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Religion on the dance floor :

Afro-Dominican music and ritual from altars to clubs

Angelina TALLAJ

Abstract: In this essay, I examine the current New York scene and the emerging discourses surrounding the recent visibility of Dominican Voodoo (*Vudú*) and its music. When Dominicans migrated, they brought with them these marginalized genres of music including the music of *Vudú*, and, since the 2000s, this music (*palo*) has moved from the religious arena to the popular music world, in turn changing the nature of the religious rituals. In New York City, *Vudú* ceremonies can now publicly feature drumming and possession and are practiced in commercial venues rather than in private homes and altar spaces. While this move of religious ceremonies from concealed spaces to public dance clubs has led many believers to complain of a compromised authenticity, from the perspective of 'lived religion', all such actions within this environment could be seen as forms of religion. Public and secular performances have changed how practices such as spirit possession are experienced, enacted, and perceived. For example, club goers have developed a new way of dancing to the music where mimicking spirit possession is part of the dance. It is precisely these new seemingly secular practices that have given Dominicans the freedom to exercise more agency in their religious identification.

Keywords: Afro-Dominican, Voodoo, palo drums, possession, trance, lived religion

Résumé : Dans cet article, j'examine les discours qui découlent de la nouvelle visibilité de la musique du *vudú* dominicain dans les bars et boîtes de nuit new-yorkais. Quand les Dominicains sont partis de chez eux, ils ont emmené avec eux ces genres musicaux marginaux, y compris le *vudú*, et depuis le début des années 2000, cette musique (*palo*) est passée de la sphère religieuse à celle de la musique populaire, modifiant à son tour la nature des rituels religieux. A New York, les cérémonies *vudú* présentent au public des tambours et rituels de possession, et sont pratiquées dans des espaces commerciaux, plutôt que dans des espaces privés (maisons) ou religieux (temples). Bien que ce passage des cérémonies religieuses de l'espace privé à l'espace public ait amené de nombreux croyants à se plaindre d'une « authenticité » compromise du point de vue de la « religion vécue », ces pratiques peuvent être considérées comme des formes de religion. Les représentations publiques et laïques ont modifié la manière dont des pratiques telles que la possession d'esprit sont vécues, promulguées et perçues. Par exemple, les amateurs de boîte de nuit ont développé une nouvelle manière de danser sur la musique, l'imitation de la possession d'esprit faisant partie de la danse. Ce sont précisément ces nouvelles pratiques apparemment laïques qui ont donné aux Dominicains la liberté de faire preuve de plus d'autorité dans leur identification religieuse.

Mots-clés : Afro-dominicains, vaudou, tambours du palo, possession, transe, religion vécue

Introduction

In this essay, I present my ethnography and analysis of recent changes in the performance and reception of the music and practices of Dominican *Voodoo* (*Vudú*) in the United States in the 21st century. As the music of *Vudú* (*palo*) moved from traditional religious arenas in the Dominican Republic to the popular music world of clubs, bars, and recording studios in New York City, it has, in turn, challenged and reshaped the nature and perceptions of religious rituals. Recent scholars (Butler 2008; Bazinet 2012; Ferran 2015; Jacobsen & Vestel 2018) have claimed that as migrants confront new cultures and new conceptions of modernity through their musical experiences, music and music cultures can be useful lenses in understanding diasporic-driven shifts in religious practices and identities.

Vudú, an Afro-Caribbean religion characterised by spirit possession, has clear connections to and is deeply influenced by Haitian *Vodou*.¹ Although its practice is ubiquitous in the Dominican Republic, practitioners have historically concealed its rituals, drums, and music to separate their practices from those of Haitians (Davis 1987: 58). Haiti and Haitian *Vodou* are often perceived and constructed in the official narratives as too black, primitive, and barbaric. The suppression (official and otherwise)² of these activities – especially those involving spirit possession and *palo* drums – has served to maintain symbolic and imaginary borders between Dominicans and Haitians.

