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Dominican folk Catholicism – healing spirits away from tourism

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The following contribution is based on a four-month-long fieldwork in the Southwest of the Dominican Republic. It is an abridgment of my master thesis which deals with possession and healing in the Dominican Republic and is meant to be a brief introduction to the local folk – healing system. The material was gathered from participant observations and qualitative interviews when I visited numerous healers between the capital Santo Domingo and an area called Elias Piña, including the towns San Christóbal, Azua and San Juan de la Maguana.

Generally the Dominican Republic is considered more as a tourist paradise than as a place for investigations on folk healing and folk religion. This is presumably the reason why there is little literature on folk medicine referring to the Dominican Republic, whereas there is plenty of material on Haiti. One can find several detailed studies on Haitian folk medicine, but nothing comparable on Dominican folk medicine. Therefore, as far as literature is concerned, I was dependent on a few essays and studies by Dominican authors (Mañon López et al. 1992, Mañon Rossi 1983, Tejeda Ortíz et al. 1993, Zaglul 1980) and a study written by Davis (1987).

During my investigations it emerged that most of the inhabitants of the Dominican Republic are not very proud of their African heritage - a fact that initially made it difficult to enter this field of research. Asking about *vodú* turned out to be problematic because the locals perceive themselves as Catholics, even though they apparently practice *vodúistic* possession rites and other *vodú*-related techniques. However, it is only the investigator who sees a contradiction in these circumstances. In the world of the locals, African and Catholic practices already merged a long time ago. Therefore I agree with Davis (1987, p. 60) to describe the Dominican folk Religion as *folk Catholicism* because this expression respects the perceptions of the locals more than the expression *vodú*.

To be able to define the medical system more clearly, it will be necessary to describe more in detail the religious system which is strongly linked to the folk medical system. Even though the Dominican religious system is different to that of Haiti, there are many aspects in common. This is because both countries have parallels in their slave history. In comparison to Haiti, Dominican folk religion, however, is less homogeneous and more distant from its African origins (Andújar 1999, 191). It has less diversity of spirits and more simplified structures, as Davis (1987, 66) maintains. The spirits called *loas* in Haitian folk religion are called *misterios* or *luases* in the Dominican Republic. They mostly appear in the form of Catholic saints and each of them has two names: an African and a Catholic one; for example Belié Belcán and St. Michael are one and the same *misterio*. The locals say that a spirit tends to have the name of a saint when it is painted, while possessing a human it bears its African name. This could mean that as long as a *misterio* is only a painting it is not considered “real” and therefore keeps the Catholic name, whereas in its physical manifestation in the body of a human, it gets the “real” African name back. Nowadays not all of the local people are aware that the second name of a *misterio* has an African origin, some people only know that a second name exists but do not remember where it came from.

God and the Virgin Mary (la Virgen de la Altagracia) play an important role in Dominican folk Catholicism. On altars one can always find dome pictures of *misterios*, but at least one depiction of God and one of the Virgin Mary is never missing. Unlike Haitians who according to Metraux (1998, 90) interact mainly with the *loas* and not with God himself because he is too abstract, Dominicans often pray and send pleas to the Lord. The Holy Trinity is also a very popular symbol that undoubtedly comes from Cristianity and is often represented by three crosses next to each other, called *calvario*. Possession of humans can only happen through “normal” *misterios*, such as ordinary saints. However no one can be possessed either by God, or by Virgin Mary, Jesus or the Holy Spirit.

Dominican folk religion is a very open system that has also integrated influences which are neither African nor Catholic, as for example the worshipping of the already extinct indigenous population. Many shrines are to be found which are dedicated to the *fuerza indígena* (indigenous power), embellished with flowers, fruits and figures of native American indigenous people. When discussing Dominican folk religion and folk medicine it is also important to mention that both are extremely inhomogeneous and vary from village to village. Different cults exist and each village has other spiritual preferences, for example, each region considers other spirits to be important.

