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1 INTRODUCTION

I arrived for the first time in Momé Hounkpati, the village which was to be my home for the next 12 months, in early October 1989.¹ The original aim of this research was to concentrate on the 'couvents de féticheuses', as they have been described in early Francophone literature (Garnier and Fralon 1951, Verger 1957), a term now readily adopted by most educated Togolese to describe the compounds associated with shrines where initiation takes place. Voodoo 'cults',² as they are often referred to in Western popular discourses, have often been represented as a religion of darkness, fear, black magic and malevolent mysticism, where images of zombies, the walking living dead or bloody sacrifices, including, it is sometimes said, human victims have taken pride of place. A plethora of films, articles and documentaries has served to reiterate the wildness of voodoo in the Western imagination. Coffee table books further reinforce such representations, despite their sometimes semi-academic credentials, making use as they do of a wealth of powerfully striking photographs, taken from 'real events', and evocative language. Yet, as we shall see, drama, play and display are indeed also part and parcel of the practice of religiosity. The 'making of voodoo' takes place at many levels, and these deities linger in the imagination under many guises.

Garnier and Fralon, writing as colonial administrators in Togo in the 1950s, provide colourful accounts of how young women are tattooed, scarified and clad in ways which clearly demarcate them from other members of their communities. The female devotees are also described as embodying the terrifying moral properties of the gods: prone to possession, theirs can be a vindictive business, and they are said to strike terror in those who refuse to abide by their taboos. Equally, they are prone to desecration and, consequently, are often punished by violent death if they fail to comply with the exigencies of their deities. Not surprisingly however, Garnier and Fralon provide little detail as to how such initiation fits into the wider scheme of sociality, nor do they discuss how the devotees' overt display of religiosity relates to the presence of white colonisers on their territory. A product of their time and conditioning, the drawings and illustrations in Garnier and Fralon's book display the typical attributes of the exoticised, and colonised, subject: 'fetish'

priests playing on drums encircled by humans skulls, devotees with pythons draped around their necks, half-naked female bodies taking to the streets in trance...

Verger's scholarly work on Yoruba orisa and Fon vodun³ appears only a few years later (1957). With its heavy emphasis on initiatory processes, Verger firmly bases his data in the religious sphere, providing vivid and detailed accounts of the symbolic significance of religious practice and mythology, but still leaving a taste for more, for how these institutions tally with other aspects of social interaction. Yet another early ethnography is provided by Maupoil (1943), an ethnographer and colonial administrator in Benin whose authoritative account of Fa divination displays his masterly grasp of the mathematical aspects of divinatory practice. Again, little social context was provided relating to the use made of divination in everyday (or, indeed, specific) social contexts, or relating to the background of diviners themselves, and making little mention of the religious institutions surrounding divination and linking it to the 'voodoo' complex. At a time when life-histories were not yet in fashion, the systematic cataloguing of practice was very much favoured. Augé's more recent work (1988) derives an obvious inspiration from Verger, viewing religious practice in this part of Africa as an expression of morality and ideology.

Vodhun, as these deities are termed locally,⁴ are treated by Augé as a relatively homogeneous complex: explanation and analysis make little differentiation between various groups, and vodhun in Benin and Togo are amalgamated to become expressions of shared cosmological and mythological beliefs. While it is the case that vodhun as belief, practice and religious complex⁵ is indeed present from Nigeria to present-day Ghana, the continuities it displays and which serve to enhance a sense of shared identity are paired with important differences used to mobilise ethnic differentiation. Vodhun can thus hardly be treated as homogenous practice or ideology.

Thus armed with theoretical reflections on the mostly francophone literature on this region, and an intellectual training firmly based within British academic tradition, I had originally intended to attempt a wider contextualisation of vodhun religion in everyday practice, while simultaneously pursuing a particular interest in the 'couvents de féticheuses' which seemed to be frequently mentioned in the literature relating particularly to Benin and Togo. This, I thought, would constitute the focus of my work, as it delved into the depths of gender issues, while also relating to wider discourses of religious practice and, I suspected, medical knowledge. The latter was, originally, an idea formulated as the result of inference, rather than being explicitly stated in other accounts on this region. Moreover, if the expression and creation of

gender identities featured prominently in vodhun, how was this to be interpreted in terms of 'modernity', in view of the flow between historical context and present-day sociality?

