CORD OF BLOOD

Possession and the Making of Voodoo

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1 INTRODUCTION

I arrived for the first time in Momé Hounkpati, the village which was to be my home for the next 12 months, in early October 1989.[1] The original aim of this research was to concentrate on the 'couvents de féticheuses', as they have been described in early Francophone literature (Garnier and Fralon 1951, Verger 1957), a term now readily adopted by most educated Togolese to describe the compounds associated with shrines where initiation takes place. Voodoo 'cults',[2] as they are often referred to in Western popular discourses, have often been represented as a religion of darkness, fear, black magic and malevolent mysticism, where images of zombies, the walking living dead or bloody sacrifices, including, it is sometimes said, human victims have taken pride of place. A plethora of films, articles and documentaries has served to reiterate the wildness of voodoo in the Western imagination. Coffee table books further reinforce such representations, despite their sometimes semi-academic credentials, making use as they do of a wealth of powerfully striking photographs, taken from 'real events', and evocative language. Yet, as we shall see, drama, play and display are indeed also part and parcel of the practice of religiosity. The 'making of voodoo' takes place at many levels, and these deities linger in the imagination under many guises.

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

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

Verger's scholarly work on Yoruba orisa and Fon vodun[3] appears only a few years later (1957). With its heavy emphasis on initiatory processes, Verger firmly bases his data in the religious sphere, providing vivid and detailed accounts of the symbolic significance of religious practice and mythology, but still leaving a taste for more, for how these institutions tally with other aspects of social interaction. Yet another early ethnography is provided by Maupoil (1943), an ethnographer and colonial administrator in Benin whose authoritative account of Fa divination displays his masterly grasp of the mathematical aspects of divinatory practice. Again, little social context was provided relating to the use made of divination in everyday (or, indeed, specific) social contexts, or relating to the background of diviners themselves, and making little mention of the religious institutions surrounding divination and linking it to the 'voodoo' complex. At a time when life-histories were not yet in fashion, the systematic cataloguing of practice was very much favoured. Augé's more recent work (1988) derives an obvious inspiration from Verger, viewing religious practice in this part of Africa as an expression of morality and ideology.

Vodhun, as these deities are termed locally,[4] are treated by Augé as a relatively homogeneous complex: explanation and analysis make little differentiation between various groups, and vodhun in Benin and Togo are amalgamated to become expressions of shared cosmological and mythological beliefs. While it is the case that vodhun as belief, practice and religious complex[5] is indeed present from Nigeria to present-day Ghana, the continuities it displays and which serve to enhance a sense of shared identity are paired with important differences used to mobilise ethnic differentiation. Vodhun can thus hardly be treated as homogenous practice or ideology.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A FIELD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As deities and their disciples are constantly in focus while also remaining firmly in the domain of the hidden, the balance between what was allowed or not was a constant reminder of my status as an outsider, although I know that many insiders are constantly faced with the same dilemmas and, like me, constantly run the risk of overstepping the boundaries of the permissible. After all, this is precisely how new members are continually recruited into vodhun societies: the inadvertent breaking of a taboo, the unwitting mention of a name that should remain unspoken, or imprudently walking into an area designated for the gods, are all simultaneously part of public and specialised knowledge. While I was rarely excluded from events taking place in the Sacred Forest (la Forêt Sacrée, as my informants referred to it in French), one of the most exclusive and secluded areas for the performance of religious ceremonies, I could never openly enquire about how many women were actually initiates. Through covert household samples, I arrived at an estimation that some 70–80 per cent of adult women (approximately 18 years of age and above) have undergone initiation in one of the secret societies[11] associated with vodhun, as was evident through the scarifications and tattoos that they carry on their foreheads, arms, shoulders and backs. As for statistical data about the occurrence of possession, I learnt that most women undergo initiation as a direct result of the onslaught of possession and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

OTHERNESS WITHIN, WITHOUT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ici, il n'y a que les vodous qui comptent. Les gens ne s'intéressent pas à l'église, alors que dans ma région, il y a beaucoup de croyants. Il y a beaucoup à faire, et surtout il faut combattre la polygamie.
[Only the vodhun matter here. People don't really care about the church, whereas in my region there are many believers. There is still much to be done, and, above all, we must fight against polygamy.]