As opposed to other related Afro-Caribbean religions (e.g. Cuban *Santería*, Haitian *Vodou*, and Trinidadian *Orisha*), Dominican *Vudú*, because of continuous historical repression, is “simplified, sometimes to the minimum, with regard to physical space, altar structure, personnel, training, food, and music” (Davis *et al.* 2007: 79). In other words, mediums do not need to be baptised or formally initiated, and there has been an absence of the top down control of priests or consistent doctrine. It is precisely this “simplicity” that allows *Vudú*’s complexity, since there are many vantage points as well as regional differences in regard to dogma, liturgy, and even music repertoire.

When Dominicans migrated to New York City, they brought with them marginalised genres of religious music including *palo*. Religious practices were necessarily adapted to the new environment, reflecting the need to celebrate ceremonies in different kinds of spaces (*Ibid*: 86). In New York City, *Vudú* ceremonies could publicly feature drumming and possession, and were held in commercial venues such as clubs, restaurants, and hotel rooms rather than in the traditional realm of the private home and altar spaces of the Dominican Republic. In this essay, I specifically examine the recent visibility of *Vudú* and its music in this transnational space where Dominicans have come in contact with other Afro-Caribbean religious practitioners and have been freed from the historical, cultural, political and racial dynamics of the Dominican Republic.

1 *Vudú* and *Vodou* share many common deities. In *Vudú* deities are referred to as *luá* (or *misterio*), in *Vodou* *lwa*.

2 The official prohibition of *Vudú* ceremonies has been traced back to 1862 (Davis 1987: 35).

By observing different venues, rituals, and performances, studying the music, and interacting with participants, I trace ways in which the practices and perceptions of music performance and religious experience have changed. I close by theorising these new complex spaces as they apply to issues of possession and the discourse over religious authenticity and identity.

In my fieldwork, conducted from 2009-2015, I accompanied *palo* musicians and mediums to ceremonies in clubs, rented spaces, *botánicas* (religious paraphernalia shops), and private homes in New York City, especially Washington Heights and the Bronx. In the Dominican Republic, I attended *Vudú* ceremonies in several rural regions of the country as well as in clubs, allowing me to better compare religious practices ranging from the most traditional to those most influenced by the New York club scene. The ceremonies in New York are attended almost exclusively by Dominican *palo* musicians, mediums, religious devotees, and fans of the music, most of them first or second-generation working-class migrants. As a Dominican, it was not difficult for me to be accepted into these situations as a participant-observer. In some ceremonies, especially in commercial clubs, I was allowed to videotape or record. In formal and informal interviews with musicians, mediums, and attendees, I asked them questions about their practice and about their reactions toward the changing landscape of *Vudú*. These *palo* parties (*fiestas de palo*)³ in clubs are celebrated throughout the year, but most commonly on or around major deities' days (e.g. Belié Belcán).⁴

I visited about 20 festivities in New York City and 12 in the Dominican Republic ranging from intimate to highly attended. The clubs ranged from highly popular Dominican dance clubs (e.g. Club Viva and Umbrella in New York) to more intimate restaurants (e.g. El Presidente and La Nueva Fortuna) that transformed their spaces for major deities' celebrations. Whereas in the Dominican Republic, most mediums work from their home altar, and *botánicas* are confined to city markets in marginal neighbourhoods, in New York City, a large number of *botánicas* and *brujo*⁵ spiritual centres are located in commercial spaces with doors and windows facing the street. In New York, there is more comfort in calling the religion *Vudú*⁶ and in acknowledging its relationship to Haiti, a shift in emphasis that can be heard in the music as well. These club events dramatise new emerging relationships between audience and performer and musician and medium,⁷ as well as new discursive practices, both musical and verbal.

3 These club ceremonies are colloquially called *fiesta de palo*. Traditional *Vudú* ceremonies are called *maní* or *privé*.

4 These experiences are true for Dominican migrants in Madrid as well. See Cristina Sánchez Carretero (2004).

5 I use this term because *Vudú* practitioners sometimes call mediums *brujos* and what they do *brujería*. Both terms are more commonly used in New York than in the Dominican Republic where they carry negative associations.

6 Dominicans refer to these practices as a belief in *los misterios* or *las 21 divisiones*.

7 My use of the word "medium" will refer to any practitioner that experiences spirit possession. Not all "practitioners" are able to receive spirits.