My interest in vodhun in Togo among a group of Watchi, rather than the Fon of Benin, a far more 'traditional' choice for such a study, was influenced partly by the relative scarcity of ethnographic interest in and, consequently, written material on Togolese vodhun, and partly by the rather diverse and agitated history of migration of various groups in the south and south-east of this country. How have these movements influenced religious institutions and in what ways, if at all, have religious institutions come to reflect historical movements? Had this group of Watchi, whose very existence has been predicated upon violent historical upheavals and migrations, spanning territories far to the east and the west of current Watchi settlements,⁶ acquired specific vodhun so as to demarcate its specific identity and territorial belonging? If the Watchi, Mina and Adja in what is now contemporary Togo had indeed originated from both western and eastern locales, what defining features did they use in order to demonstrate both affinity and difference from other neighbouring groups, such as the politically more powerful Yoruba and Fon polities to the east, and the Anlo-Ewe, Guen and Asante to the west, with whom they were all clearly historically associated? It has been pointed out to me more than once that the Fon hold the knowledge about 'real vodhun', and that the Ewe to their west are mere 'imitators'; that the royal court among the Fon in Benin provided a far greater interest and focus for ethnographic study, specifically when it came to investigating the links between vodhun as religious institution and kings as holders of political power (Bay 1995). While it is true that the Fon have displayed a far greater tendency than the Watchi towards centralised states and political institutions organised around specific monarchies, it is precisely out of the 'blurred' status of the Ewe as a whole that my interest grew.

The Watchi are separated from the Fon by the Mono River, which runs approximately 15 km to the east of the site of my fieldwork. With such proximity, was it indeed the case that the Watchi considered themselves as having a separate identity and, if so, how explicitly formulated would such discourses be? If implicit, what modes of expression would they find? In other words, could the fact that the Fon and Ewe generally share the same overall vodhun pantheon be good grounds for their amalgamation in analytical and theoretical terms? While political institutions are acknowledged as being different in character, religious ones have been automatically subsumed under the hegemonic labelling of 'vodhun'. However, while several historians had focused directly on the history of migrations which feature so prominently in the past of this region,

my intention was very much to concentrate on religious institutions in Watchi sociality. Little did I know at the time that this would also make me delve into the depths of Watchi kinship in rather unexpected ways. The crude divide between what have traditionally been termed, in anthropological theorising, the matrilineal Asante and patrilineal Fon and Yoruba, provided a cradle for intermediate groups, such as the Watchi, to establish religious institutions with a decidedly composite outlook.

The accounts included in this book should provide at least partial answers to these issues, although the material is by no means complete, exclusive nor, indeed, hegemonic. Nor is this study itself intended as an explicit comparative study between the various Ewe groups represented in the numerous settlements along the coasts of contemporary Ghana, Togo and Benin. Rather, it draws its inspiration from a dialogue which engaged me with several male and female healers and 'féticheuses' (or initiates/devotees of vodhun secret societies, as I shall hereafter refer to them), a dialogue which centred primarily on how these specialists conceived of their particular identities as people in possession of specialised and exclusive knowledge of vodhun deities and cosmology. Healers of the vodhun, and others who acknowledged some kind of affiliation with the gods, often vied for ever closer association with these cosmological entities in their quest for greater power, and healing influence in particular. Contesting claims for power had obvious social repercussions. Paradoxically, affiliation to shrines seems to have acted as an acknowledged booster for such claims while also representing a powerful levelling mechanism, since vodhun are also part of a discourse where equality is emphasised, and where the complementary character of deities, and the concomitant identities of associated humans, is also propounded.

In lengthy conversations with a number of informants, friends and, sometimes, acquaintances openly opposed to my probing inquiries, I was also made to share in the perceptions others had of the vodhun, of the 'priests', 'priestesses', 'devotees', healers and others considered closely associated with these deities. The considerations of those directly involved in 'worship' are as much at play in the making of religion as are the views of those on the margins of openly religious activity. Interestingly, however, vodhun feature as a *potential* influence in most people's lives, as unexpected events might bring the deities into focus where they were previously allocated only a rather insignificant role. Thus there appears not to be a hegemonic discourse around vodhun, and the importance afforded them will depend on life events but also, undoubtedly, personal ambition in some cases and relational conflicts in others. Nevertheless, while it is probably safe to assert that vodhun, as a

religious complex, permeates the lived world of most Watchi, including that of the few who have adopted monotheistic religions such as Christianity,⁷ deities tend to move in and out of people's lives depending on factors such as life-cycle, professional prospects and, not least, the shifting contexts of gender identities.

