illness are deeply rooted in Haitian culture and sheds light on how the culture constructs illness. The analysis of illness, however, can be expanded by examining how, in Haiti, these models are connected to a certain understanding of self and of reality which gives them credibility. In doing so, it becomes clear that this understanding is the result of subjectivation processes influenced by socio-economic forces and relations of power. The interpretative approach to illness presented here as a necessary point of departure must therefore be combined with a critical approach that incorporates history, political economy, colonialism and other forms of domination (Good 1994).

In this article, I shall combine these two approaches of medical anthropology through the analysis of illness in Haiti. First, I shall present an explanatory model of illness based on the main scenarios elaborated and described by vodou practitioners in their consultations. As will be seen, the meaning of illness is intelligible because it aligns with cultural conceptions of the body, the person and social reality. This presents an opportunity for a critical analysis of certain aspects of meaning. More specifically, by addressing the origin of illness, one can step back from a micro-social analysis and move towards a political and historical analysis that demonstrates how the construct of meaning is also related to relations of domination and to social, political and religious forces.

**Vodou Models of Illness**

Studies of illness in Haiti refer mainly to the existence of natural and supernatural afflictions. Referred to as *maladi bondye* (God’s illnesses) or *maladi satan* (Satan’s illnesses), these categories are based on an aetiology that distinguishes between afflictions caused by man and afflictions that are inevitable and may be treated biomedically. Illness representations are, of course, far more complex and my research shows that the meaning attributed to the illness is rarely definitive; it depends on events in the course of the therapeutic itinerary and it is not necessarily the starting point of a consultation with a therapist. Briefly put, the meaning of an illness is often secondary to the search for healing. Moreover, it does not always indicate where to turn for help and it is mostly the preoccupation of the therapists who must find a solution. In particular, the interpretation of illness is a matter for the vodou practitioner who refers to explanatory models of illnesses that are generally considered to be part of the supernatural category. As a health care system with magical-religious dimensions consisting of an explanatory system (Vonarx 2005), vodou has developed illness scenarios that can be classified in two interpretative categories discussed elsewhere by Fainzang (1989).

The first refers to the sick person’s responsibility—or a model of self-accusation. In this case, the sick person is situated within a set of inherited socio-cultural values that impose rules, obligations and rituals with respect to his or her ancestors and to *lwa* (vodou spirits). When a Haitian does not obey them or ignores a call from them, the ancestors and the *lwa* remind him of his duties by afflicting him or a member of his family with an illness. In such
cases, the way in which the affliction began and the signs of the illness are of less interest to the therapist than the reason for the punishment. The origin of the illness is central to illness scenarios, and points to some of the responses that will follow diagnosis. It suggests that the sick person has become detached from his family, birthplace, home, the family lwa, the ancestors, or the lwa to which he is personally bound. This separation appears as a problem in relating to these entities and a lack of commitment to them. Thus, in addition to treating a sick body using empirical knowledge based on a local pharmacopoeia, the vodou practitioner’s therapeutic response must aim to re-establish bonds with these entities or revitalise a network of relations conducive to recovery. The therapist’s task is to take care of the ways of being in the world that are valued in his system of representations of the world by planning rituals and symbolic exchanges in homes, prescribing individual worship for the person being punished, or by establishing individual and collective alliances with lwa and with the ancestors. The strategy depends, of course, on the scenario that emerges during the consultation.

The second category in the explanatory model of illness refers to the responsibility of a third party who deliberately attacks the sick person for personal reasons. This is a model in which someone close to the sick person is accused of making them ill (as described by Fainzang [1989]), or where the sick person is the victim of witchcraft or magical practices. In this model, the afflicted person is situated in a social context among his peers and contemporaries. This category involves explaining illness without naming the attacker, even if the sick person and his relatives may suspect someone. During consultation, the point is not to identify the attacker’s motives; instead the practitioner focuses mainly on the causes and agents that have produced the illness. Once they are identified, the choice of treatment becomes clear. In all cases, the level of causality in this category locates the sick person within a network of social and interpersonal relationships. This leads on to the magical dimensions of the vodou health care system.