My research builds on, but also problematises, scholars like Victor Turner and Richard Schechner who were influential in analysing the intersections of theatre and ritual, but who also made clear divisions between the two depending on, in Schechner's words, "context and function" (1988: 120). The "contexts" that both Schechner and Turner used to distinguish ritual from theatre (efficacy versus entertainment; symbolic time versus the present; active audience participation or passive viewing; performers possessed or conscious of what they are doing; criticism discouraged or encouraged)⁸ are all complicated by the ceremonies I observed where these categories cannot stand up to scrutiny, and any clear distinction between Turner's conceptions of structure and anti-structure collapses.

In my fieldwork, I focus on understanding how practitioners recognise, explain, and embody these shifting definitions in their own understanding of what they do. In particular, new commercial aspects that have become part of how these ceremonies are presented in New York have complicated deep-rooted definitions and labels and caused many traditional practitioners to question or reframe issues of validity and authenticity. The transnational spaces and performances that I studied demonstrate how practitioners and performers consciously and unconsciously engage with, use, and trouble these concepts in the creation of new forms of both popular entertainment and religious practice. Musicians and practitioners create new melodies, rhythms, and dance moves that they have adopted or borrowed from both current popular music and other Afro-Caribbean culture, a sonic and embodied conversation on the nature of religious practice for a modern and global world.

As Talal Asad (1993) and others have argued, both religions and what people understand to be "religion" are not stable universal concepts but change over time and across cultures. Throughout my research, my understanding of some recent shifts in the practices of *Vudú* has been enlarged by the concept of "lived religion" which "distinguishes the actual experiences of religious persons from the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices" (McGuire 2008: 12). My focus throughout will be on what these participants do and say, rather than on any kind of official doctrine, theology, or statement of belief. Robert Orsi (2005) argues that, for many people, everyday life is affected by embodied practices through which the sacred is made real and present, and what I am interested in presenting are ways in which participants have inserted themselves into these tensions, as they confront – through words, music, and dance – shifting definitions of these categories.

At the same time that New York City *palo* ceremonies moved from private to public spaces, the demographics of the religious practitioners also changed: most significantly, a rise in the number of second-generation Dominican migrants who, influenced by their urban American experiences, brought new voices and new religious sensibilities, opening up new creative possibilities in their religious expression. For example, many young club goers have developed ways of dancing to the music where gestures associated with spirit possession are becoming part of the dance, blurring the lines

8 See Beeman 1993.

between mimesis and “true” possession. I have overheard dancers playfully cry out “*Vamos a montarnos*” (“Let’s get mounted”), or “*Mira, me estoy montando*” (“Look, I am getting mounted”), where “mounted” means “being possessed”. It is these new practices that have given Dominicans the freedom to override the need to hide their practices and to create a new narrative of what it means to be Dominican and a practitioner of *Vudú*.⁹ While this move of religious ceremonies from concealed spaces to public dance clubs has led many observers to assume a compromised religiosity, following scholars who argue that religions are “most easily observed (seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched) when people ritualise together” (Harvey 2013: 199), *all* such actions within this environment are aspects of religion: the smell of cigars, the waving of handkerchiefs, and bodies dancing in unison. Young transnational Dominicans are not corrupting traditions, but reinventing them through acts of communal dancing, singing, drinking, and trancing together.

Material contradictions: Hybrid spaces and commercialism

One way to begin understanding the intersection of the seemingly competing aspects of these ceremonies is to look closely at the physical objects and spaces, and then the musical, embodied, and emic discourses surrounding them. One of the most complex physical manifestations of belief and practice is the private altar of believers and mediums. In previous times, altars were kept hidden, often quite literally in the closet, but today altars are transported to public spaces, transforming commercial venues into a *Vudú* ceremony. In traditional ceremonies, the altar area needs to be purified and not used for any purpose other than worship (Davis 1987: 309). In clubs, however, these altars are located in unprepared or unpurified spaces, and are usually removed after the ceremony. Since altars have traditionally marked *the* ultimate place for worship for Dominican *Vudú* practitioners due to the inability to have public temples, many practitioners expressed to me their unease with these improvised altars. These altars of the everyday break with the traditional Durkheim formulation of “sacred things” as necessarily “set apart and surrounded by prohibitions” (2001: 46). While the traditional understanding of these altars might point to what Mircea Eliade would see as “breaks in space” that create an “irruption of the sacred” or a “center into chaos” that “opens communication between the cosmic places” (1987: 63), these new altars actually confuse these distinctions as they bring *together* the chaos of the everyday and the sacred and acknowledge the lack of definition between them.