A FIELD

Upon my first arrival in Lomé, endowed with my research visa and residence permit, I set about looking for my future settlement. Etienne A., to whom I had just been introduced by a mutual friend, proved an invaluable support. Trained in sociology at the Université du Bénin, he had a keen interest in anthropology and its concomitant methodological approaches, including ethnographic fieldwork. He worked as a research assistant at ORSTOM,⁸ and had for many years acted as the fieldwork assistant of a prominent French anthropologist working in Togo. Perhaps a reflection of differing colonial and postcolonial anthropological traditions, he expressed great surprise at my idea of residing *in situ* far from the capital, rather than paying regular visits to my chosen field site during the year, especially since I had simultaneously already been offered an office as a base at the Institut d'Études Démographiques in Lomé. Within a few days, Etienne and I set off to visit friends and acquaintances of his in several villages located in the region near Vogan, considered the capital of vodhun in Togo.

By this time, after just one or two weeks in Lomé, I had become slightly cautious about all the advice directing me towards the south-east, the 'real home' of vodhun. The well-intentioned advice propounded by expatriates who had been in Togo for a long time appeared to confirm essentialising discourses about the bounded and untouched nature of some societies. Those in the south-east seemed to fit this mould perfectly. They had, I was told, remained more or less untouched by colonial encroachment, and, if I was looking for vodhun, this is where I would find it. The difficulty remained, nevertheless, of ascertaining to what extent this neo-colonial iterative discourse about the otherness of natives was replicated in the local imagination. Among many Togolese, and particularly city dwellers, certain areas such as the south-east are indeed perceived as the cradle of unblemished religious fervour, a reputation which is itself cultivated by vodhun priests in this region, as I was to learn later.

My scepticism led me to decide, at least temporarily, on another course of action, and I left Lomé for a few days to visit newly made acquaintances in the plateau region around Mont Agou, the location of several Ewe settlements bordering on Ghana, and strongly

influenced by Christianity. The contrast with the south-east, in many ways, could not have been more marked: geographically and ecologically, the plateau region is lush, covered in forest vegetation, with relatively dry, crisp air. Antheaume (1982) attributes the almost complete conversion of local populations to Christianity, in colonial times, to the very early arrival of missionaries and to their concentration in this region. Its cool dry climate, and the relative absence of severe forms of malaria, allegedly made it more bearable for these settlers than any other part of the country. The seemingly easy conversion to Christianity, however, must be attributed to more complex factors than the sheer number of missionaries in the area (see Debrunner 1965).⁹

Looking more closely at the syncretic embrace of Christianity and vodhun in the region of Mont Agou might have offered a valuable alternative focus to my research, and has indeed been the subject of other studies in the region primarily on the Ghanaian side (Meyer 1995, Mullings 1984). However, I decided against this, as I came to wonder how the notion of interaction, resistance and contestation between different fields of knowledge and influence came to be expressed instead in the context of a religious complex (vodhun) that did its best to set itself apart from Christianity. In other words, how could vodhun practices in this area make such claims on authenticity, and cast themselves as being 'close to tradition' in the popular imagination, when they had played and still continued to play such a prominent role in the interface between colonialism and resistance, and, previously, in the slave trade? If the strength of 'tradition' is partly predicated on its relationship with a powerful counterpart, as has indeed been the case with vodhun, how did the present circumstances come to crystallise? (For more on these debates, see Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, Kramer 1993, Masquelier 1993, Stoller 1995).

The site of fieldwork was situated approximately 80 km north-east of Lomé, some 40 km from the sea and 15 km from the border with Benin. The nearest main road passed through the neighbouring village of Amegnran. A dirt road of some 3 km led from there to a central marketplace surrounded by a group of hamlets known collectively as the village of Momé Hounkpati.¹⁰ From this marketplace, several other paths led away to other hamlets and villages at some distance.

The central hamlet within which the marketplace itself is situated was most commonly referred to as Atikesimé, and it was here that I settled the first time. Atikesimé was also the residence of the chief of the collective village of Momé Hounkpati. Within three weeks, I was paying regular visits to informants in the hamlets of Balime, Bofeme and Dzokofe.

I lived in what was commonly known as Kpaka's household, and Huntosudi, Hundalodji, Atsufui and Sufuhunde, Kpaka's four wives, were my closest neighbours and companions. His senior wife was a prominent trader who had left him several years previously to live and trade in Lomé. She visited him in the village only occasionally, during funerals, or other social and ritual occasions requiring her presence. My hut, situated inside the compound that constituted Kpaka's household, had previously been occupied by Kpaka's father, who had died some years earlier. Unbeknown to me at the time, Atsufui, Hundalodji and Huntosudi had previously been using it as a cooking place, and lost this valuable asset upon my arrival.

