

Chapter 7

Understanding slavery in possession rituals

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Is ritual possession a source for the study of slavery? In the last two decades a number of scholars have begun to answer yes to this question.² According to Pierre Bourdieu, ritual possessions contain recollections of the past, embedded in people's bodily actions as well as in ritual images, objects, landscapes and other materials. For Bourdieu,³ ritual possession is a form of memory practice, internalized as "natural," "forgotten as history," but deeply and unconsciously embedded in social practices, rituals' process and habits.⁴ These memory

¹ This chapter was completed thanks to funding from the European Research Council as part of the ERC project 313737: Shadows of Slavery in West Africa and Beyond: a historical anthropology.

² Among the seminal works are Robert Baum, *Shrines of the Slave Trade: Diola Religion and Society in Precolonial Senegambia* (Oxford, 1999); Judy Rosenthal, *Possession, Ecstasy & Law in Ewe Voodoo* (Charlottesville, 1998); Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade* (Chicago, 2002).

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge, 1990), 56.

⁴ Habit, or the *habitus*, is the crucial notion here. According to Bourdieu, "The habitus – embodied history internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history – is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product. As such, it is what gives practices their relative autonomy with respect to external determinations of immediate present." Bourdieu, *Logic*, 56. The *habitus* is the result of the accumulation of the historical events that do not remain unchanged but are transformed by integration into the *habitus* itself. The *habitus* is not just a close cycle of unproblematic reproduction; rather, it entails the idea of historical change and process.

practices can be opaque and quite open to interpretation.”⁵ Still, analyses of them can provide glimpses into otherwise forgotten histories; they can fill the voids found in official and discursive memories. They also help one understand the different ways people today deal with the past, for they cast light on the range of intimate feelings experienced by different groups and individuals.⁶ This chapter provides some initial guidelines for understanding slavery in possession rituals by drawing on my research on Tchamba,⁷ a *vodun*⁸ component of the complex

⁵ Nicolas Argenti describes these memories as “aporetic” and “indeterminate.” See his article, “Remembering the Future: Slavery, Youth and Masking in the Cameroon Grassfields,” *Social Anthropology*, 14:1 (2006), 50.

⁶ Among the works on these topics are Michael Jackson, “Knowledge of the Body,” *Man*, 18:2 (1983), 327–45; Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago, 1985); Wendy James, *The Listening Ebony: Moral Knowledge, Religion and Power among the Uduk of Sudan* (Oxford, 1988); Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, 1989); Filip De Boeck, “Beyond the Grave: History, Memory and Death in Postcolonial Congo,” in Richard Werbner (ed.), *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power* (London, 1998), 21–57; John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and Historical Imagination* (Boulder, 1992); Michael Lambek, *Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte: Local Discourses of Islam, Sorcery and Spirit Possession* (Toronto, 1993); Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, “How Bodies Remember: Social Memory and Bodily Experience of Criticism, Resistance and Delegitimation Following China’s Cultural Revolution,” *New Literary History*, 25 (1994), 708–23; Paul Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power and the Hauka in West Africa* (London and New York, 1995); Richard Fardon, *Lela in Bali: History through a Ceremony in Cameroon* (New York, 2006).

⁷ Between 2005 and 2008, I conducted research on Tchamba in Togo and Benin. Throughout this chapter, I refer to Tchamba or Mami Tchamba interchangeably. Mami Tchamba, however, is most often employed when the religious order honors female slave ancestors, and Tchamba when there is no specific gender reference. See Alessandra Brivio, “Tales of Cowries, Money, and Slaves,” in Alice Bellagamba, Sandra E. Greene and Martin A. Klein (eds.), *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 2013), 47–53; Alessandra Brivio, “Evoking the Past Through Material Culture: The Mami Tchamba Shrine,” in Alice Bellagamba, Sandra E. Greene and Martin A. Klein (eds.), *Bitter Legacy: African Slavery Past and Present* (Princeton, 2013); Alessandra Brivio, *Il vodun in Africa, Metamorfosi di un culto* (Roma, 2012); Alessandra Brivio, “Foreign Vodun: Memories of Slavery and Colonial Encounter in Togo and Benin,” in Ana Lucia Araujo (ed.), *Living History: Encountering the Memory of the Heirs of Slavery* (Newcastle, 2009), 245–64; and Alessandra Brivio, “Nos grands-pères achetaient des esclaves ... ’ : Le culte de Mami Tchamba au Togo et au Bénin,” *Gradhiva*, 8 (2008), 64–79.

⁸ The word *vodun* is used by Fon-speaking people of southern Benin and by Ewe-speaking people of southern Togo to define powerful entities able to act in the visible and invisible worlds. Since *vodun* can be manifested in different forms, the same word could define different moments of religious practice. The word *vodun* can be used to express different meanings: first of all, to describe the objects worshipped in the shrine; second, it is the name given to practitioners when possessed by the invisible entities; third, *vodun* indicates children who bear the sign of a *vodun*; and finally, *vodun* may be used to define the whole polytheist religion practiced along the Bight of Benin.

religious panorama of *vodun* possession cults worshipped in coastal Togo and Benin. In addition, I consider possession rituals that contain memories of slavery among North-African Blacks (rituals known as Stambali or Stambouli in Tunis,⁹ Gnawa in Morocco,¹⁰ the *zar-bori* cult in Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan¹¹ and *Tumbura* in Sudan)¹² and in other forms of rituals and performances, such as those found in masked dancing in Cameroun¹³ and the “Egungun” ancestor cult in Benin.¹⁴ A comparative analysis of these different possession cults highlights the historical depth found in many such memory practices. Equally important, comparisons reveal the extent that the memory and the identity claims in these rituals have also often become a major political concern today, especially within

⁹ Richard C. Jankowsky, “Black Spirits, White Saints: Music, Spirit Possession, and Sub-Saharanans in Tunisia,” *Ethnomusicology*, 50:3 (2006), 373–410; Richard C. Jankowsky, *Stambeli: Music, Trance and Alterity in Tunisia* (Chicago, 2010); Ismael Musah Montana, “Bori Colonies in Tunisia,” in Behnaz A. Mirzai, Ismael Musah Montana and Paul E. Lovejoy (eds.), *Slavery, Islam and Diaspora* (Trenton, 2009), 156–67.

¹⁰ Viviana Pâques, *La religion des esclaves: recherches sur la confrérie marocaine des Gnawa* (Bergamo, 1991); Chouki El Hamel, “Constructing a Diasporic Identity: Tracing the Origins of the Gnawa Spiritual Group in Morocco,” *The Journal of African History*, 49 (2008), 241–60; Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (Cambridge, 2013); John Hunwick, “The Religious Practices of Black Slaves in the Mediterranean Islamic World,” in Paul E. Lovejoy (ed.), *Slavery on the Frontiers of Islam* (Princeton, 2004), 149–71; John Hunwick, “Islamic Law and Polemics over Race and Slavery in North and West Africa, Sixteenth to Nineteenth Century,” *Princeton Papers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 7 (1999), 43–68.

¹¹ Michel Leiris, “La possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Ethiopiens de Gondar,” *Collection L’Homme, Cahiers d’ethnologie, géographie et linguistique*, 1 (Paris, 1958); Janice Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison, 1989); Janice Boddy, “Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 23 (1994), 407–34; Richard Natvig, “Liminal Rites and Female Symbolism in the Egyptian Zar Possession Cult,” *Numen*, XXXV:1 (1988); Richard Natvig, “Oromos, Slaves, and the Zar Spirits: A Contribution to the History of the Zar,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 20:4 (1987), 669–89.