This perceived disconnect of the authentic and the religious versus the secular and commercial is perhaps the theme that most concerned the musicians, mediums, and participants with whom I talked. While many musicians and mediums capitalise on this juxtaposition, practitioners were sceptical about the club ceremonies because – just like altars – dance clubs and restaurants have necessitated a redrawing of the lines between spiritual, popular, and commercial practices. While traditional celebrations to

9 This recontextualisation of identity is not unique to Dominicans in the diaspora. As Paul Christopher Johnson (2006) has analysed, *Garifuna* practitioners in New York are acquiring a new religious repertoire from other Afro-Caribbean communities in the process changing ethnic and racial identifications.

the deities are sponsored by the mediums or devotees, in clubs, the owners, musicians, and the mediums profit from the ceremonies. On busy deities' days, mediums earn money traveling from club to club receiving deities at each location. The cover charge can range from \$20 to \$50, depending on whether club owners distribute food, cigars, and handkerchiefs to attendees.¹⁰ Club owners profit from alcohol sales, and musicians tell me that club owners sometimes stop the music if too many people are experiencing possession instead of consuming drinks. Not surprisingly, many older and more traditional Dominicans find *Vudú* public club festivities inauthentic because, to them, the commercial world is incompatible with what they recognise as religious. For example, several practitioners questioned the authenticity of some mediums (*brujos*) such as El Niño Prodigio who baptises up to five people a night at \$5,000 each. They find the amount outrageous and are offended by the medium's BMW car and luxurious house.

Further evidence that the commercial qualities of such celebrations in dance clubs have brought *Vudú* religious practices into public view are the posters and invitation cards that pop up in Dominican neighbourhoods close to major deities' days. These posters display the name of the ceremony sponsor: either a *botánica*, a club, or a restaurant.¹¹ The events are advertised as either a *palo* party or as a festivity for a deity (e.g., Fiesta para San Miguel), and the iconography of the deity is usually included. Often the posters contain photos of the alcohol that will be on sale, the musical groups performing, and the party favours to be given out. Ceremony organisers also promote special appearances by mediums or diviners, who predict lottery numbers, read fortunes, and/or give advice to the attendees (e.g., Fanny the Prayer Leader, the diviner Niño Prodigio, the Messenger of Peace Lourdivery Bisonó). These posters sometimes include advertising for cigar or taxi companies, as well as instructions for the attendees, such as a reminder to bring IDs, to come early enough to catch the prayers, or to come dressed in the colours of the deity.

Interestingly, I have rarely seen posters where the actual *palo* drums are shown. Instead, most promoters find other ways to suggest their presence, for example, by showing secular *conga* drums (not used in *Vudú*), or even firewood (the word *palo* in Spanish is a synonym for a wood stick). Drummer Joan De León¹² believes club owners may exclude *palo* drums to also attract non-believers, who might negatively associate the *palo* drums with Haiti or *brujería* (witchcraft). It is revealing of the music's power and importance that the drums communicate the idea or "danger" of witchcraft more than the deities or even the mediums. On the other hand, the commercialisation of *Vudú* and its music serves to celebrate and normalise a marginalised religion and the products and services sold at ceremonies are commercially viable precisely, because they have religious value. The cigars, handkerchiefs, *palo* music, and mediums are all

10 Cigars are traditionally used to keep the medium alert. Cigars are also said to satisfy the desires of the deities (Davis 1987: 324).

11 For example, Bamboo Lounge, Jet Set Café, La Nueva Fortuna Restaurant, Umbrella Nightclub, and others.

12 Personal communication, April 2013.

part of traditional Dominican *Vudú* ceremonies, but in clubs they are given new or additional meanings. For example, the handkerchiefs that clubs give as party favours are traditionally baptised and used to invoke a deity and, once it comes down, to bind the deity to a medium's body, but in New York clubs they also become decorative dance accessories.