I was soon introduced to both male and female healers. Yet it originally proved more difficult to convince women about the nature of my work and my interest in theirs. I gradually managed to establish fruitful relationships with a number of healers of both sexes, some of whom accepted me as a constant fixture at their shrines and homes for the full period of fieldwork, while others provided more intermittent contacts. I attended their practice when they received patients, either in their home or waiting at the vodhun's shrine for people to arrive. Some healers travelled to see patients who had called for them for treatment, and I accompanied the healer on his or her journey on such occasions whenever possible. I also conducted interviews with patients and healers, whom I saw at their homes after treatment had been dispensed. As most healing sessions start at dawn – coolness being a prerequisite for the treatment of many ills and ailments – I would often return to my hut by mid-morning, having spent several hours in the company of healers where the customary drink of *sodabi*, the local gin, was offered in rounds several times over. The rest of the day was often spent in the company of neighbours and friends, where I honed my skills at recording genealogies, primarily and originally as a helpful and practical personal mnemonic device to keep track of social relations. I had looked upon this as a pragmatic exercise. Little did I realise then how intimately intertwined the spheres of kinship (in the rather traditional and wooden anthropological sense) and medicine would prove to be.

At the core of my interest lay the relationship between women's and men's knowledge, whether both sexes had equal access to vodhun deities as such and, by extension, whether they had access to the same aspects of knowledge about vodhun. Three of my female informants were leaders of vodhun shrines, and had also been initiated into 'secret societies'. Mesigatoyi, who headed a shrine for vodhun Aveyibo (Black Forest) featured prominently in the first six months of my fieldwork, but became increasingly withdrawn as my own understanding of vodhun increased, and as my questions

became, perhaps, too close to the bone. The other two women leaders continued to be regular hosts throughout fieldwork. Their life histories provided many insights into the life-cycles of women. They also highlighted particularly well the connections that occasionally triggered the onslaught of possession and the beginning of a new life as devotee to a deity.

Among the male healers who formed the core of my circle of informants were Kokoduku, a bonesetter who was also the custodian of the chiefly ancestral stools; Hunkpe, the cult leader of one of the most important vodhun shrines in the village, embroiled for the past 30 years in a custody battle over the guardianship of the shrine; Dzogbesi, the contender for the leadership of the shrine; (another) Dzogbesi, a cult leader dealing mostly in witchcraft-related illnesses; and Jean and Thomas, two relatively young healers who had both recently returned to the village after having spent a few years in Lomé. The latter two had a relatively high competence in French, and had completed at least the first cycle of secondary education. Nevertheless, they had been unable to sustain themselves in Lomé in the long run, and had now returned and established themselves as healers and leaders of vodhun shrines. Finally, a *bokono*, or diviner, also featured among my closest informants, but our mutual interest in 'things of the vodhun' was interrupted by his very sudden death.

Each healer was asked about the history of the vodhun of which he/she was a 'patron', how the vodhun had been acquired by the person or local descent group, what its specific characteristics were and how it was passed on from one generation to another, if at all. This original ease of access, however, was paired with more ambiguous and conflicting underlying tensions. Upon arrival, and after initially starting work with three or four healers, I received home visits or calls through members of my compound from healers who strongly desired to become my informants, and who wished to be included in my ethnographic enquiries, to which I agreed. As the contestation of power among healers and spiritual leaders is often channelled through public acknowledgement, this study originally came to encompass and contextualise the public expression of such competition. However, as my questions became more probing some of the religious specialists I had been working with eluded me, preferring to abscond to their fields before my arrival, although they may well explicitly have asked me to come. Refusing to visit would have been rude, yet paying them the respect which they expected from me also placed them under the perceived obligation of answering my questions or allowing me to attend their practice while they treated patients.

Other informants included several 'féticheuses', or initiates of the vodhun secret societies. Three of my 'co-wives', the women who

shared the courtyard where my hut was located, were initiates, and shared piecemeal information with me on several occasions. The chief's three wives were also all initiates, and occasionally imparted information rather jokingly and in indirect ways. Solada and Misisu were brothers, both in the rare category of male initiates. I had the privilege of knowing Solada particularly well. By his own account, he allowed me to share in his knowledge as far as his own taboos and desire would allow him.

By contrast to the healers, devotees, most of whom had always been reluctant to become regular informants, at least formally, became less reticent as time passed. Nevertheless, they never allowed me to record any of our private conversations, or take notes openly during our encounters. Only in the context of public events were recordings and the taking of photographs openly encouraged.