¹² G. P. Makris, “Slavery, Possession and History: The Construction of the Self among Slave Descendants in the Sudan,” *Africa*, 66 (1996), 159–82; G. P. Makris, *Changing Masters: Spirit Possession and Identity Construction among Slave Descendants and Other Subordinates in the Sudan* (Evanston, 2000).

¹³ Argenti, “Remembering the Future”; Nicolas Argenti, “Things that Don’t Come by the Road: Folktales, Fosterage, and Memories of Slavery in the Cameroon Grassfields,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 52:2 (2010), 224–54.

¹⁴ Joël Noret, “Between Authenticity and Nostalgia: The Making of a Yoruba Tradition in Southern Benin,” *African Arts*, 41:4 (Winter, 2008), 26–31.

diaspora communities. In such communities, ritual memories tend to recall a stereotypic reconstruction of their supposed cultures of origin in ways that are purposely designed to provide a semblance of cultural continuity between an imagined past and their present lives.¹⁵

What elements should the researcher look for in evaluating whether or not the ritual possession before him or her is one of a memory practice? How should scholars approach informants and people involved in possession rituals? What kind of background must researchers have? Last but not least, is there any connection between religious practices rooted in the present and the historical events and experiences of the distant past? This chapter will consider the difficulties and opportunities associated with the use of possession rituals as a source for the study of the African slave past.

Tchamba

Ritual possession performances have long attracted the attention of scholars, and there is an extensive debate on their social and cultural meaning. A good starting point is L. Brenner's¹⁶ definition of African ritual performance as a dynamic process in which spiritual forces converge in the performing bodies, which go into possession as seen in their bodily movements, often at the climax of the ceremony. The religious rituals are understood to unite the spirit and the

¹⁵ David C. Berliner, "The Abuses of Memory: Reflections on the Memory Boom in Anthropology," *Anthropology Quarterly*, 78 (2005), 197-211.

¹⁶ Louis Brenner, "Religious Discourses in and about Africa," in Karin Barber and P. F. de Moraes Farias (eds.), *Discourse and Its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts* (Birmingham, 1989), 87-103.

possessed persons in their thoughts, actions and emotions. Communication is effected during the performance through tactile, olfactory, acoustic or visual means. All the elements found in a performance, improvisation, interaction with the audience, gesture, bodily expression and rhythm, give meaning to what can otherwise be an amorphous set of ideas and memories.¹⁷ In addition to the body (which dances, falls into trance and takes part in the ritual in various ways), there are also “things,” ritual objects, which combine to materialize the dynamic relationship between practitioners and spiritual forces. Ritual objects carry with them, in their materiality, “biography” and a history of being crafted. They contain the signs of social, historical and cultural transformations.¹⁸ Hence, they too are important areas of investigation.

Tchamba or Mami Tchamba is a possession ritual that includes a constellation of *vodun* (spirits), all of which are associated with slaves, called in Ewe *ameflefle* – bought people.¹⁹ *Ameflefle* were the men and women purchased as slaves in times past by the ancestors of present *vodun* Tchamba adepts. They were domestic slaves, and sometimes they married into their masters’ families,

¹⁷ This vagueness allows all protagonists to achieve different ends or express different and even at times antagonistic points of view.

¹⁸ See Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986); Mary Jo Arnoldi, Christraud M. Geary and Kris L. Hardin (eds.), *African Material Culture* (Bloomington, 1996); Jean-Pierre Warnier, *Construire la culture matérielle: L’homme qui pesait avec ses doigts* (Paris, 1999); Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford, 1998).

¹⁹ Rosenthal, *Possession*; Tobias Wendl, “The Tchamba Cult among the Mina in Togo,” in Heike Behrend and Ute Luig (eds.), *Spirit Possession: Modernity and Power in Africa* (Madison, 1999), 111–23; Brivio, “ ‘Nos grands-pères achetaient des esclaves’”; Brivio, “Memories of Slavery and Colonial Encounter”; Dana Rush, “In Remembrance of Slavery: Tchamba Vodun Arts,” *African Arts*, 44:1 (Spring, 2011), 40–51; Dana Rush, “In Remembrance of Slavery: Tchamba Vodun (Bénin and Togo),” *African Voices*, Vol. 1, 164–77.

and thus became the ancestors of the present-day worshippers.²⁰ During Tchamba ceremonies, the spirits of the deceased slaves possess the descendants of their ancient masters. The families involved in Tchamba all claim their ancestors owned many slaves; sometimes they may also admit that a “grandmother” was actually a slave who had married into her master’s lineage. For the most part, however, they are far more willing to boast about having a slave-owning ancestor than to admit the existence of slaves within their own families. Kokou Atchinou, a Togolese Tchamba priest, who is president of Groupment des Adorateurs de Maman Tchamba (GAMAT)²¹ and the descendant of a slave trader commented on this phenomenon in 2007: “We all know who the slaves’ descendants are in our families, but it is not something we talk about,”²² because it could compromise or even destroy the families’ integrity. The stigma associated with slave status is difficult to erase even when they were fully integrated into their masters’ family through marriage or childbirth. Talk about slavery is therefore best discussed in secrecy, through “whispers and silences”²³ or, as in the case of Tchamba, through collective memorial ceremonies. Mami Tchamba offers a sensitive way for individuals and families to come to grips with these personal and family memories. It allows a variety of lineage perspectives to emerge in ways that speak silently (rather than discursively) about a common

²⁰ Today Tchamba people claim to celebrate not only the slaves incorporated into their own families but also the victims of the transatlantic slave trade.

²¹ GAMAT, “Groupement des Adorateurs de Maman Tchamba,” is the association that gathers the Togolese Tchamba shrines.

²² Interview with Kokou Atchinou, Lomé, January 2, 2007.

²³ Sandra E. Greene, “Whispers and Silences: Explorations in African Oral History,” *Africa Today*, 50 (2003), 40–53.

but contentious past in which some in the family owned others within the same family.

When studying any African possession cult, the first important issue to consider, from a methodological point of view, is the social position of the actors involved. What is their social position, in terms of both their past and present identities? How does their social status, their origins and the way in which they construct their own identities affect their perceptions of the past and the way rituals are performed? In Tchamba, rituals are enacted by the descendants of the masters. It is their historical consciousness that structures their practices. Their goal is to come to grips with the role their ancestors played in contributing to the “tragedy” of slavery, in which people upon death were buried far from their motherlands, their gods and their ancestors, a situation that they say led to the enslaved being forgotten. To atone for the actions of their ancestors, they transform the slaves into *vodun* and celebrate them. These collective ceremonies help the larger society cope with a problematic past, while also helping individual families resolve internal conflicts that can arise between the different components of the family: the descendants of slaves and the descendants of masters. In other African possession cults, however, especially those found in the African diaspora communities within Islamic countries, it is not the descendants of the masters, but rather the descendants of the enslaved who use ritual performances to construct a useable past for the present. Accordingly, when studying such cults, it is important, as mentioned, to know the identities and social position of those associated with the cults.