Representations of illness based on punishment have rarely been studied, yet they are directly related to vodou rituals that define vodou as a family spirit and ancestor cult (see Herskovits, 1937; Simpson, 1940; Métraux, 1958; Lowenthal, 1978). The efforts that have been made to structure vodou and organise it as a religion based on socio-political and identity issues (Vonarx, in publication) have ignored the essential connections between vodou and illness, instead using an approach that often disconnects vodou from its context and from the daily lives of Haitians. When the meaning of illness in Haiti is discussed in this way, the first category is skipped over and the second (that of attack by a third party)—the patterns of which are very explicit in the lay knowledge used to explain illness—is emphasised. The work of Kiev (1961), Murray (1976), Singer et al. (1988), Farmer (1990), Brodwin (1996) and the information about illness in Hess (1984), Delbeau (1989) and Tremblay (1995) are good illustration of the importance of the second category.

It is also important to add that this second category is most often referred to in vodou because endemic poverty places limits on the organisation of rituals for maintaining relationships with the ancestors and with the lwa. It is also because the religious landscape in Haiti is being transformed due to the increase in Protestant and Pentecostal churches, which force vodou practices underground and lead to the rejection of Afro-American religious traditions. Another reason is that family homes are crumbling, splitting up families, obscuring the reference points needed for rituals and diminishing the collective resources available to carry them out. Finally, as people move away from rural areas or emigrate, family ties become frayed and family members grow more distant and isolated. These socio-economic factors lead to significant shifts in the cult of the ancestors and family spirits that is at the heart
of vodou religion and the vodou health care system, when they do not simply result in its disappearance. The impacts of such changes are reflected in explanations for illness; increasingly, vodou practitioners refer to attacks by a third party in their explanations for illnesses.

Agents and Causes in Vodou Practitioners’ Scenarios

When we examine how illness is interpreted in the case of illness scenarios involving deliberate attack, we find three typical scenarios. The first refers to souls (nàm), which are agents sent by magical-religious procedures; in the second, a lwa is sent; and in the third, a “lougaou” (a king of vampires) is implicated in a childhood disease.

In the first and most common scenario, a soul enters the sick person’s body. The soul is a vital principle that animates all living bodies, be they human, animal or insect. Souls can penetrate a person’s body, settle there and create visible and/or invisible disorders and physical symptoms. My analyses of health-seeking processes and my interviews with practitioners suggest that souls do not always manifest in the same way in all sick people. In fact, there is rarely a direct connection between a type of illness and certain signs/symptoms in the diagnoses of vodou practitioners. A soul can cause pain, fever or other symptoms that may last, vary in intensity and move around in the body. Sometimes the clinical profile may be different because some souls of the deceased can also cause behavioural problems. For example, people who have become mute and isolated, who do not react and no longer eat and who are agitated are diagnosed as being affected by a deceased soul that is creating personality disturbances. Sick persons whose ability to relate to others has been disrupted and who behave inappropriately in relation to local codes of behaviour have been affected by these souls. They are said to have a “maladi mòvè zespri” (evil spirit illness) a “maladi zonbi” (zombie illness) or a “maladi foudwaye” (struck-by-lightning illness).

The sick person’s spirit is understood to have been overpowered by an agent who disorganises his personality and relationship with others. In addition to identifying the agents in the explanatory scenario, the practitioner specifies how the victim was afflicted. The soul penetrated the victim’s body in the form of a carefully prepared powder or liquid—in accordance with the laws of sympathetic magic—because the victim stepped on or over it. Alternately, the body may have struck by invisible means, because souls are also sent to crossroads and graveyards when the lwa Baron Samdi and his acolytes have been asked to dispose of them.

The second scenario is when a lwa has been ordered to attack a person—this is known as a “Koud lwa” (hit by a lwa). During the consultation, the practitioner announces that the illness is caused by a lwa, thus triggering various somatic disorders. The victim is often in poor physical condition because a lwa strikes with great violence. It is not unusual for the sick person to be bedridden and to have visions of an animal coming to attack him, which others cannot see. These lwa are the same lwa that are honoured in the rituals performed in homes or the lwa in the service of vodou practitioners. In fact, any lwa may be sent to attack a victim if one knows their favourite dishes and certain relational codes to force them to take orders.