Openness of access, alternating with taboo and restriction, have been constant features of fieldwork, providing contradictory settings, rules and expectations throughout. Vodhun is characterised by its very public presence and constant insertion in social settings, where the performance of ritual is publicly marked on a daily basis. However, it simultaneously remains shrouded in secrecy and concealment, and is associated with obscure practices, immoral use of power, and specialised and secluded knowledge. These facets are part and parcel of the discourses which surround vodhun and, of course, reflect human behaviours and expectations surrounding religion and morality.

I had relatively free access to all open spaces and public places normally accessible to other members of the community. Vodhun figurines exposed in public were for all to see, and my presence in this respect did little to alter the general code of access. Within two weeks of establishing residence, many of my hosts began inviting me to religious celebrations, and most engaged me in a rather open way about their vodhun and, particularly, the life events which had led them to seek out the protection of a deity or, alternatively, to see this task devolved upon them by social convention. As long as I abided by the taboos imposed on most as they approached the deities, my presence appeared relatively unproblematic and even, to some, amusing.

My data reflect these tensions: many of the accounts surrounding both life histories and cosmological explanation appear remarkably streamlined, and access all too easy. Illness often features in these narratives where vodhun are said to have saved the lives of many a healer or devotee, and are now praised for having made people happy. These narratives were often presented in surprisingly stereotypical and standardised fashion, at least for an outside observer. There is, however, another explanation for this seeming

homogeneity: once an individual has become closely associated with a deity, one's existence prior to the formalisation of this bond tends to be forgotten. Informants' life histories prior to the vodhun's involvement are thus part of a narrative style which tends to 'flatten' out differences. From a methodological viewpoint, the originally opaque discourse and the amnesia relating to past lives had to be unpacked in other ways, and other informants were therefore pivotal in providing viewpoints, details and, sometimes, gossip. Beyond what they could tell about particular individuals, their contributions to my understanding also allowed for a considerable glimpse into how vodhun are perceived by 'lay' people, by those who have not (yet?) been affected by vodhun in the same way as some of their contemporaries. In addition, this streamlining discourse is partly enforced by taboos (or so people would say) where a previous life had become irrelevant, and 'the vodhun does not want me to talk about this'. Such protective devices were obviously used to shield informants from the curious proddings of an anthropologist. However, they feature prominently as identity markers in the relationships many villagers entertain with one another, not least those between husbands and wives. Strategies of using such taboos provided a powerful device for women to stave off unreasonable or overly demanding behaviour from their husbands.

As deities and their disciples are constantly in focus while also remaining firmly in the domain of the hidden, the balance between what was allowed or not was a constant reminder of my status as an outsider, although I know that many insiders are constantly faced with the same dilemmas and, like me, constantly run the risk of overstepping the boundaries of the permissible. After all, this is precisely how new members are continually recruited into vodhun societies: the inadvertent breaking of a taboo, the unwitting mention of a name that should remain unspoken, or imprudently walking into an area designated for the gods, are all simultaneously part of public and specialised knowledge. While I was rarely excluded from events taking place in the Sacred Forest (*la Forêt Sacrée*, as my informants referred to it in French), one of the most exclusive and secluded areas for the performance of religious ceremonies, I could never openly enquire about how many women were actually initiates. Through covert household samples, I arrived at an estimation that some 70–80 per cent of adult women (approximately 18 years of age and above) have undergone initiation in one of the secret societies¹¹ associated with vodhun, as was evident through the scarifications and tattoos that they carry on their foreheads, arms, shoulders and backs. As for statistical data about the occurrence of possession, I learnt that most women undergo initiation as a direct result of the onslaught of possession and

affliction and, once initiation has been completed, are generally prone to more controlled forms of possession as these subsequently tend to occur during ritual contexts only. Not all initiates, however, formally continue their association with the shrines. It is therefore difficult to ascertain what percentage of initiates are actually involved in possession and its associated performances. And although all devotees are potentially prone to this experience, those who continue to be active within the shrine after initiation will obviously experience possession on a regular and rather public basis, while those who neglect these ties can go unpunished for a long time, but are said to make themselves vulnerable to further violent, unpredictable and potentially dangerous episodes of spirit possession because of the non-observance of religious obligations and the dissatisfaction of the implicated deity.