Figure 1. Flyer for Fiesta de Palo at Umbrella Club, New York city

Figure 2. Flyer for Fiesta de Palo in La Nueva restaurant

Figure 3. Flyer for Fiesta to San Miguel in Luna Night Club in the Bronx

Rossy La Diva de los Palos,¹³ a popular New York-based singer of *palo*, characterised this juxtaposition of religion and club culture as a *cruce*, or crossroad. This metaphor offers a view of a space where possibilities and choices are multiplied, but where violent collisions might also occur. For example, in the 2012 San Miguel¹⁴ festivity at the Trio bar in Brooklyn, the devotional blowing of cigar smoke at people provoked the security guards' intervention. Another common activity in *Vudú* is spraying people with beer, but in a club, Rossy says, this might easily lead to a physical fight, as dressed-up attendees find the practice disrespectful. These *cruces* were reflected in the interior of the Trio bar where there was a hookah bar decorated with Middle Eastern motifs as well as handkerchiefs with San Miguel's colours hanging from the ceiling.¹⁵ Rossy embodies this *cruce* in her performances by singing traditional songs and yet also creating new lyrics that relate to the contemporary transnational New York experience.

Although I use these types of events to complicate the binary of authentic/inauthentic expressions of religious faith, it is the music of *Vudú* that is most located at the crossroads of the entertainment and the devotional and the commercial and the ritualistic, and which ultimately challenges the definitions of each of these concepts. The role of music in spirit possession has been analysed by many authors (Rouget 1985; Friedson 1996; Jankowsky 2007), most of whom follow Rouget's influential claim that the causal link between the two is culturally determined. In the case of Dominican *Vudú*, these links have changed over time, and in fact it was not until the 20th century that *palo* music was linked with *Vudú* rituals (Piper 2009).

Musical crossroads

Palo drums are long, single-headed and played in sets of two or three accompanied by idiophones. The vocals are organised in verses and/or call and response. There are not as many rhythmic ostinatos as in *Santería batá* music or the music of Haitian *Vodou*, because rhythms used in Dominican *Vudú* are not attached to particular deities. On the contrary, the same rhythmic base can be used for many different deities. The text of the music orients a piece towards a particular deity, although one deity may manifest even when the music played is intended to praise another deity. As opposed to other Afro-Caribbean religions, in Dominican *Vudú* the drummers are free to choose the order of the pieces as well as create new ones. Drums are generally not baptised, and while *palo* music can incite spirit possession, this can occur without music. In clubs, I have even seen mediums manifest the deities with *reggaetón*. And while the performance of *Vudú* music in secular venues could be interpreted as an example of sacred music circulating as a commodity or as a "folklorization",¹⁶ it is important to remember that these events are essentially exclusively for Dominicans, most of whom are believers and attend the ceremonies with the purpose of celebrating the deity. They recognise

13 Personal communication, September 2013.

14 San Miguel or Belié Belcán is the most popular deity among *Vudú* practitioners.

15 Some clubs have replaced cigars with hookah smoking to avoid breaking non-smoking laws.

16 For examples, see Shannon (2003), Kapchan (2007), and Hagedorn (2001, 2006).

many of the songs and melodies, and even if they are Dominicans born in the United States, they have heard the music via their parents and community and recognise the connection between *palo* and spirit possession. This is particularly true since the 1997 recording of a *Vudú* chant to the deity Ogún Balenyó (known to Dominicans as “Los Olivos”) by popular *merengue* artist Kinito Méndez who mixed *merengue* and *palo* into a song that conflates the love of the deity with romantic love, asking both for Ogún Balenyó’s help and an “intravenous injection” of love from a woman. This recording can be considered the point of departure in the move of *Vudú* music to dance clubs.