The third scenario applies specifically to young children who are ill and are victims of an attack that affects the most vulnerable, but mainly targets the parents. The practitioner attributes the child’s illness to a “lougaou” that attacks at night for social, political and economic (rather than food-related) reasons. More specifically, the “lougaou” is usually a person who takes on a different appearance to visit the child, such as a cat, a screech-owl or an insect. The phenomenon is not unique to Haiti as similar manifestations can be found elsewhere in the French Caribbean; metamorphosed beings which are often old women during the daytime and become flying vampires at night.
On the Origin of Illness

In addition to the instrumental causes and the agents described above that constitute the explanatory models, it is important to explain why illnesses appear in the lives of Haitians—or what their origins are among a plurality of causes (Zempléni 1985). On this point, it should be noted that practitioners do not name the origin during a consultation; it is implicit and needs no explanation because everyone is well aware of the reasons for magical-religious attacks. Attacks are sometimes gratuitous, they are often motivated by envy and the need to possess something to the detriment of another person, and they serve as barriers to socio-economic mobility. These reasons are obvious to vodou practitioners, as seen in the following excerpts from interviews:

‘You know Haitians! People sometimes rob you, break things in your home and take your belongings. When you have identified a person that robbed you, you prevent him/her from doing it again by going to the vodou practitioner … If you come to my place today, it is because you are my friend, because you like me and I like you. But if I do something wrong to you tomorrow, you could attack me with a weapon. Well, Haitians hurt each other and do not live like white people. White people do not injure one another. But Haitians do! Because you have visitors and others do not, they hate you. Your neighbours hate you for what you own. Haitians hate you for that … We Haitians are both good and bad at the same time. When someone knows that you found a job, he thinks that he should have the job. And you end up sick at the doctor and the vodou practitioner’.

‘Well, if you want to buy a house, they send you something. If you have a car … and you own animals, some people notice that they do not have any of that. So they go see a vodou practitioner … They make you sick or make sure that your animals die so that you lose. If you have land, you can make more money than others. They send you something or force you to leave using magical practices. There are many situations. When you have more possessions than the other members of your family, they are jealous and envy what you have. So they go to the vodou practitioner. If you are poorer, it makes others feel better. Also, in a family, some people gain from a person’s death. So they go to the vodou practitioner … And some attack you gratuitously and look for a way to bring you down, even if you did not do anything to them’.

Vodou practitioners consider jealousy, envy, covetousness and hatred between Haitians and their relatives and friends as common ingredients in interpersonal relations among Haitians, which lead them to seek help in attacking others or in managing the effects of such attacks. These specialists are in a good position to explain the attacker’s intentions. Other Haitians, however, share the same viewpoint and often state that Haitians are spiteful, referring to the saying ‘nèg rayi nèg depi nan ginen’ (Haitians have always hated Haitians). They do not consider that proximity might decrease the risk of attack; on the contrary, one is more likely to be attacked, hated and envied by someone close than by someone distant or unknown. The following excerpts provide a good illustration of this:

‘When someone does not like you, they send you a disease. When you do not like someone, you go and get a vodou practitioner […] I know how it goes. Sometimes, it is because of your job, when someone wants to take your place, he has to divert you with magic. And above all, in our country, there is not enough work. Then, when someone works, people get jealous. Also, when someone does bad things, when people are offended, they can turn to mystical realms to settle this’.

‘When a person earns a good living and manages to make a little money, his/her mind is never at peace. He/she is persecuted. A person is better protected and less persecuted when he/she makes no money, when he/she works in the fields and wears old clothes. But when you do well and are well-dressed, you are always persecuted. There is always someone sending you a blight. It is to divert you from your activities. When you are ill, you spend money. This hinders your business. There are some Haitians who do not want to see you possess more than they do. If they have more than you, it does not cause them any problems. Quite the opposite […]’.
‘There is hatred here when we have possessions. People do not like it when others possess something. Especially in the family. There are some family members that do not want us to get ahead [...] They want you to live in the same conditions. They think that you will become proud and that you will snub them, look down on them. Even if it is not the case [...] That is why people kill others’.