As healers were often also spiritual leaders, ritual events regularly took place at the shrines which they headed. Details of initiation rituals, possessions, purification rites and healing ceremonies were recorded, both in writing and through the use of photographs and tape recordings. Descriptions of events were based on observation, complemented by interviews, surveys and diaries sometimes compiled by informants. Details of conversations and other oral communications were derived from extensive note-taking and tape-recordings. Exegetic information and interpretations were collected after the events in interviews with participants involved.

Observations of village life, that beacon of anthropology, were recorded through written and taped recordings of conversations, conflicts, expressions of friendships, loyalties, alliances, etc. Originally, I did not employ an assistant. Gabriel had been told by the chief, his paternal uncle, 'to look after' me at the beginning of my stay. This originally involved practical assistance, such as locating the village well and various stalls in the market, and generally mapping out the area. Gabriel also introduced me to some of the healers in the village. He gradually came to be identified by others as my assistant, and became my constant companion. An adolescent girl of 16, Ama, also helped me in my visits to various women and women healers in the village, introducing me to households outside my hamlet of residence, where it would have been inappropriate to venture without prior introduction.

Upon hearing the name of the village, Komlan, my Ewe teacher, launched into a rather excited explanation of its etymology. He already knew of my interest in medicine, and in its potential association with devotees of the vodhun. When I let him know of my decision to settle in Momé Hounkpati, I was told, a little embarrassingly and with a longish pause before the explanation began, that *Momé* referred to a woman's vagina (the suffix *me* corre-

sponding to the English preposition 'in'). *Hun* (*Houn*) referred to blood, *kpa* to an enclosure; and *ti* to a forest. Hence Momé Hounkpati: Vagina/Forest/Enclosure/Blood, could be approximately translated as 'the forest of enclosure of blood in (the) vagina'. As we shall see later, the significance of this name is closely associated with the status and constitution of vodhun shrines and women's identity.

Other etymologies were also provided by Komlan and Gabriel, and also by two prominent elders in the villages, Folikui and Kokoduku. Momé was said to derive from *mo*, the word used for trap (and again, a woman's vagina is often considered in this way), and *me*, a suffix corresponding to our preposition 'in', hence indicating location. *Momé* therefore could mean 'in the trap', a name perceived as reflecting the days when the hunting of game and birds was still common practice (and again echoing many of the metaphors equating women with wild game). Hounkpati is the name of the chiefly descent group currently holding power, claiming descent from an unnamed female apical ancestress believed to have been the founder of the village, three or four centuries ago.

The other name in use, that of Atikesimé, designates primarily the very centre of Momé Hounkpati where the market is located and where the chiefly lineage resides. Atikesimé is said to mean 'the marketplace in the forest' (*Ati*: tree; *asi* or *si*: market; *me* is the preposition in, hence 'the market in the forest'). According to local discourse, when ancestors came to settle here after their departure from Notsé to the north-west, the site appeared attractive because of the availability of game and shelter presented by the forest. They decided to settle and created a weekly market. Most of the forest has now disappeared, and the region is covered in shrub vegetation and savannah. No hunting takes place as game is scarce and the government implements a total ban on hunting, with very heavy fines for poaching. Nevertheless, this does not prevent many a man from venturing out at night to catch hares and agoutis (a large, wild, vegetarian rat), mostly using poison to catch their prey. The forest may have disappeared, but the market remains one of the largest and busiest in the region, and is regularly visited, every Monday, by a wide range of traders both from the local region and from Lomé.

The name Atikesimé offers several other etymological explanations. The following possibilities appear, and again were pointed out to me by Komlan and by two of the healers who subsequently became close friends. If segmented differently, one obtains the word *atike*, meaning medicine, or *atikesi*, which means fever in a very general sense, but can also be used as a particular reference to malaria fever. Hence, the following possibilities appear: *Atikesimé* could mean 'the market in the forest'; 'the market of medicine(s)'; and finally 'in fever'. The three latter interpretations were confirmed by some

informants in the village, but most generally agreed that the common understanding lay in the first explanation, namely the 'market in the forest'.

OTHERNESS WITHIN, WITHOUT

Identities are at best malleable, in the making. The term 'identity' is highly elusive, problematic, as it seeks to delineate structures (of kinship, social organisation, ethnicity) or forms (gender, occupation, nationhood) which are never really there but nevertheless make themselves felt in very real terms. Identities can thus be mobilised differently, from within or without, either to demarcate inclusion and solidarity for instance, or to leave out those 'who are not like us', as was so markedly reified by colonial administrators and military in an attempt to justify the colonial enterprise. We could perhaps agree with Miller's postulation that 'identities are "negotiated" rather than natural' (1998: 171), yet this leaves us with the unresolved dilemma of ascertaining what to do when identities are indeed reified by social actors – from within or without – in particular circumstances. We may be rid of the totalising categorisations of the colonial era, and may have become more aware of the complexities of the dynamic processes involved in the creation of identities, yet we still face the difficult task of describing and explaining *how* these dynamics operate at particular times. If communities are imagined,¹² they remain potent evocations for what is present and elusive at one and the same time.