All musicians and DJs that perform at clubs have strategies for interacting with dancers and enhancing the energy level at appropriate times, and this is no different for the *palo* musicians I interacted with. While the motivations behind musical decisions may be similar whether drummers are playing for a traditional ceremony or a dance club, musicians in clubs employ specific musical gestures to enhance the participants’ experience in commercial spaces. For example, the entertaining shout outs to the audience, mediums, and deities that are common in a club are a new addition to the tradition. In a traditional ceremony, “musicians” are indistinguishable from “audience”, as anyone, whether performer or participant, might play drums, begin a song, or improvise lyrics. However, in this new public milieu, musicians perform onstage to cheering fans, and adopt popular music aesthetics, plan their set list, and tend to choose the catchiest *palo* songs for the audience instead of the most appropriate for the deity. The popular “Los Olivos” is played in every ceremony just as any band saves its most popular song for a strategic time during a performance. At clubs, female singer-dancers wear provocative clothes and male musicians coordinate their outfits. Singers are expected to sing in tune, use microphones, synchronise the improvised sections of the music, and add musical breaks and dramatic tempo changes.

Music groups exploit the theatrical aspects at clubs, in ways similar to how club owners and mediums market religion’s performative aspects. In a 2012 ceremony, in La Nueva Fortuna Restaurant, the drummer added vocal effects to a *palo* song to the deity Damballah Wedo, onomatopoeically depicting the deity’s snake character by moving his tongue as a snake and improvising vocalisations. At a 2014 ceremony at El Aguila restaurant in the Bronx, the singer, La Piki, shouted out numerous times from the stage: “Who are the single women? Where are the *brujos*? Raise your handkerchiefs! Hurray for San Miguel!”¹⁷ DJs, mediums, and musicians encourage people to dance and feel the music, to make room for those possessed, and to shout out to the deity. In club ceremonies, dance also plays a role ambiguously located between ritual and entertainment. The dancers take elements from urban musical genres such as *reggaetón* and hip-hop while also incorporating gestures of possession.

Attempts to commodify the music and rituals of *Vudú* have resulted in what could be identified as a *performed* authenticity. These rites – some invented for the stage – have become rituals by which some practitioners’ measure authenticity. Claudio

17 All translations from Spanish to English are mine. All interviews were conducted in Spanish.

Fortunato, a *palo* group leader,¹⁸ enters club ceremonies with his musicians and fans in a processional manner imitating the spectacle of Jesus on Palm Sunday, with the path lined by flags in the deities' colours. He often starts a fire in the form of a cross in the middle of the dance floor. Fire is traditionally used in altars for its purifying effects (Davis 1987: 143), and Fortunato told me he uses it to open the way down for the deities. He admits he is proud of the spectacle that fire creates and claims that people going into it "do not even mind having their clothes burned". While in many ways, these extreme examples of theatricality are "created" rituals, practitioners in New York consider Fortunato's group one of the most authentic because of its perceived basis in traditional practices. Even more dramatically, some musicians in New York now demonstrate (or experience? mimic?) possession while onstage. Leaders of groups allow this, seeing that it enhances their theatricality and popularity.

As a result of this taste for the sensational, changes to *palo* music in both clubs and New York ceremonies have brought the experience closer to its Haitian counterpart. According to De León, drummer Julio Valdez,¹⁹ and other practitioners, in New York, deities associated with Haiti have become popular because of their extroverted manifestations. De León has seen mediums mounted by the deity Criminel, who eats and stands on broken glass, and inserts pins into his body. Another favoured possession is by San Elías, who expels foam through his mouth. In Fortunato's group, songs with Haitian *Kreyòl* lyrics are adapted to *palo* rhythm and, as Valdez explains, sometimes drummers mix *palo* and Haitian rhythmic patterns on the same *palo* drum. Fortunato's group has created its own hybrid style to accompany the theatricality of the *Petró* deities (*Petwo* in Haitian *Vodou*). Similarly, the drummer from Francia Reyes' group ²⁰ noted that he introduces a rhythmic riff used today in both Haitian-derived *gagá* music and modern *merengues* when the audience is reaching climax. He believes that people fall possessed at higher rates when he switches to this rhythm.

These blends represent new directions in Dominican identity: sometimes closer to Haiti, sometimes to New York City, but also reinterpreted in a new transnational Dominican context, a complicated and multi-directional move religiously, ethnically, and racially. Dominicans in the 21st century have found ways to redefine Dominican religious identity in ways that encompass forms of culture codified as black and Haitian. These events and musical genres are examples of the power and malleability of popular religion and tradition, which work dialectically with modernity and popular culture, and adapt to the transnational environments, demands, and desires of a new generation of practitioners.