Any research on the relationship between possession cults and slavery must also take into consideration that domestic slavery is a sensitive and controversial subject. One can rarely find it discussed in official discourse or in public ceremonies. Memories of it are more often than not relegated to the margins. Tchamba, for example, has been critical to the maintenance and proliferation of memories of slavery in the coastal communities of Benin and Togo.²⁴ And the number of Tchamba shrines has been increasing recently. But it does not occupy a prominent place in the annual Vodun festival, which takes place every January 10th in Benin since 1992, to celebrate African and African American religions.²⁵ The festival organizers do not describe Tchamba as a *vodun* linked to slavery. Instead, it is presented as just one among many *vodun* cults. Even if the slavery connection were made public, such an open venue would not be the best place to investigate the multiplicity of viewpoints embedded in Tchamba rituals. Even in less public settings Tchamba practitioners and leaders, when asked about their cult, are accustomed to stating thus: “We have Tchamba because our grandparents were rich and they owned a lot of slaves.” Such statements, however, are part of a set of standard explanations about the cult offered to strangers that actually hide quite a bit about the cult’s cosmology and

²⁴ Rush, “In Remembrance of Slavery: Tchamba Vodun Arts,” 40.

²⁵ This festival was officially called *Festival des arts et cultures vodun*. On this festival, its origins and linkages to both international and local organizations, see Robin Law, “Commemoration of the Atlantic Slave Trade in Ouidah,” *Gradhiva*, 2:8 (2008), 10–27; Alessandra Brivio and Giovanna Parodi da Passano (eds.), “Dossier. Turismo e patrimonio: il caso del Bénin,” *Africa e Mediterraneo*, 67 (2009). On slave memories in Benin, see Gaetano Ciarcia, “Mémoire de l’esclavage au Bénin: le passé à venir,” *Gradhiva*, 8 (June, 2008), 4–9; Ana Lucia Araujo, *Public Memory of Slavery: Victims and Perpetrators in the South Atlantic* (Amherst, 2010); and Ana Lucia Araujo, “Slave Trade Heritage Tourism and the Public Memory of Slavery,” *Ethnologies*, 32:2 (2010), 145–78.

the life histories of those venerated by its members. As a result, they are of limited value for understanding how the *vodun* retain memories of the slavery. Such silences are common in all possession cults, where secrecy is an integral part of their practice. Unraveling of these opaque narratives, however, is imperative if one wishes to understand how possession cults remember and forget the past. Strategies for doing so require one to avoid direct questioning and, instead, to participate in ceremonies and analyze the cult's mode of dress, body treatments, practices, places, ritual objects and dances. Such an approach is more likely to help the researcher identify the presence of memories of slavery.

Looking at rituals step by step

Iconography – the study of visual representation – is central to any analysis of possession rituals. How people present themselves, the way spaces are organized, the kinds of objects displayed, all have meanings that can tell us a great deal, but that are also subject to different interpretations.²⁶ In Tchamba, for example, it is easy to recognize those “spirits” who are strangers in southern Benin and Togo, but who possess local adepts. They wear baggy trousers, kerchiefs and brightly colored turbans. They evoke a cultural and geographical panorama that stands out for its difference from the “autochthonous” *vodun*. The personality of these particular *vodun* is believed to be particularly strong and

²⁶ Where meanings are controversial, individuals and groups can interpret differently certain behaviors and practices, and these in turn can be used to propose an alternative understanding from perhaps the one proposed in official discourses. By “official discourses,” I mean those produced both inside (i.e. by the leaders of the cult) and outside the community (i.e. by the political elite), who share the same ritual space.

“hot.” This is evident in the way they move, the sounds they utter and the fabrics and unusual garments they wear. All evoke a certain idea of a distant North. By paying attention to such objects and to their spatial positioning, one can better determine what it all means. In the sections below, I explain this by focusing specifically on the use of cloth and colors, and people and places in Tchamba.²⁷

Of cloths and colors

Clothing and other body treatments are signs and symbols that can be revealed as historically significant. They are critical sites of interpretation where cross-cultural meanings are important, where presumed distant cultures are in dialogue with one another and where, in the case of ritual performances, they reference traumatic experiences such as slavery.²⁸

Within Tchamba there are multiple religious orders, each of which contains an indefinite number of spiritual entities (*vodun*). Each *vodun*, in turn, is related to a specific ethnic group and is identified by a particular color. For example, Mami Tchamba is multicolored; Yendi is yellow; Bublume is blue or black and so on. This classification of spirits by color influences the entire material culture within the Tchamba orders: the materials used in their bracelets, the color and type of shrine pots (brass, aluminum or black clay), the dresses worn by the adepts during ceremonies as well as the color of the animals to be

²⁷ Henrietta L. Moore, *A Passion for Difference: Essays in Anthropology and Gender* (Cambridge, 1994), 71–85.

²⁸ Hildi Hendrickson, *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa* (Durham, 1996).

sacrificed. Their coats must be white, black or red, according to the *vodun* to which they are being offered. Colors help to identify and celebrate those spirits who otherwise would be doomed to remain unknown.²⁹

The importance of color clearly emerges if one engages in a comparative survey of studies on spirit possession among the descendants of enslaved people elsewhere in Africa. In the Mediterranean diaspora, for example, the most widespread possession cults seem to have had links to the *bori* cult, a religious order usually associated with Hausa people of West Africa. It contains a pantheon of some 200 individually named spirits, and each spirit has a specific set of clothes and attributes that differentiate it from the other members of the pantheon during ritual possession. The first useful attribute for identifying these spirits is the color or combination of colors of the spirit's dress and garments. As suggested by Masquelier, the *bori* spirits of Niger are recognized by the way they move their midriffs, but their identities lie in "the fabric of the wrappers, robes and shirts they are dressed in during possession ceremonies."³⁰

"In Tunis, where one can find a northern branch of *bori* called Stambali, they too use particular colors and clothing."³¹ According to a description of Stambali given by Zawadoski in 1942, locals held a masquerade called Bu Sa'diyya to worship the patron saints of Stambali, and its objective was the expulsion of evil spirits. As in the case of Gnawa, it was the dress that first attracted the attention of the observers:

²⁹ Rush, "In Remembrance of Slavery"; Brivio, "Nos grands-pères achetaient des esclaves."

³⁰ Adeline Masquelier, "Mediating Threads: Clothing and Texture of Spirit/Medium Relations in *Bori*," in Hendrickson, *Clothing*, 66.

³¹ Hamel, "Constructing," 259.

The Bu-Sa di dresses himself up in a costume which is that of the fetishist magicians, that is he puts on multicoloured rags on which are hung an extraordinary number of amulets, cowries, little bells, and small mirrors. ... On his head he places a very tall conical headdress also decorated with animal tails which half covers his face, giving him a fierce look.... When the Bu-Sa di begins to dance his entire outfit produces a terrible din as it is jiggled about. The Negro twists himself about frenetically as if he was afflicted by St Vitus's dance, or he turns around on the spot uttering horrible cries.³²

Early descriptions of the Moroccan Gnawa order,³³ originally developed by blacks (probably the Mande people) of West Africa, indicate it is divided into seven sections, representing seven saints or ancestral spirits. Each section is associated with a color that symbolizes a particular function in nature and in the spiritual world. In the 1920s, for example, Carleton Coon, an American anthropologist, made the following observation on the Gnawa: "[They] are racially full Negroes, very black and broad-nosed. They are said to come from Rio de Oro. They wear [distinctive] rags and comic headdresses, belts covered with cowries' shells, and leather sandals."³⁴ Similarly, in the *zar* cult in Ethiopia,

³² Zawadowski, *Le rôle de Nègres parmi la population tunisienne* (1942), quoted in Hunwick, "The Religious Practices," 160.