In other words, the meaning of the origins of illnesses that have been directed at a person and the ensuing deaths lie in the social order. They are part of a reality in which the sick person is a victim because of the many evil people who always covet what others have. These envious people take away the possessions of those more fortunate with the help of the vodou practitioner and his magic, or they create financial difficulties for them so that—having spent a fortune in treatments or burial expenses—they end up in the same position as the attacker. Both the sick and the practitioners confirm this, as do the surveys by Houtart and Rémy (1997), which show that fifty per cent of Haitians in Port-au-Prince think that certain illnesses are caused by black magic. Other descriptions and stories of illness back this up: Diogène and other Haitians who have accused a sister, mother or brother of killing a family member or making them ill (Kerboull 1973: 103–104); Adelsia who fell ill and lost her shop on account of a jealous, envious friend (Tremblay 1995: 175); Manno, a teacher described by Farmer (2006), who was attacked by a soul because he had three jobs; and Dieusauveur, a man described by Brodwin (1996), who was attacked by a maladi satan as punishment for his socio-economic success and died as a result.

The Social, Historical and Macro-Social Context of the Meaning of Illness

The patterns described above that provide explanations for illnesses caused by witchcraft are linked to other conceptions that make the theories given by vodou practitioners meaningful, plausible and culturally relevant. These conceptions are a hidden dimension of explanatory models and refer in particular to the body, the person and the Haitian reality. The scenarios presented above make sense to Haitians because they consider the body to be a permeable space that is accessible to agents that can penetrate it and move around inside it via circulatory pathways. In addition, the soul is a spiritual principle found in every part of the body, which accompanies the corpse to the graveyard and which can be materialised and handled. Finally, these scenarios make sense to Haitians because the Haitian world is full of supernatural manifestations and reality is teeming with dangers of all sorts.

These different conceptions complete the puzzle that helps us to understand how explanatory models come into being. However, certain links between these conceptions force us to go beyond the immediate interpretation of illness given by the sick and by practitioners, for instance, the connections between the origin of illness and ideas regarding interpersonal relations and the motives of the attackers. The origin of afflictions suggest that the socio-political situation in Haiti and power relations between Haiti and the West need to be studied in order to understand the emergence of the representation of reality and of self that underlies a common explanatory category for illness. In using this approach, we find that the representation of Haiti and of self that many Haitians share is the result of a process of subjectivation that refer to socio-economic and political problems, colonialism and struggles within a plural religious environment.

Socio-Political Influences in the Understanding of Self and of Reality

If the origin of illness is so easily linked to the economy and to social mobility in Haiti, it is because it is so difficult for people to get ahead and because their assets are always threatened. Everyone therefore appears to be prone to
greed. The victim’s fate is linked to that of the attacker because their association is determined by the precariousness of the economic context, which does not leave much choice other than to take away from others in order to have a little something for oneself. A basic quality of life and the means to survive depend on this. Faced by an economic impasse caused by the poor management of local resources, their exploitation by foreign interests and a world order in which the inequalities between rich and poor countries grow greater every day, Haitians consider that the only way out of the crisis is by individual endeavour. Any social advancement—or any bad luck—is therefore seen to be the work of witchcraft and magic. The omnipresence of vodou and its power over life encourages this interpretation. To improve one’s lot in life, to bring others down and to redistribute their possessions, one need only appeal to a practitioner’s powers and choose how to proceed.