18 Personal communication, September 2012.

19 Personal communication, September 2014.

20 Pedro Osorio interview, September 2013.

Spirit possession, authenticity and Lived religion

In traditional ceremonies, participants who are possessed enact the personality of the deity through their mannerisms, tone of voice, and body language. Many practitioners believe that in clubs, however, some attendees pretend to be mounted by deities to obtain the best free rum, cigars, and food, and to become the centre of attention. Traditionally, when mediums summon deities they shake a bell and perform bows, turns, and salutations. But in a dance club, someone might suddenly fall into an altered state without having performed any recognised ritualistic procedures. Such changes in practice have led practitioners and musicians to rethink possession and to question the boundaries between performance and ritual and between spirit possession and other altered states. A drummer once joked with me at a party that “Saint Corona” and “Saint Whisky” possessed a woman although, tellingly, shortly after the woman warned him about a promise that he had not fulfilled, he believed otherwise, accepting the reality of her possession.

At a 2013 ceremony at La Nueva Fortuna restaurant, as the music grew in excitement, several women began exhibiting signs of possession, one of them crawling and writhing on the floor as Santa Marta (who manifests as a snake), provoking increasing excitement and curiosity. The owner stopped the musicians and kicked “Santa Marta” out of the club for disruptive behaviour. I heard observers say that they suspected that she and her friends were just under the effects of drugs, not truly possessed by a deity. Presumably the owner believed the possession a fake, too, otherwise he just threw the deity out of a *Vudú* ceremony. The fact that a club owner could throw a deity out of the club is a complicated move that comments on all of the blurred definitions and borders of practice on which this essay focuses. But more than that, this interaction is revealing of defining issues and questions emerging out of these new modern practices: Who is in charge when a space functions as both sacred and commercial? What is the difference between divine possession and drug/dance induced “trance”, and on what ground can this distinction be made? When practitioners express doubt, what is being questioned, the deity or the dancer?

As my fieldwork demonstrates, while practices of spirit possession are understood by both observers and participants as deeply connected to historical traditions and contexts, they can also be seen as interactions with the present and as ways to imagine the future. These are important considerations when we think about the ways in which the ceremonies I witnessed were, at least in part, interactions with modernity. For Paul Christopher Johnson, not all possession is about “tradition, history, or the past at all” (2014: 20). In the same way that my participants were interacting with modern advertising, American capitalism, digital technology, and DJ aesthetics, Johnson points to how possessions can also be “assertions of cosmopolitanism and a path to imagining different pasts and futures” (2014: 20). As a new Dominican demographic creates a more public *Vudú* practice by dancing in new ways to new musical sounds in

new places, the meanings of the spirit possessions are “open ended, brilliantly creative, and unburdened of any foundational past” (Johnson 2014: 21).

Musicians and practitioners often grapple with the question of what happens to the religious content of *palo* music when it is presented in commercial spaces. I heard many practitioners underscoring their vantage point about a false possession because “the deities would not want to come down in this environment or through a drunken person.” If we accept both the emic reality of spirit possession, we also need to accept the emic doubts and accusations of fraud and fakery (Halperin 1996; Romberg 2014). Doubt in possession is rarely a doubt in the deity itself, but new types of music and dance (and intersections with club culture) make it more difficult to recognise what Raquel Romberg calls “performances of proof” (2014: 233), or the accuracy of [the medium’s] gestures with regard to how well they embody the spirits’ voices, how indistinguishable their movements are from those of the spirits, how unpredictably and succinctly they are able to convey the spirits’ messages and raise the emotional engagement of participants. (2014: 232).

Historically, as Johnson writes, fakery has “had to be part of possession’s discourse” (2014: 12). While the accusation of fakery may be intended to demystify spirit possession, it also helps to constitute real possession, as “authentic possession” can “only be determined by reading the *surfaces* of bodies as ciphers of what dwells within” (Johnson 2014: 11). What is significant in my fieldwork is that this reading process has changed; the language expressed by bodies is different. As the reality of New York mixes people from different communities with different *Vudú* practices, and as the club scene changes how spirit possession manifests, it becomes harder for participants from different backgrounds and generations to recognise what they see as authentic.