³³ The term "Gnawa" refers to black people from West Africa, as well as to their religious order and musical style. The belief in possession is crucial to Gnawa religious life, and through music and songs, devotees access the spiritual realm.

³⁴ Carleton S. Coon, "North Africa," in Ralph Linton (ed.), *Most of the World: The Peoples of Africa, Latin America and the East Today* (New York, 1949), 431.

cult members might change their colorful dress several times to suit the demands of particular spirits possessing them during the ceremonies.³⁵

In the adverse, foreign environments in which slaves and slave descendants found themselves, they used the aesthetic dimensions of the body to create identities and emphasize differences at the same time they attempted to conform to the hegemonic social context in which they were located. Among the diaspora in North Africa, colors and garments were critical, first as an assertion of self-identity, and second as a recognition of spiritual entities that did not belong to the hegemonic religious and ritual context. Such slave memories seem to represent a way of asserting a pre-enslavement ethnic or cultural identity, while also asserting the existence of particular spiritual entities. Investigating the existence of distinctive dress as a complex document can lead to an understanding of the memories, hopes and desires of the people concerned. Such representations through dress should alert scholars to the existence of hidden practical memories.

The use of such elements, particularly colors and dress, is not sufficient, however, for proving that a relationship exists between spiritual practices and memories of slavery. For example, in Togo and Benin, a *vodun* called *gorovodun* manifests itself during possession, also using the surfaces of the body.³⁶ These spirits are supposed to have arrived from the savannah. This is the same area of origin of the slaves celebrated in Tchamba, but *gorovodun* spirits are not

³⁵ Natvig, "Oromos," 682.

³⁶ Brivio, *Il vodu in Africa*; Rosenthal, *Possession*.

associated with slavery, but rather with migration from the north to the south during the colonial era. To avoid misinterpretation, one needs to cross-reference the informants' testimony with historical evidence and clarify the specific historical meanings and origin of the rituals. Simply observing the rituals is not enough. Tchamba and *gorovodu* performances are very similar; archival research would alert a researcher to the fact that they both have very different histories and that the similarities in their performances have to do with the fact that the two cults –in operating in the same cultural and religious context in which there is continuing reference to the north – have meant that they have deeply influenced each other over the years.

Of people and places

In addition to material culture, colors and garments, investigations into the meanings and the origins of the names attributed to spiritual entities and particular rituals offer interesting insights into the memory of slavery in ritual performances. Such investigations, however, should be conducted with suitable interpretive instruments, grounded in history and deconstruction techniques. For a long time, scholars understood rituals as one of the means participants used to express and sustain collective memories.³⁷ Roger Bastide, for example, used the concept of collective memory to describe and explain Brazilian religious syncretism. According to Bastide, certain religious practices preserved the memory of the past in a constructed “bricolage” even as these preserved

³⁷ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*.

memories were mixed with more contemporary ones.³⁸ But scholars should remember that memories of the past that rituals are said to preserve, like culture and identity, are not static but have also been culturally constructed. We see this quite clearly in Tchamba.

The names of the *vodun* component of the Tchamba are largely associated with the cultures and religions found in northern Togo, Benin and Ghana. Worshippers claim this is so because it was from these areas that the slaves whose spirits they worship trace their origins. For Tchamba worshippers, however, the past is open to invention and personal elaboration if this is what is needed to establish a shared memory. Worshippers, for example, do not know the actual villages from which the slaves came. This has forced the descendants of the slave masters to use more general terms to welcome to their shrines the spirits of the slaves they owned. The names attributed by Tchamba to their *vodun* geographically map their understanding of the slaves' origins. They assign specific ethnic identities for the slaves and attribute to them a relationship with a particular divinity. Among the names I encountered in Togo and Benin, Mami Tchamba is the most widely known, then Yendi, Bolgatanga, Bublume, Mami Gae, Allah,³⁹ Donko⁴⁰ and Losso.⁴¹ Tchamba is a present-day city in Togo, on the

³⁸ Memory was said to explain human life: nature, culture, language and ethnicity, rather than other means. See Berliner, "The Abuses"; and Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," *Representations*, 69 (2000), 127–50.

³⁹ Many are the references to Islam. For example, Friday is chosen as the holy day, and *trosi* used Muslim prayer beads as a necklace.

⁴⁰ *Donko* or *adoko* is actually a general definition in Ewe and Twi for "slave."

⁴¹ The Losso people are a subgroup of the Kabre. As noted by Kokou Gbosso, a priest of Mami Tchamba in Cotonou, "It is really difficult to find all of them in the same shrine; for example, I just have Bublume, Yendi, Adoko and Fulali, it depends on the number of slaves your family bought." Interview with Kokou Gbosso, Cotonou, December 14, 2006.

banks of the Mono River; it was an important marketplace to which slaves from areas further to the north were conveyed and sold. Yendi is the name of a northern Ghanaian city, on the border with Togo. In the past it was an important center for the exchange of slaves, kola nuts and salt. Bolgatanga is a city in the upper eastern region of Ghana; it served as one of the southern termini of the ancient trans-Saharan trade route that also hosted a slave trade. Bublume comes from the term "Blu," a name given to foreigners whose descendants were later integrated into the coastal villages of the Anlo-Ewe.⁴² Allah is present in Tchamba because of the slaves' northern origin and their supposed Muslim faith. Yet, it is likely that the slaves who were brought to southern Togo and Benin came not from these specific areas alone and many were surely not Muslim. Yet, the spirits of the slaves are all associated with this limited set of signifiers.

A geographical as well as ethnic dimension is also present in the Sudanese Tumbura cults. According to G. P. Makris,⁴³ in Tumbura rituals, the Nuba, Banda, Gumuz, Sawakniyya, Lambunat, Bashawat and Khawajat religious orders recall the historical processes that led to their displacement and brought southern people to their present status. The first three represent pagan tribes to which devotees supposedly belonged before enslavement. The Sawakniyya took their name from Sawakin, a nineteenth-century Red Sea port where slaves were exported. The Bashawat are the Egyptian officers who served in Sawakin in the same period; Lambunat were female slaves from the same city, while Khawajat

⁴² Rosenthal, *Possession*, 110.

⁴³ Makris, *Changing*, 171.

were British colonialists. All are geographical places that were critical during the slave trade or were linked to particular historical events. Researchers must bear in mind, however, that identity claims can change with the political and social context. Identity is not a static feature of African cultures. The names that recur in both Tchamba and Tumbura rituals served to root slaves' descendants in a place of origin and to assist them as they reconstructed an ethnic origin, whether real or invented.⁴⁴ Understanding how these religious practices operate in the present is equally important. Tumbura people seem to need to belong to history. They want to do more than just record it. The same can be said for the Tchamba attribution of slaves' ethnic origins. Through rituals and material culture, Tchamba people have created "an ethnography of the North."⁴⁵ They invented through stereotypes a certain idea of what the slaves' northern culture should have been.

Rituals between past and present

The issue of identity leads us to another methodological problem: how to understand the supposed historical dimensions of the rituals. Memory practices leave remnants of their existence on the bodies of the people concerned even as these memories are forgotten as conscious history.⁴⁶ Can we turn these traces into historical sources? Again, one must be cautious when doing so. Rituals, if

⁴⁴ Makris has also argued that Tumbura songs and ritual modalities cannot be regarded simply as historical data or documents "outside their constitutive social relationship." Makris, *Changing*, 171.

⁴⁵ Wendl, "The Tchamba Cult," 118.