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

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

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

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

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

2 BLOOD AND PLACE, PERSONS AND GODS

Togo's population is estimated at 4.5 million,[1] and consists of approximately 40 ethnic groups the largest of which is the Ewe (40 per cent of the total population), occupying the southern part of the country, and extending along the coast and northwards in the west, into the mountainous region of Mount Agou. Several groups of Ewe also reside across the border in the south-eastern part of Ghana, neighbouring Asante territory. Defined in the literature as a more or less homogeneous group, identification of this 'purely' Ewe ethnic group remains elusive. Subgroups proliferate, and tend to identify themselves by various denominations, such as the Mina (also known as Guen, Gen, Ga), the Adja and Watchi in Togo and the Anlo, Abutia and Ga Ewe in Ghana. The boundaries of an ethnic group are always difficullt to delineate, as has been pragmatically made clear for a considerable historical time, and as postcolonial writings have increasingly begun to emphasise. The margins of specific territorial units tend to blur with those of other neighbouring groups, while the centre itself often incorporates incomers, challenging the notion of bounded community altogether (Amselle 1998, Anderson 1983, Kopytoff 1987, Miller 1998).

Early denominations have tended to incorporate the Watchi within the larger Ewe polity. The concept of a bounded ethnic group is difficult to establish, while the term 'Ewe' in particular is problematic. Since colonial times, the Ewe have been divided into a number of subgroups, none of which explicitly defines itself as Ewe. The various denominations of Anlo, Abutia, Watchi, Mina have been amalgamated by researchers to constitute this larger entity. Certainly, a linguistic Ewe denomination can be identified, and the different groups in this region refer to themselves as speakers of *Ewegbe*, the 'Ewe tongue'. Historical processes, past migrations, contacts and conflicts hold the key to establishing how these various groups relate to and differ from one another. However, the debate relating to the migrations of various groups in this region of West Africa could easily be misleading, as it treats ethnic groups in a historical context while using contemporary names to define them.

Indeed, although Ewegbe, the Ewe tongue, with its variations, is spoken from the coastal areas of Benin to Ghana, belonging to different 'ethnic' (sub)groups may sometimes be expressed by a refusal to comprehend other vernaculars, or to answer an interlocutor from another region, particularly if personal or collective conflicts have arisen. I witnessed how a trader told one of her clients, with whom she had failed to negotiate an appropriate price, that 'It would be easier to trade with you if you spoke properly.'

Most of those who reside in the south-eastern region of Togo tend to refer to themselves as being Watchi, but refer to their language as Ewegbe. Watchi, Mina and Adja are mutually intelligible, but the different vernaculars allow for a considerable degree of diversity between different 'Ewe'-speaking territories. Many also make a point of stating other differences: apart from the linguistic aspect, identities are also differentiated through various activities and 'customs' designed, among other things, to highlight such distinctions. In this sense, being Watchi is a process in the making, a perpetual affirmation of traits that help define differences between groups. These are often enacted in public displays, and can include for instance, the erection of vodhun shrines linked to particular localities, the performance of dances and music associated with such gods, or the display of bodily markers such as scarifications to honour various vodhun particular to one community. Many in this region also regard themselves as less 'corrupted' by the introduction of Christianity than other Ewe groups, and emphasise that vodhun constitutes the primary complex for the expression of religious sentiment. Indeed, so strong is vodhun considered to be in the south-east that I was, upon my arrival, constantly prompted to settle there by well-meaning colleagues in Lomé, who assured me that I would find the essence of vodhun practice in this part of the land. Once I had settled in Momé Hounkpati, it became increasingly apparent that vodhun represented, among many other things, an avenue for opposing outside influence and interference. When accompanying a healer on one of his visits to a patient, I was met once with great hostility by the family of the sufferer, a young girl seven or eight years of age. There was considerable discontent with my presence, and it eventually emerged that I had been believed to be a member of an Italian Catholic mission established some distance away. My interest in vodhun had been interpreted as a disguised attempt to eradicate such practices.

I shall hereafter refer to the particular group in this study as the Watchi or Watchi-Ewe, making it clear that it shares a common historical background with other Ewe groups, while acknowledging that the differences stated also contribute to the expression of a separate identity. According to some of my older informants, the

history of settlement in the village goes back to the dispersion of Notsé, a town situated some 50 km away, in the fifteenth century.[2] One group of refugees is said to have come to settle in Atikesimé. Elders in the village were unable to specify the cause of this diaspora, although the dispersion of Notsé under the allegedly tyranic rule of Agokoli has been widely documented by historians (see, for instance, Amenumey 1986, Gayibor 1984, 1986, Gayibor and Ligier 1983, de Medeiros 1984).