While for many, the question of whether a possession is real or not determines an authentic religious experience, this question can be seen to present a false dichotomy often represented by the terms “possession” and “trance”. Scholars and practitioners use the words trance and possession, sometimes interchangeably and sometimes to mean different things.²¹ In both trance and spirit possession, the person feels an altered state of consciousness, but spirit possession is used to refer to the incorporation of a deity into a person’s body. The identity of this person is replaced by that of a spiritual entity, and consequently the person changes behavioural patterns and body language. But while this definition might suggest a traditional distinction that sees trance as a “secular” altered state and possession as a sacred interaction with a divine figure, this is another binary that my research demonstrates is better seen as discursive, dialectical, and on a continuum. While on the one hand, we want to accept the emic formulations of practitioners, we also need to look for the social meanings behind these distinctions.

21 Clearly, the discussion of trance versus possession is a long and complicated discussion with a deep bibliography. For this essay, I can only touch the surface of this discussion as it applies to my immediate research.

While many of the participants I talked to tried to make an absolute distinction between possession and trance or even between real or fake, their lived experiences embodied a more complex picture. I have heard practitioners warn dancers engaging in what they may think of as “non-religious” trancing or mock possession that the deities may come down and surprise them. From the perspective of lived religion, the “meaning” of these terms depends on the person possessed, rather than on their relationship to some larger system of belief. The power no longer resides only within the priests or the drums, instead becoming one that people can take into their own hands. Where, after all, does the religion manifest if not inscribed in these bodies experiencing transformation during ceremonies?

In trying to understand the act of possession and its surrounding discourses, we might also remember what this act affords practitioners. As Janice Boddy points out, “phenomena we bundle loosely as possession are part of daily experience, not just dramatic ritual. They have to do with one’s relationship to the world, with selfhood” (1994: 414). In the context of Dominican migrants in New York City, possession can provide protest, catharsis, and resistance to the marginality and racism experienced in the host country. Today, practitioners acquire status and express pride in their ability to receive deities. Young, disenfranchised Dominicans in New York use possession as a way of exhibiting cultural identities they have learned from elders, yet recreating it through their own generation’s music and dance, thereby inserting themselves into the Dominican narrative of religion, ethnicity, and race. Early on, these *palo* festivities – so radically different from what religious “ritual” had previously looked like – were often viewed as merely business opportunities or entertainment by many. Attendees were perceived as attracted primarily to the music or alcohol, and perhaps more to the trance and drugs than to spiritual practices. More recently, the vantage points regarding the intentionality of these ceremonies have shifted from mostly sceptical to fully acknowledging the religious aspects of club celebrations.

The question remains: Are sounds, movements, and actions that are unknown to traditional practitioners a sign of inauthentic devotion or of vibrant new religious practices for a new generation? As drummer Raymond Abad stated,²² “the trance in commercial places is democratic”, meaning that in the clubs anyone might “get possessed” and have access to the deities. So, whereas in a festivity in the Dominican Republic those receiving the deities have, for the most part, been determined by ritual and hierarchy, in a New York dance club, young people transform the religious narratives to include themselves. We can speculate that without the commodification of the music and then the religion, such shifts in public ceremonies and personal narratives would have been impossible. It is precisely this commodification that has given practitioners and musicians more choices as to how to practice and express religious sentiment.

Orsi writes that practices once considered outside of accepted religions “constitute a powerful alternative experience of the modern – not in reaction to the modern, not as atavism or survival, but as another way of being in the world” (2010: xx). Lived

²² Phone conversation, September 2013.

religion scholars also remind us that religion is not merely subjective, not only a private interaction, but that “people construct their religious worlds together” (McGuire 2008: 12). The musicians I observed create fresh musical ideas and sounds for a younger more musically and globally literate audience, at the same time that they create a sonic religious “truth” that draws on embodied traditions and memories. Moving away from beliefs to the practices of agents – both individual and social – allows us to see practitioners, musicians, and dancers, not simply as reacting to the sensationalist, the commercial, and the modern, but as co-creators of a transnational narrative in which *Vudú* and *palo* music play essential roles.

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