⁴⁶ Bourdieu, *Logic*.

performed in the present, tend to reflect not just the past but also current political and social dynamics, and need to be considered in light of contemporary processes and the aspirations of the participants.⁴⁷

A rite can also acquire different meanings in relation to the successive experiences of those involved. In Togo, for instance, the southern people of Ewe origin were subjected to the dictatorship of Eyadema, a Kabye man from the north, for almost forty years. Their assertion that slaves' spirits actually arrived from the North has had important political meaning. The Tchamba rituals they performed recognized and celebrated those spirits that they said came from the same northern regions as the dictator Eyadema. But Tchamba worshippers also claim past hegemony over those spirits. Through rituals, they remind contemporary society that the ancestors of the northern political elite were once the very slaves that worked in Ewe houses. The stereotypes performed in rituals are not so much a way to record the past, as a way to engage in a dialogue with the present.

The Yoruba Egungun cult has also changed in response to contemporary times. In the past, the Yoruba identity in southern Benin (where the Fon language and culture is dominant) was largely associated with slave origins, so Yoruba families used to perform funerals and the Egungun ancestor cult according to local Fon customs rather than Yoruba ones, so as to hide their origins. In more recent times Egungun cult members have begun to revive and

⁴⁷ And if we study rituals through past documents – travelers' accounts, missionary reports etc. – both the historical moments in which they took place and the social positions of the authors need to be contextualized.

admit the existence of slaves in their families, but they do so in ways that also speak of a history prior to the experience of slavery. In this way, slavery is relegated to “a circumscribed moment in a longer [more glorious] lineage history.”⁴⁸ Since the 1990s, the adoption and performance of Egungun rituals has become emblematic of an alleged and proudly asserted Yoruba tradition. Still, these Egungun rituals might contain bodily manifestations of dramatic historical events. For instance, Argenti describes another masked dance in Cameroon in which the dancers move in ways that refer to both precolonial slavery and colonial forced labor but also to unequal power relations between the younger and older generations in postcolonial Cameroon today.⁴⁹ All speak of both past and present concerns.

Another example of a rite acquiring over time a different meaning for participants is the Tumbura cult of Sudan.⁵⁰ This cult began to decline in popularity when the distinction between Arabs and Sudanese, and between masters and slaves ceased being socially and politically relevant. Emerging in its place was a distinction between northern and southern Sudan. Many southerners migrated to the north as second-class citizens, as rebels and refugees, but those of slave descendants in particular began to identify as Sudanese and gradually adopted Islam. They grew closer to Muslim Arabs. They no longer identified with non-Muslim southerners, and no longer found any advantage in entering the Tumbura brotherhood. Today, young people, third or fourth generation slave

⁴⁸ Noret, “Between,” 30.

⁴⁹ Argenti, “Remembering the Future.”

⁵⁰ Makris, “Slavery,” 159–82.

descendants, have almost forgotten their slave past. They are no longer able to understand the songs and the history of the old Sudanese. As a result, Tumbura is becoming more like *bori*, a possession cult able to appeal to a wider, ill-defined mass of people. It is more associated with those on the social margins of society rather than with those of slave origin. The same has happened with the *bori* cults in North Africa. Slaves of Hausa origin were crossing the Sahara into North Africa as early as the seventeenth century,⁵¹ although the *bori* cults seem to have emerged in Tunis only in the 1830s, linked to the presence of imported elite slave soldiers.⁵² *Bori* cults provided these slaves with a support system to cope with the alienation that accompanied their displacement from their original homelands.⁵³ Today, the *bori* cult called Stambali is a mix of Sufism and local and indigenous African beliefs and practices and is no longer reducible solely to a practice developed by and for the black community. In contemporary Tunis, it serves the contemporary needs of a population that has little sense of itself as a “black community.” Likewise in Morocco, the *bori*-derived Gnawa cult adapted itself to its local context. It modeled itself on local Sufi orders and chose the local holy person as a point of reference for performing ritual visits. Through possession and spiritual practices, “they re-embodied themselves as a spiritually constructed people, independent of their [past] social identity in the world.”⁵⁴ Their new identities allowed them to adjust to their new social environment,

⁵¹ Hunwick, “The Religious Practices,” 151–3.

⁵² The religious practices from their homelands “were transformed in many ways, displacing differing degrees of Islamization and naturalization.” Montana, “Bori Colonies,” 159.

⁵³ Hunwick, “The Religious Practices,” 149.

⁵⁴ Hamel, “Constructing,” 254.

while addressing their desires and aspirations, and their past memories, which at times survived only in their music and ritual objects.

As these examples suggest, it is essential for scholars interested in “using” ritual performance memories as sources for understanding slavery to adopt a historical and processual approach. They must analyze the social and political context in which the rituals are performed and celebrated. The present most often remains the main concern of the people involved in possession rituals. Still, these rituals can reveal past historical solutions for coping with their encounters between different cultures. For this reason they are apt to survive and develop in contexts of displacement and migration. The rituals themselves mix elements from different cultures that belong to different historical periods. As memory practices, they become part and parcel of contemporary culture, associated as much with the past as with new sociocultural realities.

Accordingly, scholars studying embedded memories cannot simply take these rituals as texts to be read as signs of history and, like archeologists, scrape off the dirt to find the remains of the past. On the contrary, these remains should be understood to speak of struggle and negotiation as well as negation of reality, along with an effort to remember. Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that people who perform rituals usually no longer have any direct memory of the facts, a situation that renders the use of these memories even more complex. This is the case for the Gnawa performances, and even the Stambali communities in Tunis, which have become a popular folkloric tourist attraction in the past few years. On the other hand, these rituals should also not be interpreted as simply

referring to the present social condition of the people involved. What scholars need to remember is that the central issue of ritual possession is mimesis: it shifts and changes while also registering both sameness and difference, likeness and “otherness.”⁵⁵

Beneath the surface of rituals

Spiritual forces most vividly manifest themselves in possession ceremonies. Adepts completely change their identities in these events. They offer themselves to foreign spirits or to the spirits of their forefathers. In both cases, they assume identities that pertain to some other geographical location or person. Possession ceremonies are public events, however, and represent only one aspect of the rituals. Other spaces, the inner places, such as sanctuaries and shrines where ritual objects are housed, also host rituals. These too should be investigated, for architectural forms and the uses of such spaces, as well as the shapes, colors, smells and particular materials of ritual objects, their position and how they are manipulated, can conceal repressed memories and different meanings. For example, at the Mami Tchamba shrine, the arrangement of the ritual pots that contain spirits belonging to particular ethnic groups is striking. All the pots, stools and other objects that form the Tchamba shrine are sometimes arranged to evoke a corpse awaiting its funeral. In this way, the Tchamba practitioners construct a symbolic body in which all the slave spirits might find a place where

⁵⁵ Mimesis in fact is a cognitive activity and a comment on history. See Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (London, 1993).

they can stay and finally be celebrated.⁵⁶ But how does one interpret what appears to be a dead body? In such instances, scholars need to acquire a comprehensive understanding of local religious concepts. Tchamba celebrates the tragedy of men and women who died far from their lands, ancestors and divinities. No one organized for them funeral rites in keeping with local custom, and their bodies were buried in a foreign land. Furthermore, as was explained to me, many slaves died on their way to the coast because they could not survive the trip or because hunters killed them. Such people, those who were not given funeral rites, died a “bad death.” They were rendered unable to rejoin their ancestors and become, in turn, ancestors themselves. Forced by circumstances, their connections to their lineages were broken. As a consequence, they could not find a place in the hereafter. This is why these spirits are considered restless, angry and aggressive. They return instead to annoy the descendants of their masters. In this culture context, slavery is a tragedy associated with being uprooted and removed from one’s ancestral land. Today the descendants of families in which slaves worked feel the need to reconstruct the bodies of these unrequited spirits. Tchamba adepts build a symbolic body into which all the slaves’ spirits might find a place. The adepts recognize their duty to remember because they fear the consequences of the unresolved past. But these observations raise yet another set of questions: How does one approach and gain the trust of those individuals whose knowledge about these ritual memories is critical for our own understanding of the very performances one is investigating?