BODIES, CONCEPTION AND COMING INTO BEING

I intend to examine the ways in which the 'cord of blood' is exegetically conceptualised, and what its connections are with concepts of identity and territoriality, while remaining aware that the term 'identity' often carries problematic connotations, as its contours remain glib and difficult to ascertain. Identity in the sense used here can hardly be viewed in primordialist terms. Rather, I seek to convey the different aspects of what makes some Watchi openly display their sense of belonging to a group in particular circumstances, and how concepts of blood mediate in the establishment of intersubjective relationships. There are, predictably, many twists and turns to this story, and what makes identity crystallise in particular ways at some junctions of a person's life cycle may itself shift over the course of a lifetime. Nevertheless, it appears important to highlight some of the concepts that are called forth when making claims of belonging to the Watchi as a group.

The 'cord of blood', *hunka*, evokes bodily images of wombs, female bodies, conceptual continuity and bonds of intersociality which serve to connect humans to each other in their everyday interactions and simultaneously, tie them to the divine realm of vodhun. However, bodily representations of sociality focus only partially on inter-human or divine connections. Equally important is the notion of grounding humans to particular habitats and forms of settlement. While the cord of blood serves to emphasise the emplacement of unborn children within their mothers' wombs, its direct association with the realm of vodhun, activated through the occurrence of spirit possession and female initiation, authorises settlement on historically important sites and legitimates claims of access to new territories. Vodhun, in other words, are hardly to be considered as divinities whose existence is kept separate from that of humans. Vodhun as cosmological beings are in fact part and parcel of bodily practice and experience, and are also important markers of ethnic belonging.

There exists a connection, however loosely defined, between an exegetic understanding of identity and locality as settlement. These

concepts tend to become merged in certain circumstances, while allowing for a considerable degree of flexibility, mobility and territorial expansion. I also focus on the relationship between the imagery of nature and bodily practice, and how these come to reflect and contribute to shaping personal and collective identities, expressed in idioms of kinship and mirrored in cosmological contexts. Related theoretical questions concerning the concept of nature itself, the transformation of landscapes into habitat and the dynamics involved in shaping notions of belonging are also explored, particularly as locality and understandings of space appear embedded in bodily experience of gendered individual and collective identity. While I examine mythologies and symbolic typifications of landscape and nature, this goes beyond the scope of sheer representation as the sociality of these concepts is firmly contextualised within the framework of social, cultural and historical localisation of collective identities.

Importantly, who 'we' are depends on context, on historical shifts and (re-) constructions, and on contextual definitions. The creation of belonging, which is inherently tied to notions of identity, to a differentiation between 'us' and 'them', is itself multi-faceted, and stratified. This far from implies that the Watchi fail to identify who they are as a group, but that the group itself constitutes, and represents, its identity at several levels, which operate both simultaneously and in a desynchronised fashion, thus creating coordinated yet at times also competing discourses around identity. In so doing, movement across territories and the creation of new settlements become possible, while maintaining some mythical and cosmological fundaments which underpin a common Watchi understanding of belonging and locality. For this reason, the argument extends further to incorporate notions of gendered space, and the differentiations which arise as a result of such dynamics and shifts in meaning. In addition, if notions of identity and community are rarely hegemonic, the same must be said of the understanding of nature itself. Complementary or competing images of nature have to be considered in relation to one another, in the field of power relationships if necessary, but also in terms of various groups' different claims on territories of knowledge. The concept of nature, therefore, has to be seen in the context of the various discourses of which it becomes a constitutive part, and which it also helps arouse. The motion by which nature is created, appropriated, imbued with meaning(s) and transformed into a socially significant category mirroring images of human identity tends to emphasise the malleability of such a concept which is, I believe, why such associations are so fruitful in the first place, and conducive to human interference (cf. Bender 1993, Descola 1994, Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995,

Schama 1995, Tilley 1994). The amorphous characteristics of nature, and of humans in nature, make them particularly pregnant with meaning because they can be given almost any shape, and come to be moulded and mirrored in one another in a multiplicity of contexts while allowing for constant transformations and modifications.