The causes of disease vary, though they are often seen in connection with spirits. In my master thesis I used the distinction between *natural* (biomedical) and *supernatural* (spiritual) causes of disease. Now I do not use this artificial subdivision any more because spirits are not considered “unnatural” by the local people. Nevertheless, there are diseases caused by spirits and diseases which have other causes. Slight ailments, such as colds, are not considered to be caused by spirits, but more severe diseases are sometimes also not considered to have spiritual causes either. Whether a spiritual cause is given or not may be investigated through oracles or other divination methods which I will describe in more detail below. Sufferings with no spiritual cause are often treated with herbs at home or with the help of a local herbalist or biomedical doctor, whereas diseases with spiritual causes are definitely assigned to folk healers.

Witchcraft is often assumed to provoke illness, particularly if a disease appears very suddenly and / or lasts for a long time. There are various ways of practising witchcraft and they are all summarised under the term „bad influences“. According to my informants it happens, for example, when somebody hires a *brujo* (sorcerer) to send the spirit of a dead man to a person for reasons of vengeance or envy. This can cause the involuntary possession of this person which can result in madness or serious physical illness (Esteban Deive 1996, 249 f). A kind of spirit that can make people sick is the *bacá*. A *bacá* is a created spirit that serves its owner to protect property, but it can also be sent to somebody to make him / her sick. Each person who gets in touch with it except its owner becomes physically harmed (Esteban Deive 1996, 257 f). *Mal de ojo* (the evil eye) is especially assumed to cause illness in babies. It happens when somebody looks with envy at a child and makes compliments without including the words “God bless you”. If children become suddenly sick without a physical reason detected by a doctor or healer, *mal de ojo* is in many cases the perceived cause (Esteban Deive 1996, 256, Hauschild 1980, 243 ff). Diseases can also be caused by *dirty blood* or the rapid change between heat and cold (Laguette 1987, 68). These ideas have obviously been inspired by the theory of humoral pathology which was brought to the country by European conquerers (Ackerknecht 1984, 115, Greifeld 1995, 118). Finally disease can be caused by not paying enough attention to the *misterios*. According to my informants, the *misterios* get angry when they are not taken seriously, when they do not receive enough sacrifices and especially when people do not believe in them. This leads to involuntary possession as they want to attract attention and this possession can cause physical and mental illness (Esteban Deive 1996, 249). After diagnosing this certain cause of illness, the frequently recommended therapy is to deliberately get in touch with the *misterios* to find out how to deal with spiritual possession.

An other way to calm down angry *misterios* is to go on a pilgrimage to repent one's sins by sleeping on the floor in front of an altar.

People who have experienced displeased *misterios* often become spiritual healers themselves after they are healthy again. This phenomenon seems to parallel Eliade's (1980, 43) concept of *shamanic disease* in which disease is the initial reason to become a shaman. Many of the healers I interviewed indicated that they first suffered from a severe physical or mental illness before they started their own career as healers. While suffering, they had spiritual encounters with certain *misterios* and were told what they had to do to recover. When they were healthy again, some were given an order by the *misterios* to cure other people, others felt that they had received the gift of healing powers. I would mainly consider people who became healers through this experience as "spiritual healers", even though I am not able to make a proper classification among healers in general. However there is barely one healer who can be classified only as either a herbalist or a spiritual healer. Most of them are both and often they also perform divination and help solve life and love problems. There are also some people who on the one hand work as a *curandero* (healer) while on the other practice *brujería* (witchcraft). The latter are called *brujos* (scorcerers) who work "on both hands" as Dominicans say and are considered very powerful.

To diagnose diseases healers often use oracles or other divination methods as already mentioned above. The Dominican interpretation basically is that all methods are effective because of to the helping *misterios*. One very popular method is to diagnose through possession. The healer gets possessed himself by one *misterio* and has it speak through his mouth. The *misterio* is supposed to know exactly what this patient is suffering from and whether the disease is caused by spirits or for other reasons, and is able to explain to the patient himself or to the people accompanying him/her. To invoke the *misterio*, the sound of a little bell, incense, cigar smoke and sacrifices can be used to attract it. Another popular method is the use of a state of clairvoyance, *vista clara*, as the locals call it. Some healers for various reasons do not like to be possessed and prefer just to be inspired by a *misterio*. They put themselves into a slight state of trance, waiting for a divine inspiration to declare a diagnosis. Some healers say that they derive this inspiration by the *misterios*, some claim that God himself inspires them. Not only can the causes of a disease be diagnosed with the help of these methods, but also proper treatment can be investigated. One informant told me, for example, that she tells fortunes by predicting folk medical remedies or biomedical medicine to use to cure her patients. Other methods of divination are reading cards or reading coffee grounds. The latter can be done by using a cup of coffee which is nearly empty but still