The unstable socio-economic order, the ongoing crisis in Haiti and everyday hardship also contribute to an image of Haitians as dangerous, spiteful and skilful attackers. Upon closer examination, it is difficult to deny the psychological and social impact of the crises that have so deeply affected Haitian society and that manifest themselves in violence of all sorts. The reference here is not to the odd conflict over land in rural areas, to animals that are stolen or disappear leading the victim of the theft to threaten the thief’s life, nor to the kind of fights and revenge killings that exist in all societies. These are events in Haiti that, when taken as a whole, reveal the distress that haunts the Haitian world, as Corten (2001) puts it. The situation here is one of destitution, extreme poverty and the destruction of life, as well as the political strife and instability that has racked the country since Independence. There have been too many presidents, coups d’états and assassinated leaders. There was the bloodthirsty, thirty-year dictatorship of the Duvalier father and son and a country in which human rights are violated with impunity. Current events are a constant reminder that armed gangs rule in certain neighbourhoods of the capital city, that the abduction of adults and children is commonplace and that this lawlessness spreads like an oil stain over the territory, affecting women stallholders who are robbed of their wares and rebellious peasants who are massacred. To this list of everyday events—this banditry organised at times by the government—we might add the fact that Haiti has been characterised by historic official repression, beatings by security forces, wrongful arrests, sudden disappearances, assassinations of journalists, exactions by militias in the service of despot, widespread corruption, a minority getting rich on the backs of the majority and other terrible events reported in the media.

These are very real facts, in some cases historic but in many cases contemporary. Not surprisingly, they influence people’s perceptions of social reality and foster an attitude of fatalism and the feeling of victimhood (Corten 2001). As they repeatedly affect the lives of Haitians, they show how some Haitians behave towards others. They let everyone know that reality is dangerous and they validate a common-sense knowledge that tells of the need to mistrust others, even close relatives or neighbours. Anyone could be preparing an attack; anyone could be coveting something we have; anyone could be a hidden enemy paid by a terrorist organisation or secret society; anyone could be behind a secret plan to ruin a life. Illness is but one of many different means to an end!

**Colonial Domination, Construction of the Haitian and Self-Perception**

The way in which the nature of Haitians and of reality is represented is both a historical construct and a part of explanatory models of illness. If we go back into the past, an image of Haiti and of Haitians was being constructed and disseminated even prior to independence. Inseparable from western domination, this image led to the development of a ‘historical con-
sciousness' of oneself and of reality. First, slaves were likened to dangerous poisoners, skilled in making potions, in using black magic and in murder. The observations of foreign visitors, trials for poisonings, certain confessions and administrative provisions witness to the prejudices towards slaves (Pluchon 1987). Both during and after the colony, all Haitians were considered dangerous crooks and sons of the witch doctor Makandal. The many people arrested for such crimes and the public trials served as evidence for the slaves, who had to understand their reality using a framework laid out by the colonisers.

This understanding of reality and of the nature of Haitians began a process of subjectivation. Following independence, it informed the production of supposedly realistic and para-anthropological knowledge on Haiti. In a colonial context tainted by colour biases and theories of racial inequality, European and American authors justified the political and cultural domination of the West by describing a catastrophic Haitian reality. In addition to reports of economic and political disaster (D’Alaux 1856), Haiti was described as being mired in barbarism, epitomised by macabre practices such as ritual murders and cannibalistic feasts. The country exemplified failed independence and was portrayed as a hotbed of magic and witchcraft (Zacaïr 2005). It became a curiosity for thrill-seekers intent on verifying the authenticity of the stories told by Saint-John (1886), Prichard (1900), Seabrook (1929), Craige (1933), Loederer (1937) and other novelists. All of them participated in shaping a reality dominated by magic and sorcery which intellectuals, priests and Haitians alike have shared since 1880 (Newell 1888–1889)—and continue to share today.