⁵⁶ Brivio, “Evoking the Past.”

What background should scholars obtain in order to correctly interpret the memories embedded in these rituals? What theoretical approach should one take in analyzing them?

The background necessary for understanding ritual memories

Past scholarship has most often understood rituals as part of the so-called “traditional African religion.” This was a religion constructed as ahistorical, with its origins in a distant, unchanging past. Any alterations were attributed to “syncretism,” a term that implied “contamination” of a supposedly pure “tradition” by practices, symbols and meanings from others. Cultures, and in this case religious cultures, were understood to be closed universes; all meaning was to be found within that closed universe.⁵⁷

Here I argue that while this approach to cultures may provide us with some valuable insights, it also prevents us from seeing the larger religious and ritual contexts in which a possession cult operates. We lose sight of important connections that exist between a possession cult and other divinities or ritual expressions. For example, in the Tchamba shrine, practitioners often install an altar devoted to Ade. Ade is the *vodun* of hunting and hunters. By asking if there is a connection between hunting and slavery, I obtained interesting insight into

⁵⁷ Rosalind Shaw, “The Invention of African Traditional Religion,” *Religion*, 20 (1990), 339–53; Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart, *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (London, 1994).

the way slavery was remembered. A priestess in Cotonou told me that her ancestors were great hunters who might also mistakenly kill human beings; for this reason angry spirits might come back to trouble the family of the hunters. Kokou Atchinou, on the other hand, explained the presence of Ade by saying that their ancestors, who were slave traders, captured the slaves while hunting, because when hunters could not find animals they customarily resorted to capturing persons wandering in the bush, whom they could sell to the big slave traders in the cities.⁵⁸

Although the Cotonou priestess and Atchinou offer different explanations for the presence of the *vodun* Ade in the Tchamba shrine, together they suggest that slaves and animals are members of a common category in a world in which captured slaves, like large hunted animals, need to be spiritually pacified. The skulls and bones of hunted animals are placed in the Ade shrine; a symbolic human corpse containing all the spirits of the human beings who were hunted is composed in the Tchamba shrine. Both Ade and Tchamba operate in the same symbolic universe. Ade and “hunting” become strong metaphors for the fears and incertitude of a historical period when a trip to visit distant relatives and places could lead to a life of slavery. The same can be said for the cowry shells found in the sanctuaries and shrines of possessions cults. According to my informant, Atchinou, the human prey, once captured, were brought to the coast to be used as bait to fish for the creatures that produced and lived in cowry

⁵⁸ Interview with Kokou Atchinou, Lomé, January 2, 2007.

shells.⁵⁹ The cowries are imagined as vampires that use the bodies of humans to reproduce by sucking their blood. The image of these little vampires and accounts about hunters going after both human and animal prey reflect how people in this area think about the capturing of slaves. It was a process that transformed human beings into commodities. Their capture brought to them ultimately a “bad death” in which they were treated as animals, to be used as bait.

From this analysis, it is clear that the nice, little, white cowry shells found in the Tchamba shrine hide a story not so immediately evident. The ritual objects convey multiple, and sometimes hidden, disturbing meanings. By inquiring into the hidden meanings associated with ritual objects and by adopting a theoretical approach that considers both bodies and objects as active subjects in a ritual space, scholars can bring greater depth and wider range to their studies.

On the anthropological approach to ritual possession

Possession rituals are widespread all over Africa, and as a subject, it has occupied a central position in a number of different disciplines: comparative religion and theology, religious phenomenology, the sociology of religion, psychology and the anthropology of the body. Consideration of all the themes and theoretical perspectives about rituals found in these disciplines is beyond the scope of this chapter. Nevertheless, some discussion about the way

⁵⁹ This is a common myth (with many different versions) that is widespread along the Slave Coast. Brivio, “Tales of Cowries”; Elizabeth Isichei, *Voices of the Poor in Africa* (Rochester, 2002).

anthropologists have approached the topic is necessary as a preliminary step for appreciating how their methods can enhance the study of the African slave past. Over time, there have been three main trends. For functionalist scholars, most notably I. M. Lewis, spirit possession reveals frictions in the social fabric. The spirit mediums belong mainly to women and to afflicted groups. Lewis interpreted membership in the spirit possession *zar* cult as an opportunity for women and the chronically ill to obtain some degree of emancipation from their traditional marginalization.⁶⁰ Such a model, however, fails to question the historical dimensions of the cult. It focuses solely on the cultural and bodily dimensions of spirit possession.⁶¹

Some anthropologists use psychoanalytic models. These focus on spirit mediums, who are identified as having psychotic illnesses, which their societies treat through initiation and possession. Both rituals are said to be cathartic experiences for the individuals involved in the ceremonies. Possession is defined as a therapeutic practice. Social meanings are ignored in favor of a focus on the strategic benefits that the possessed enjoy.⁶² Yet another approach focuses on the symbolic and the interpretive. Here, scholars argue that possession rituals should be read as texts that represent cultural knowledge and that transmit information. These studies seize on the complexities of local expressions and ideas, but they too fail to consider historical and social contexts. They also start from the assumption that bodies, sounds, smells and tastes are just “texts.” Still other

⁶⁰ I. M. Lewis, “Spirit Possession and Deprivation Cults,” *Man*, 1:3 (1966), 322.

⁶¹ Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories*, 18.

⁶² Boddy, “Spirit Possession Revisited”; Thomas J. Csordas, “Health and the Holy in African and Afro-American Spirit Possession,” *Social Science & Medicine*, 24:1 (1987), 1–11.

scholars understand ritual possession as a product of the experience of subjugation, slavery or colonialism. They tend to impose a politics of resistance and subversion on ritual, at the expense of the participants' actual experiences.

More recent developments in the anthropology of ritual represent yet another approach. Based on a rethinking of Marcel Mauss's "Techniques of the body" and Bourdieu's notion of "habitus," this approach regards the body as a subject, and not merely as an object on which society inscribes itself. The body is neither imitative nor is it representational, but it is determined socially by the individual. Paul Stoller takes this more complex and holistic approach to possession.⁶³ He states, "to reduce possession to a theatricalization of cultural history, cultural resistance, or cultural texts is, to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty, to manipulate things and give up living in them."⁶⁴ Instead, Stoller focuses on the sentient body in possession, on the relationship between bodily practices and cultural meanings, and the power of mimesis as a historical instrument. As a phenomenologist, he stresses the indeterminate and boundless nature of experience, "which can flow into new meanings and different cultural dynamics."⁶⁵ Stoller applies this theoretical approach to the study of a possession cult among the Songhay of Niger.⁶⁶ He describes the life and suffering of cult initiates in an effort to grasp the meaning of the cult to the people involved: the

⁶³ Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories*.