contains some coffee grounds. Therefore the cup is turned upside down and the coffee dried above an open fire. The dried coffee grounds can now be interpreted. Also a glass full of water with a burning candle behind it can serve as divination. Objects used to prophesize such as cards, coffee cups or water glasses are considered to function as aids that create links between the people and the *misterios*.

No matter whether a disease is caused by “bad influences” or not, a person is mostly treated in two different ways (Prinz 1993). On the one hand, symptoms must be controlled (which can be done through herbs or biomedical remedies) and on the other hand, God and the *misterios* have to be called and asked for assistance. Even healers who actually prefer to treat their patients with herbs instead of faith-healing methods own an altar and do not miss spiritual services. *Ensalmar* (praying for health) for example is a frequently used remedy. People often resort to classical prayers as for example the Ave Maria or the Lord’s Prayer, but also prayers for certain diseases (Esteban Deive 1996, 331 ff). Some healers find it useful to transmit messages and wishes to the *misterios* to gain their assistance. Therefore they write a wish on a sheet of paper and put this paper inside or under a magical object, such as candles, figures of Saints and so-called lightning stones or magnets.

Illness caused by a bad spirit sent by some enemy is called *enviación*. Exorcism in the case of involuntarily possession by the spirit of a dead man can be done through transmitting the sick-making spirit into another living creature like a chicken. For this purpose, a certain group of *misterios* is invoked: the *fuera guédé* which is associated with death. The chief of this group is called San Elías or “Barón del Cementerio” (Baron of the cemetery) and is supposed to live at the cemetery. With his help evil spirits can be sent but also be removed as well. Another technique to get rid of an evil spirit is to use a specially prepared bottle which has a kind of a trap inside. The patient has to spit into the bottle about seven times, thereby capturing the bad spirit.

Applications for protection against “bad influences” are called *resguardos* and can be used separately or combined with other techniques. *Resguardos* can be applied either to prevent illness or, when a person is already sick, to support the effect of other remedies. A very common method of a *resguardo* is the use of a *baño* (bath), a mixture of chemical or herbal ingredients which is used on three consecutive days to wash one’s body. *Baños* can be applied in different ways, such as attracting positive attributes (luck, love or health...) or preventing somebody from receiving negative influences (bad luck, disease or black magic...). The applied liquids are considered to have magical powers and are treated with

respect. Also bathing in sacred springs or rivers is considered as salutary. Other *resguardos*, for example, are amulets which contain images of Saints or “magical weapons”, such as shark or crocodile teeth. *Resguardos* can also be swallowed: one writes a plea and some magical formulas on a sheet of paper, burns it and swallows the ashes with sugar and water.

My impression of Dominican folk healers is that each one of them has a very individual manner of treating his/her patients. The processes in which patients are treated are not always the same and often follow the intuition of the healer. If a patient decides to go to a healer, this decision is mostly not made because of mistrust against biomedicine; the patient just wants to be sure, that not only the symptoms of a disease are treated but also the cause. Many diseases are not considered to be “diseases for a Doctor”, which does not exclude biomedical treatment, but demands for the treatment by a folk healer. The healer is a person who understands the beliefs of the population and who knows how to deal with “bad influences”. A Doctor, on the other hand considers these beliefs as antiquated and underdeveloped. I truly experienced Dominican folk healers as very open and willing to give me information on their spiritual and medical beliefs. I admire their flexibility of incorporating new influences into their traditional system and I look forward to another four-month field trip to deepen my knowledge about their work.

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