



Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie

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one thinks that the promise of certainty in both the engineering model and its first cousin, the positivist model of science, is a will-o'-the-wisp, then this model, which locates the relativism squarely within the cultural and historical context that gives shape to our conversation, may seem refreshing by contrast" (p. 245).

In addressing the importance of the physician's character, Brody attaches special significance to the virtue of compassion. He creates an essential link between compassion and issues surrounding power in medical encounters. His observation that a physician who can identify and sympathize with patients will be more likely to use power responsibly is accurate. Brody is critical of those who would encourage physicians to distance themselves from a patient's experience of illness: "To be compassionate in response to the suffering of the patient is therefore one of the most powerful things a physician can do; but this is possible only to the extent that the physician is willing to adopt a position of relative powerlessness, to acknowledge that the patient's suffering has incredible power over him and that he cannot remain unchanged in the face of it" (p. 259).

Brody ends his book with an appeal for further investigations of the "power approach" to ethical dilemmas in medical care, including its application to problems such as the ethics of medical research, reproductive technologies and abortion, brain death, and persistent vegetative state. Brody invites challenges to the conversation model of ethical reasoning and welcomes a vigorous debate that would call attention to the deficits and strengths of adding the dimension of power to medical ethics discourse. *The Healer's Power* will be of great interest to anthropologists, other social scientists, medical ethicists, and health professionals concerned about the representation of power in medical care.

Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie. Wade Davis. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988. xx + 344 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), \$9.95 (paper).

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This book is a scholarly presentation of research already described by Wade Davis in *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (Simon & Schuster, 1985) and in several articles in ethnobotanical journals. In *Passage of Darkness*, Davis abandons the first-person narrative and novelistic style of his earlier book, but he advances the same argument and presents similar information (at times repeated verbatim). After summarizing the historical development of Haitian peasantry and the religious worldview of Vodoun (chapter 1), Davis builds the case for his central hypothesis. He claims that zombification—the apparent death, actual burial, and subsequent revival of a human victim—does occur in Haiti, and that it has an explicable physiological cause (the powerful poison tetrodotoxin) and sociological function (informal justice meted out by quasi-religious bodies to well-known criminals in the local community).

Davis weaves the findings of several disparate academic fields into a provocative argument. He begins with well-documented cases of two individuals in Haiti who had been legally and medically certified as dead, but who appeared alive years later and were interviewed by several physicians (chapter 2). Davis then shows that a scientifically accurate definition of death is historically recent and depends on sophisticated medical technology. Without such technology, people in drug-induced states of suspended animation have been misdiagnosed as dead (chapter 3). In some instances, victims have even survived a premature (short-term) burial, because the body's depressed metabolism can continue

to function despite oxygen deprivation. Davis reasons, however, that the experience may produce permanent cognitive or personality losses, which would render the victim suitable for use as a virtual slave by the individuals overseeing the poisoning and disinterment.

This is the scenario Davis proposes for zombification. The drug is the main protagonist, and Davis provides detailed accounts of the preparation and chemical make-up of the supposed zombie poison and its antidotes (chapters 4 and 5). He persuasively argues that tetrodotoxin, a neurotoxin present in the puffer fish found in the coastal waters near Haiti, is the pharmacologically active ingredient that induces apparent death. This is a compelling argument, backed by an impressive array of botanical, clinical, and physiological evidence—although neither Davis nor any other researcher has ever witnessed the potion being used, and other ethnobotanists have since challenged Davis's conclusions.

The book does not end here, however. Davis positions himself within the interdisciplinary field of ethnobotany, which appropriates the methods and concepts of anthropology (among many other disciplines). He therefore wants not only to catalog organic substances and their uses, but through them to understand "the very cognitive matrix of a particular society" (p. 286). He writes that tetrodotoxin provides only the physiological template or raw material that is transformed by cultural and psychological forces (pp. 179, 181). Davis's claims about the cultural significance and social context of zombification, while provocative, remain unproven and misleading for future anthropological research in Haiti.

The Haitian discourse on zombies indexes many central themes of Vodoun: its political history, its ethnopsychology, and its response to illness and affliction. Most anthropologists would explore these topics through the lives of religious specialists and

others who serve the spirits (*lwa*), their relationships in a given community, and their experience of possession and healing power. Davis's analysis, however, is curiously impersonal and desocialized; he describes what "the Vodounist" believes in the most generic and disembodied terms. Moreover, he regards these beliefs as a non-empirical but unfalsifiable "closed system" of thought (pp. 54–55). He depicts reified Haitian peasants who, under the "weight of tradition," accept these beliefs absolutely; they cannot think outside of their emic cognitive structures, which generate "an illusion of total comprehension" (p. 182).