⁶⁴ Paul Stoller, *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology* (Philadelphia, 1989), 209.

⁶⁵ Kim Knibbe and Peter Versteeg, "Assessing Phenomenology in Anthropology: Lessons from the Study of Religion and Experience," *Critique of Anthropology*, 28:1 (2008), 50.

⁶⁶ Paul Stoller, *Fusion of the Worlds: An Ethnography of Possession among the Songhay of Niger* (Chicago, 1997).

point is to understand how these meanings become reality to the people themselves. But this approach is more easily said than done. To follow a phenomenological approach means full participation in the ritual experience one wants to study. Such participation allows an immediate understanding of meanings. Stoller speaks of his own experiences as a sorcerer's apprentice, but he makes no claim for reality or truth. The experience is too personal for that. Can an analysis of the political and sociohistorical circumstances of a ritual ever focus only on personal experience and tell us anything beyond what it meant for the individual? It is extremely difficult to write about such experiences and to claim them as an account of the historic past. However, a phenomenological approach can contribute to our understanding of human agency and intentionality: how and what humans do with their understanding of the past. This too is an important aspect of any investigation. Such an approach establishes a more empathic relationship with so-called informants.⁶⁷

A different phenomenological approach focuses on an analysis of inanimate objects as sentient subjects. With this approach, a mask or an object is not just the representation of a spirit. It is a substantive embodiment, with its own agency. During Tchamba ceremonies, priests talk directly to the uncovered pots that contain the slaves' spirits; they apologize and ask for protection; they share family problems and expectations. The agency of the ritual objects is clearly felt during the trance by adepts, whose bodies become physically and dramatically infused with the energy, power and anger of the objects contained

⁶⁷ See next paragraph.

in the pots. The objects are no longer considered mere bearers of a message or vehicles of human will. Rather they are the places from which different actions, coming from different cultural and temporal landscapes, silently come to affect the adepts. These actions, read as signs, are interpreted in ways that address present concerns and open for participants' routes to future possibilities. The opaque character of these objects allows people to make discoveries about themselves and the world they live in, because they are understood to embody a force that cannot be humanly controlled.⁶⁸

Methodological difficulties

I learned during my research that Tchamba is considered a very strong and dangerous *vodun* because of the actions of its hot-tempered and angry spirits. Today descendants of both slave traders and slaves fear Tchamba and they prefer not to speak openly about it. Coming face to face with such invisible and threatening entities is one of the difficulties of investigating memories of this kind. Another difficulty involves the fact that possession is largely concerned with healing. To obtain good results, participants are asked to reformulate their speech, a speech that involves a largely suppressed and, today, unspeakable history of the trade slave, where there is talk of witches able to steal souls,⁶⁹ vampire cowry shells, sorcerers who turn their victims into zombies and

⁶⁸Webb Keane, "Subjects and Objects," Introduction to Part III, in C. Tilley et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Material Culture* (London, 2006), 197–202.

⁶⁹Wyatt MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The Bakongo of Lower Zaire* (Chicago, 1986).

witchcraft that transports its victims to a faraway “second universe,”⁷⁰ invisible and wonderful cities, or other alluring places hidden in the depths of the sea.⁷¹ Thus, the silence alludes to disturbing images, the terror and the moral problem of these troubled memories, in which ghostly places form the background for these rituals.

One such ghostly backdrop is inhabited by the Tchamba vodun, Mami Wata. It is not unusual to find Mami Wata represented as an Indian lady, although sometimes she is a European, but always a foreigner with white skin and straight hair. She lives under the ocean. Her city is an ultramodern site of luxury, where cowries, shell money, cover tall buildings. Mami Wata is also a metaphor for vampiric and selfish modernity. Human beings cannot dwell in her kingdom, but she seduces men and women and lures them to her underwater city.⁷² In Benin and Togo, it is her adepts that she lures into the sea. During ceremonies that take place on the beach, the possessed *vodussi* run toward the water, trying to join her. A team of young muscular men line the water’s edge to prevent the *vodussi* from plunging into the water to reach Mami Wata in the

⁷⁰ Ralph Austen, “The Moral Economy of Witchcraft: An Essay in Comparative History,” in John and Jean Comaroff (eds.), *Modernity and Its Malcontents* (Chicago, 1993), 92.

⁷¹ The Atlantic slave trade provided apt metaphors of wrongful “eating” that were deployed in rumors about those who were its most visible agents. Phantasmagorical images of Europeans and African elites as consumers of human life were reported throughout the centuries of the slave trade. See Rosalind Shaw, “The Production of Witchcraft/Witchcraft as Production: Memory, Modernity, and the Slave Trade in Sierra Leone,” *American Ethnologist*, 24:4 (1997), 868. The metaphor of cannibal witchcraft in particular “highlights the silencing effect of slavery.” Argenti, “Remembering the Future,” 50.

⁷² On Mami Wata, see Misty L. Bastian, “Married in the Water: Spirit Kin and Other Afflictions of Modernity in Southeastern Nigeria,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XXVII:2 (1997), 116–34; H. J. Drewal (ed.), *Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora* (Bloomington & Indianapolis, 2008); and Adeline Masquelier, “Encounter with a Road Siren,” *Visual Anthropology*, 8 (1992), 56–69.

ocean depths. In this and in other ritual practices, memories are regularly reenacted.⁷³ In local thought, the sea, like the river, marks a divide between the world of the living and that of the dead. During the slave trade it was a place where captured people disappeared forever. According to widespread legends, such individuals were used as bait by fisherman to obtain cowries (imagined as a living creature that feeds on people). The sea, in this ritual context, can mean many things: the abode of Mami Wata, who, in encouraging the selfish desire for money, creates social divisions within the community; it can also mean the loss of life to the Atlantic slave trade, and refer to the moral cost of participating in a trade in which some benefited at the expense of others. As such, the ritual at the beach for Mami Wata can be understood to speak of both contemporary fears and past miseries.

The difficulty in making these kinds of interpretations about cowries and the sea, as noted by Edna Bay,⁷⁴ is that often evidence in support of one's ideas is lacking. Yet, we also cannot limit our analysis to the kinds of interpretations provided by *vodun* priests (who readily explain the shells as positive symbols, bearers of richness, fecundity and regenerative power). At the same time, we must be careful not to project our own feelings about this history onto that which we study in ways that render ritual possession as simply an expression of a land traumatized by the tragedy of the slave trade. Still, important ritual objects such as the cowry shells are evidence of the need to read the silences and to pierce the

⁷³ Alessandra Brivio (ed.), *Mami Wata, l'inquieto spirito delle acque* (Milano, 2010).

⁷⁴ Edna Bay, "Protection, Political Exile, and the Atlantic Slave Trade: History and Collective Memory in Dahomey," *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, 22:1 (2001), 22-41.

surface of things. And even if there is no explicit evidence of the direct connection between *vodun* religious practice and the slave trade, I maintain that it is not an epistemological exaggeration to look for memories of slavery in spirit possession ritual practices. Opportunities do exist to understand slavery through these cults. With careful probing, one can reach through the obscurity and find dramatic images and metaphors of the slave trade.⁷⁵

Methodological opportunities

In 2001, Ralph Austen⁷⁶ discussed African silences about the slave trade and attributed it to the morally and socially problematic nature of this tragic period. For it was often members of a victim's own clan who seized him or her to sell that person into slavery.⁷⁷ Others ascribed the silences about the slave trade to the traumatic nature of the memories that continue to cause new conflicts and produce new forms of marginalization.⁷⁸ In Africa, slave descent remains a stigma, and Africans prefer not to discuss its legacy. People whose ancestors suffered imprisonment, deportation, punishment and forced labor prefer not to speak about it; the same is true for the descendants of those who ordered the capture of slaves and participated in the slave trade. Silences exist as an

⁷⁵ See, for example, Brivio, "Tales of Cowries."