This literature did great symbolic violence and was closely tied to macro-social power relations. As such, it was an effective tool for legitimising colonialism. It influenced certain representations by showing the world an image of Haiti and Haitians as being cruel. This fed racist bias and Western imaginary by upholding and disseminating an image of the “Cannibal Negro” (Hurbon 1988). As this literature found its way into Hollywood films and was distribute in Haiti, it influenced gradually Haitians to adopt this view of themselves and their reality. It initially influenced a Haitian and mulatto elite whom Price-Mars (1998 [1928]) describes as bogged down in a misguided 'bovarysm', the pathetic imitation of Europeans and the rejection of all traces of Africa. The wealthiest and best-educated, like the Whites, began to see the poorest, the peasants and the darkest-skinned Haitians as less than human. In order to set themselves apart from these lesser humans, they believed that Haiti needed to be reinstated as one of the great nations by making changes to the local political and religious scene. These victims in search of recognition inevitably confirmed the western interpretation of Haitian reality (see Bellegarde 1939a, 1939b, 1941). Playing the game of the former master, they mobilised the press in this project to inform people of the dangers they faced and of the diabolical motivations of Haitians by claiming that certain Haitians had a craving for human blood, horrifying ritual scenes and the ritual killing of infants.

The stigmatisation of Haitians and the condemnation of their characteristics, their lifestyle and conduct are therefore the result of these power relations. They are the outcome of a slave-trading past and are embedded in power relations, unequal social relations, colour relations and a quest for identity guided by an outmoded view of progress and development. With time as an ally, they have succeeded in winning over the so-called barbarians and fostering an interpretation of the world inherited from the former French colony of Saint-Domingue; a colony rich in legends, in legal provisions and in sanctions for magical-religious practices.

Religious Imperialism and the Demonisation of the World: the Omnipresence of Evil in Haiti

The interpretation of reality and of Haitians has also been nourished by competition among re-
ligions and the messages broadcast by various religious groups seeking to spread their views in a context of religious pluralism. This interpretation might be considered to be based in part on vodou and its supernatural content. Indeed, some authors argue, in their analyses of mental health problems in Haiti, that vodou plays a role in the emergence of anxiety, feelings of oppression and psychoses accompanied by hallucinations and delusions of persecution (Bijou 1963; Douyon 1964; Philippe 1983). There is no point in contradicting this potential connection because vodou practitioners and their practices guarantee that such attacks are, in fact, very real and maintain the representation of the reality that accompanies them. The objectives of vodou practices do not fool anyone. A mere visit to a graveyard or a practitioner’s home shows that some practices indeed consist in causing illness and death. This can be corroborated by those who organise and supervise vodou practices, as well as by those who have observed them, for instance, sleepwalkers, grave-keepers and those who lay out the dead. These people are the main witnesses, sometimes participating in such practices by admitting people to cemeteries, supplying products needed for preparing disease-causing agents and by asking the dead about the cause of death in cases of suspicious fatalities.

Clearly vodou is complicit in a process of subjectivation with regards to reality. We must not, however, omit the role of the Roman Catholic Church here. Its condemnations of vodou, which it associated with the Devil, its denunciation of its disgrace, its decrees and prohibitions from Saint-Domingue to Haiti sought not only to eradicate vodou and shape a new religious landscape. In this quest for ideological domination, the Church’s efforts also influenced a local imaginary of vodou and of reality. We need only go back to the late nineteenth century when a French bishop fighting vodou shared his strategies with Haitian leaders, telling them about Haitian reality, the evil affecting Haiti, Haiti’s image abroad and what was at stake in the struggle against idolatry. Vodou was described as crude fetishism, a vile African paganism, and vodou practitioners were described as venomous snakes and dangerous criminals that had to be stamped out (Kersuzan 1896). This gave an official tone to an anti-superstition campaign that peaked in the 1940s when the Catholic Church was planning more thorough and aggressive interventions. Now vodou and its practitioners were mentioned in sermons. Vodou objects were destroyed in public squares, the trees where the lwa resided were cut down and these acts of destruction were recorded in writing. Armed with authorisations and accompanied by the police or legal authority, groups of men helped the Catholic priests carry out their plan. Access to the church doors was barred to anyone wearing amulets. Funerals and masses were refused to anyone who had not officially rejected vodou and punishments were imposed on those who did not keep their vows (Jan 1941). Resorting to an arsenal of gothic legends and supernatural events, and ascribing extraordinary and destructive powers to vodou practitioners, this campaign left new marks in a world already imbued with a wealth of symbolic references.