The approach, of course, derives partly from Evans-Pritchard's Azande writings, which Davis cites extensively. But he seems unaware of both the critiques of Evans-Pritchard and the subsequent debates about rationality that have shaped the anthropology of religion for the past 40 years (see Stanley J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* [Cambridge University Press, 1990]). Davis analyzes the Vodounist belief system under the slightly more recent emic/etic framework. While Haitian society must take cognitive steps to protect such all-inclusive beliefs from falsification (p. 54), Davis aims to explain them through causal, scientific models, either materialist (chapters 2–5) or functionalist (chapters 6–8).

The interpretation of popular healing practices reveals the danger of Davis's non-ethnographic approach. For the Vodounist, he writes, illness is an imbalance in one's physical and spiritual components (see pp. 43, 189). This experience-far formulation misses what is essential for conditions that Vodoun practitioners actually treat. These are not just "supernatural" illnesses, in Davis's terms, but illnesses of man, resulting from a human enemy's jealous or malicious attack via the instrument of spirits or ghosts. Davis does not mention the social conflicts signified by such illnesses or the

moral response to interpersonal hostility offered by Vodoun healing practices. He instead constructs a privatized model of the "sacred equilibrium of the individual," and describes treatment as a vague "intervention on the spiritual level" (pp. 44 and 45).

Davis mishandles the social context not only of illness and healing, but also of the secret societies discussed in chapters 7 and 8. He begins with Laguerre's intriguing research into the transformation of bands of escaped slaves (maroons) into clandestine groups (the Bizango societies) allied to Vodoun leaders (Michel Laguerre, "Bizango: A Voodoo Secret Society in Haiti" in *Secrecy* [Human Sciences Press, 1980]). Laguerre writes that these societies were reconstituted after slavery to protect community resources from external threats, a function they retain to this day. This is the background for Davis's hypothesis that the practice of zombification enforces social order and conformity to local norms (p. 215).

Davis conducted four months of research on this topic (p. 242) and he describes only one presumed case of the Bizango's informal justice. The putative victim did indeed transgress the moral codes prohibiting, for example, ambition, disrespect, adultery, that Bizango leaders claim to enforce. But given such broad categories, why was this man singled out? Davis offers no answer; he does not examine the operation of these groups in any actual social context. Moreover, this case fits none of the other supposed functions of secret societies that Davis elaborates: (1) to resist the depredations on peasants by the urban political elite (p. 231); (2) to guarantee the integrity of community land from strangers (p. 238); or (3) to provide material support to members (p. 276).

While providing several descriptions of Bizango rituals (chapter 8), Davis misstates their sociopolitical significance at the time of his research (1984). Davis describes how Vodoun networks were co-opted by Duva-

lier, but he does not draw the obvious conclusion that Bizango groups would then have ceased being "arbiter[s] of social life" (p. 272), the protectors of peasant communities. They would have functioned instead as an arm of the repressive and kleptocratic centralized state. Davis himself tells us that many *chefs de section* (the Duvalierist government's main representatives in rural areas) were also Bizango presidents (p. 271). The function of Bizango, whatever it was in 1984, hardly reflected "the heritage of the people" or conformed to established "folk traditions," as Davis implies (p. 284). Because he views Vodoun as a closed system of belief, he cannot explain how the social meanings of Bizango depend on changing historical circumstances.

In sum, this is an interesting yet frustrating book. It raises many important questions, but the answers require more solid ethnographic and historical research by Haitian, European, and North American academics. While Davis's ethnobotany is excellent, his anthropology is theoretically and methodologically problematic (we never learn how much time he spent in Haiti, whether he used translators, etc.). The book may perpetuate an ahistorical view of Haitian society and an outmoded picture of rural people as locked in traditional webs of belief that they accept uncritically. For these reasons, I cannot recommend this book for courses in medical anthropology. For a course in methodology, however, it would make an excellent case study of the promise and perils of interdisciplinary research.

Issues in Contemporary International Health. *Thomas A. Lambo and Stacey B. Day*, eds. New York and London: Plenum Medical Book Company, 1990. xvi + 344 pp. \$65.00 (cloth).

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