Let us be clear. Alongside the stringent internal critique anthropologists have applied to their own enterprise in the postcolonial era (Asad 1973, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Fernandez 1986, Kuper 1988, Stocking 1983, Vansina 1985, Wolf 1982), other academics have also been quick to latch on to the weaknesses of our discipline (Affergan 1991, Deleuze and Guattari 1987, Miller 1998, Mudimbe 1988, and more recently Appadurai 1998, Bhabha 1994). It is primarily the notion of bounded, located culture that has elicited most criticism. The structural-functionalist school of the colonial era did little to dispel the idea that non-European societies, and African ones in particular, could be constituted of anything but cogent and powerfully coherent institutions and social systems, mostly based on kinship, and tied to specific and well-identified territories (save for nomadic groups, who defied Western European logic and had to be settled). Nomadic thought, in its pragmatic and figurative senses was, to paraphrase Miller, a threat to the establishment of an ordered society. Likewise, the mixed cultural heritage of several groups in the west African region – Amselle's understanding of 'métissage' – was

noticeably absent in academic discourses. In this way, identities could be tied to a bounded intersociality which had nothing to do with the outside. Traditions, as they are expressed for instance in rituals, ancestor worship and witchcraft, functioned as the glue which justified, internally, the existence of the social institutions upon which organisation was built. The critique is well known, let it suffice to reiterate some relevant points in this context. This internal logic imposed from the outside allowed for social entities to remain 'other' and, more importantly, to be perceived as isolated from the dynamics of power between various groups in the regions under scrutiny and, as an extension, from the dynamics of power introduced by colonial agents.

This postcolonial critique has, rightly, made us aware that the subject/object of our studies is as much a product of our research endeavours, of 'us being there', as it is a product of our imagination; an imagined community, yet again, but where the identity of actors shifts in multiple directions. It is no longer the case that anthropology is merely descriptive, nor does it dare look upon cultures as isolated entities located elsewhere. Yet the writing of/about culture is as much, if not more, to be perceived between the lines: human actions, knowing the world, being in the world,¹³ are otherwise constituted than the process of writing allows for.

There is, therefore, a difficulty in using denominations such as 'the Watchi', 'the Ewe' or any other ethnic terminology for that matter. In addition to the critique delineated earlier, we are also faced with the problematic consequences of using a term in a contemporaneous context without it necessarily having had the same connotations in a historical past. There is no necessary linearity here, no certainties, in spite of some claims to the contrary.¹⁴ Retaining a certain critical outlook on such historical developments has to be balanced against the very real criticism of denying such groups a proper historical context. It is crucial to remember, nevertheless, that identities, however defined and however malleable such definitions might be, remain constituted in the interface between people, in their everyday dealings with one another, yet without denying the historicity of social and cultural encounters. The local identities reified by colonial agents were a product of that imagination, and the invention of traditional culture a further consequence of a particular encounter.

It is in this context that we have to understand vodhun. Obviously a force to contend with in local discourses about identity, it is at the crossroads of many diverging claims. The urban elites emphatically describe the south-east as the last foothold of an indigenous form of religion they perceive as scary, powerful and backward. The religious divide represented between the mostly Christianised towns of Lomé

and Kpalimé and the vodhun cults of the suburbs such as the quartier de Bê, or countryside such as the villages outside the towns, relies on such distinctions remaining intact. Yet it is obvious that the realms of vodhun and Christianity have never been hermetically constituted (see Field 1937, 1960 for early studies of Christianity in the region, and also Greene 1996, Meyer 1995). Not surprisingly, many urbanites seek the assistance of vodhun healers when required, but often only as a last resort, as they often perceive themselves so far removed from local tradition that recourse to its practices is perceived as undermining their status.

It has also to be pointed out that while sometimes reviled as backward by the elite or confined to secrecy for political reasons,¹⁵ vodhun cults and rituals regularly come out of the closet during official ceremonies. In the era following independence Éyadéma, inspired by Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire, instituted a national policy of authenticity, underlining the ethnic differences present within the Togolese territory while putting them to use in the interests of the nation state. Folkloristic performances led by the aptly named 'groupes d'animation' and held at national (and international) events were made to represent the diverse ethnic identities of the country, and used to highlight the purported policy of tolerance instituted by the postcolonial state (cf. Toulabor 1986, 1993).