This struggle continues to this day with the presence and dynamism of fundamentalist Protestant churches that dominate Haiti’s religious landscape, demonising reality and thus validating the notion that it contains an excess of magic and witchcraft. With their efforts at conversion focused on the presence of evil in every Haitian, these churches pour their messages into both public and private spaces, preaching the advantages of conversion, faith and prayer. They fight illness and all social problems, including the many difficulties of daily life and vodou, blaming Satan for all these afflictions. In short, their struggle is in line with the older Catholic message which they multiply tenfold by colonising the Haitian environment and by drawing other social problems into their sphere. In this way, they offer Haitians a way to interpret the world, social reality and themselves.
that reinforces the interpretation produced by the subjectivation mechanisms discussed above.

Conclusion

In addition to filling certain gaps in the literature on illness and vodou and providing some details of an explanatory model of illness and Haitian folk knowledge, this text shows that the representations of certain illnesses are not a purely local construction that lies within the bounds of Haitian culture. The conditions that create these representations extend well beyond Haiti, as has been seen by locating the origin of illness within a historical, social and religious context. The study of illness sets us firmly at a crossroads in which a fabric of finely woven cultural meanings, socioeconomic forces and forms of domination overlap. They have clearly succeeded in creating a particular reading of self and of reality that has been carefully put together, disseminated and adopted in Haiti.

An understanding of illness must include both micro-social and macro-social levels of analysis and a social and historical contextualisation of the meaning given to illness if the complexity of the phenomenon in Haiti is to be grasped. The second part of this paper presents this context and a macro-social analysis thereof. It demonstrates that an anthropological approach focusing on the cultural meaning of illness is inadequate and that different sources of understanding need to be combined. Yet this second part is also inadequate because the interpretative approach is the best guide in changing scales to enrich our understanding of illness. In the end, the interpretative and the critical approaches, which each offer a different understanding of reality, are good field partners in Haiti. In fact, it is often difficult to set aside a critical approach when considering any phenomenon in Haiti because the socio-economic context and the colonial and post-colonial past dominated by various forms of oppression and western intervention always risk coming to the surface.

It is worth noting that I have combined these two approaches here because neither of them was eliminated from the outset of this research project on the vodou health care system. Although the project called first and foremost for an interpretative approach that would help to reveal and describe the content and social uses of this cultural system, my theoretical choice was not exclusive. It aimed at leaving room for other approaches depending on the phenomena studied, the ethnographic material gathered, the meaning of illness and the processes that determine how illness is experienced in Haiti. This openness to confluence implies that an anthropological research project is not always completely organised and wrapped up beforehand, that some things cannot be foreseen and that the interface between a researcher and his field data can transform the framework of interpretation and course of research. If we accept this as a valid way in which to perform anthropological research, we can avoid any extremes in applying any one approach and engage in a reflexive effort with respect to our theoretical choices and our relationship to a research problem. These conditions can help to avoid establishing a hierarchy among approaches and make it easier to combine interpretative and critical viewpoints, as I have tried to demonstrate in this article.

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Notes

1. Research focused on vodou’s relationship to health and illness. It was based on sixteen months of fieldwork in the Haitian countryside.
2. The lwa Baron Samdi is the master of graveyards. He plays a key role in matters connected with death. For instance, he owns the souls of the dead.
3. Makandal was a runaway slave who joined the slave uprising in the 18th century. He was said to have supernatural powers and was known to be able to prepare poisons which he used in his plans to escape. He was arrested and burned alive. His name is used to this day to refer to poisons and poisoners in Haiti.

4. I have borrowed this expression from Jardel who has studied the representations of West Indians and African-American cults using the notion of hetero-image. He points out that a para-anthropological literature consists of textual discourses produced by authors who have represented ‘Others’ and their cultural practices [in this case, Haitians and their way of life] without being professional ethnologists or anthropologists. These authors claimed to provide information to readers concerning the customs, habits and behaviour of the people that they observed (Jardel 2000: 452).

5. Price-Mars speaks of Bovarysm (in reference to Flaubert’s character Madame Bovary who entertained illusions about her real situation) to describe the way in which the Haitian elite identified with elements of their European ancestry while denouncing any African legacy.

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