⁷⁶ Ralph Austen, "The Slave Trade as History and Memory: Confrontations of Slaving Voyage Documents and Communal Traditions," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 58:1 (January, 2001), 229-44.

⁷⁷ Jean-Pierre Warnier, "Slave-Trading without Slave-Raiding in Cameroon," *Paideuma*, 41 (1995), 251-72.

⁷⁸ See Martin A. Klein, "Studying the History of Those Who Would Rather Forget: Oral History and the Experience of Slavery," *History in Africa*, 16 (1989), 209-17; Baum, *Shrines of the Slave Trade*; and Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*.

“[indigenous response] both to the traumatic conditions of slavery”⁷⁹ and to the difficulties of shaking off this stigma.⁸⁰ Analyzing silences in the context of ritualized memories offers a different approach to those who focus on local ethical and moral notions and describe silences as examples of repressed memories. Simply speaking with a wider range of informants and respecting their silences while making enquiries about practices and objects can reveal new insights about slavery in Africa.

When approaching people involved in ritual practices, scholars should avoid asking direct questions. Asking such questions will not produce useful answers, and doing so can produce a negative research experience. G. P. Makris⁸¹ described such an experience in his article on Tumbura in Sudan. The first time he approached the cult, the devotees made him wait for hours and then his guide told him, “they do not like you ... the Tumbura people do not like strangers.” Perhaps their refusal to see him was due to the anthropologist’s excessively blunt questions and to his invasion of their space. Moreover, they suggested to him that, although outsiders considered the Tumbura as mere slaves, pagans, thieves and prostitutes, they wanted to present themselves in a positive and dignified manner, and for this reasons they refused to be stereotyped yet again by total

⁷⁹ Argenti, “Remembering the Future,” 50.

⁸⁰ Nevertheless, since the late twentieth century, there are more and more exceptions. For example, in Benin official initiatives are aiming to promote memories of the slave trade, such as the construction of public monuments, the creation of new private museums and memorials and the introduction of new commemorative events such as the *Marche du devoir de mémoire et du repentir*. The same process is taking place in Togo, too, in recent years. The creation of a museum in the “Maison des esclaves” in Agbodrafo (Puerto Seguro) is evidence of the desire to participate in the international discourse on the slave trade.

⁸¹ Makris, “Slavery,” 159.

strangers and anthropologists. Yet the rewards from working with informants when approached with greater sensitivity are multiple. In Benin, today, everyone hesitates to make public declarations concerning regrets about the past when, thanks to the slave trade, their ancestors became wealthy. No one will openly explain the meanings of the ritual objects contained in the shrine or disclose the meanings of the hunters' *vodun*. Only after spending a great deal of time observing and participating in the rituals, in which the researcher is required to conform to the rituals' own rhythms and purposes, can a scholar begin to win people's trust. Only then will informants begin to share their knowledge and memories.

In an interview with Kokou Atchinou, for example, I asked if, during possession, the slave spirits enter the bodies of the slaves' or the masters' descendants. He said that there was no distinction. In another interview, however, when I noticed that a particular bracelet, called *tchambaga*, was worn by all the adepts during the trance, but not by Atchinou and the other priests, he told me that it was not necessary for him or the other priests to wear them because they did not fall into trance. On a different occasion, I learned more when a priestess explained that the *tchambaga* she was wearing belonged to her grandmother, who had been bought as a slave in the north, and whose beauty had caused the master's son to marry her. Evidently, if a person learns that he or she is linked to a Tchamba spirit, the first step is to buy two *tchambaga*, one to place on the shrine and the other to wear. Generally the shrine belongs to a

family compound, and every adept will deposit his or her own bracelet on it.⁸² During yet another meeting with Kokou Atchinou and the people of his compound, he indicated with eye movements that the two old ladies sitting with us had slave origins, since they were wearing an antique bracelet. Kokou Atchinou himself emphasized that he did not have slave origins. These encounters did not so much teach me how to distinguish the descendants of slave owners from those of slave origin (which was not my primary interest) as it showed the impossibility of speaking publicly about slavery and the importance of concentrating on the unsaid: gestures, ritual objects, the way topics are broached and the relations between the people involved in the ritual. To win the trust of informants, scholars should show interest in the religious and mystical meanings of the rituals and in the present consequences of the performance. They should strictly avoid making any reference to the practitioners' supposed slave origins. In order to approach such memories one should start with the principal surface facts, explore connections, ask simple questions without pressing for answers and accept that sometimes answers will not come.

⁸² Often, I was told, one will find *tchambaga* while cultivating a field, constructing a house, digging a well or simply walking along a road or in a courtyard. This is incontrovertible evidence that the person has Tchamba spirits he needs to venerate. There can be at least two different types of *tchambaga*, an old type found by chance and a new type purchased at a market. See Wendl, "The Tchamba Cult," 111–23.

Conclusion

I wish to conclude with a quote from Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*.⁸³ One of the central characters of the novel is Beloved, the ghost-daughter that Sethe, the mother, had killed to save her from slave traders. Although here we are in an American diaspora context, if we assume a perspective based on African belief systems, she has suffered a "bad death," and as a *vodun*, she comes back to trouble her kin. She is an element of disruption and unease, who haunts her mother. She wants to find a place among the living and to be reconnected with her ancestors, so she dredges up the memory of slavery to the detriment of the living. The broken link between the past and the future needs to be recovered and reconstructed. The novel explains that past violence, if neglected, will generate new violence.⁸⁴ Internal conflicts and struggles, raids, betrayals and murders leave in their wake a degree of suffering that permeates the human landscape with their ghosts and memories. But ritual spaces offer a terrain in which good and bad, past and present, suffering and salvation can coexist. Ritual possessions and rituals bring the past into the present.

These forms of remembering are elusive, open to contrasting interpretations because they incorporate memories from many different periods and places. Scholars need to work cautiously in investigating these phenomena,

⁸³ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York, 1987).

⁸⁴ *Beloved* tells us of traumatic reenactment. Of course, there are important differences between traumatic reenactment and rituals: the former is involuntary while the latter is learned and is under the conscious control of the performer. On this subject, see Argenti, "Remembering the Future"; as well as Nicolas Argenti and Katharina Schramm (eds.), *Remembering Violence: Anthropological Perspectives on Intergenerational Transmission* (New York, 2010). Actually, as Argenti (2006) argued, ritual possessions provide a liminal case between trauma and performance.

which bring together the past with the present, the individual with the social, the visible with the invisible and the speakable with the unspeakable. They need to listen with sensitivity and cast an enquiring eye at ritual objects and practices. The elusive and indeterminate landscapes of rituals and the invisible spaces of the religious dimension can be an important terrain for investigations into the memories of slavery, but only if scholars are backed by a profound knowledge of the present and past sociocultural contexts and by a critical knowledge of religious systems of belief. As difficult as this area of study is, it is indeed worthy of scholarly attention. Possession rituals can reveal neglected and obscure forms of memory.⁸⁵ They give voice to points of view made marginal by the predominant scholarly focus on discursive sources and public commemorations.

⁸⁵ Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*.