The interface between how vodhun is constituted as 'authentic' by a number of actors often gives rise to competing claims on knowledge. This image of the authentic is represented, enacted, lived, maintained and allowed to adapt to new circumstances, to new modernities, in various contexts. This is partly what allows vodhun to be perceived at its strongest in this region, while tolerating the presence of a few Catholic catechists and an Italian missionary hospital nearby. In the village itself, not many seem to care about the proselytising catechist from Kpalime in the west, and only a few educated members such as the chief (also a vodhun adept) and the primary school teacher from the north, appeared to be regular visitors at his Sunday services. Yet many parents felt no reluctance at sending their children to the catechist's afternoon and Sunday classes: the teaching of the Bible in Ewe, and the possibility of learning to write their own language, were deemed by many far preferable to the French education offered at the local state school. The preacher himself acknowledged that the children who came here were sent by their parents primarily to improve their language skills in Ewe. His church did not attract many adults, and he stated to me that:

Ici, il n'y a que les vodous qui comptent. Les gens ne s'intéressent pas à l'église, alors que dans ma région, il y a beaucoup de croyants. Il y a beaucoup à faire, et surtout il faut combattre la polygamie.

[Only the vodhun matter here. People don't really care about the church, whereas in my region there are many believers. There is still much to be done, and, above all, we must fight against polygamy.]

In Atikesimé, my neighbours and hosts cared for vodhun on a daily basis in their households, compounds, at the marketplace, in the sacred forest and at many other sites. These deities elicited what appeared to me an almost casual respect. In a sense, it is fair to say that for many Watchi, and even among those not directly involved in vodhun practices, there exists a correspondence between the images projected upon them by outsiders as adepts of these cults, and the constitution of their own 'identity' around such deities. Yet far from simply reiterating tradition, adherence to vodhun appears to act as a marker of identities. As such, such adherence is constantly in movement. Embedded in the encounter with the 'outside', vodhun become a highly decisive and, at times, divisive, feature of Watchi commonality.

Let us return for a short while to the images so often associated with vodhun, those of the zombie, of the possessed, the black magic, the pins. They focus on features which reduce vodhun to a set of ritualistic practices. Vodhun is, needless to say, more complex and multi-faceted. It is, above all, far more than religion in a reductionist sense, and certainly far more than a set of ritual practices. In what follows, I discuss how vodhun is linked to an understanding of Watchi personhood, locality and territoriality. Through a complex web of bodily images, connections are established between humans and the landscape which they inhabit. The territory upon which the Watchi have settled is conceived of as a geographical location and as cosmological landscape in very palpable terms. In this respect, being Watchi is tied to a sense of territorial belonging. Yet cosmologies involving vodhun also remain highly deterritorialised and malleable, allowing for movement, resettlement and ambiguity.

If vodhun mediates in the settlement of humans in particular localities, it makes use of bodily images which are also highly gendered. The multi-faceted understanding of personhood contributes to the creation of identities which relate to discourses of sociality, intra- and inter-gender relationships, and to historical legitimation of settlement. Men and women are both intricately involved in this process of legitimation, at a pragmatic level through physical reproduction and, symbolically, through the expansion of cosmological territoriality. Women in particular, through their almost exclusive rights of membership in vodhun cults, are crucial to the perpetuation of cosmology and the historical continuity of the

group. Indeed this is so to the extent that fertility itself is thought to become impossible without this female link with vodhun. The use of esoteric knowledge in the context of initiation thus serves to shape gender identities, and helps create gender differences between men and women.

It should be clear by now that it is impossible to speak of many of the groups in south-east Togo without taking account of vodhun, and that this religious complex is highly predicated on its interaction with the outside world. The contexts in which these deities appear are often couched in a moralising discourse (Brodwin 1996, Lovell 1993, Rosenthal 1998, and for a more general discussion Overing 1985), one where illness, possession, suffering and affliction take pride of place. Angering the gods can ultimately cause death and, if left unchecked, make whole communities wither. Yet providing a cure, alleviating others' ills, and making use of the gods and their powers is not a simple affair: healers' claims on knowledge are a matter of constant questioning and contestation (see also Reynolds-Whyte 1997). The legitimacy attributed to healers partially depends on their previous associations with the gods, with ancestors and with modernity.

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