The construction, maintenance, negotiation and transformation of boundaries that pertain to place, habitat, nature, the human body, cosmologies or identity can all be seen as processes that are instrumental in the definitions of such concepts in the first place. There is an inherent and inevitable circularity at play here. The concept of nature has also come under renewed anthropological scrutiny in the context of gender studies (Moore 1988, 1994, Strathern 1987, Strathern and MacCormack 1980, Weiner 1991), where the long-presumed relationship between women and nature has been re-examined. Although I shall return to this association later, suffice it to say at this stage that the predominant focus has been on the criteria which are believed to constitute gender *per se*, and the notion of nature as a category has remained relatively unexplored in these theoretical debates. I propose to examine how women help create an identity both of and for themselves and, simultaneously, mediate in the creation of a particular image of place and nature that is instrumental in shaping religious discourses and power relations.

Closely tied to this construction of identity and notion of belonging is the way in which humans relate to their gods, and the memories they create around them. These are needed for a community to be properly established. The history of Watchi original appropriation of territory in this region of southern Togo, which is primarily a history of migration and displacement (see, Gayibor 1986, Greene 1996b, de Medeiros 1984), recounts their arrival on the site of their present habitat, with the founding members of the village, a man and a woman, carrying conjoined male and female deities. These intertwined deities had been removed from their original site after an internecine dispute, and this group of Watchi in flight were able to appropriate their new, uninhabited (so it is claimed) territory by installing their two deities in this new location. Such appropriation of natural habitat and claim on territory through the evocation of divine rights are commonplace features in contemporary claims on specific territories. Although no major resettlement of the Watchi has occurred in recent times, new more localised settlements and movements are continually established in an identical fashion: the expansion of a crowded household is made effective by the installation of a shrine for a deity, and the identification of a god that has 'fallen to earth' from its cosmos requires the building of a shrine which, inevitably, leads to the expansion of a household and appropriation of previously

unclaimed territory. A sense of communal identity, somewhat diffuse yet pervasive, is constructed through the intermediary of deities which are themselves extensions of natural and environmental features. By providing these deities with names, a place is created for humans to dwell in, and the gods are simultaneously provided with an identity and place of their own. In both cases, the process of grounding deities for worship assists in providing that particular deity with an identity of its own, distinct from the generic and amorphous mass to which it belongs at a metaphysical level. The action of naming a deity therefore imbues a space with a sense of place, so that it is no longer an anonymous feature in the environment.

Territory or space, however, is defined both as a metaphysical domain, and as a terrestrial entity. Deities are believed to dwell in another plane, but also need to have their presence manifested and anchored on earth in order for humans to propitiate them properly. In its physical manifestation, the appropriation of a territory thus associated with a deity can involve pragmatic and ethereal forms and considerations. Settlement, in this sense, stretches beyond the confines of the strictly terrestrial, and encompasses the sea, rivers, trees, wild animals and the sky. Through this association with their deities, humans also appropriate part of a metaphysical, cosmological landscape (see also Århem 1998, de Boeck 1998, Ottino 1998). The identities of humans and that of their gods are intricately linked, as is their relationship with nature.

Vodhun represent the primary entities in indigenous cosmology, although they are by no means alone. A vodhun is one god among others in a cosmological order notable for its complex polytheistic structure. Some ethnographers have been busily involved in trying to identify as large a number of vodhun as possible, positioning them in a hierarchical, and archaic, relationship depending on their parentage, in relation to a cosmological order defined through myths of creation and a linear historical ordering. The earlier the appearance of the god in the cosmology, the more powerful it has been deemed by virtue of its chronological and genealogical pedigree. Maupoil (1943) and Verger (1957) have estimated that there might be more than 2,000, hierarchically organised, while others (Augé 1988, Rivière 1981, de Surgy 1981, 1988) have indicated that the contemporary vodhun pantheon could easily accommodate more than 1,000 such deities (cf. Lovell 1993 for a fuller discussion). Vodhun are all given exegetic personal names, depending on their gender, individual characteristics and parentage. Like humans, they are believed to entertain kinship ties with one another, and their origin will thus partly determine their individual identity.

In the present context, the focus is on what could be considered the identity of a deity and its instrumentality in delineating definitions of place or territoriality, and their domestication, and how these processes contribute to endowing humans and gods with distinctive, overlapping and localised identities. A brief exploration into four narratives of origin and settlement serves to provide an embryonic imagery of some Watchi concepts of place and landscape.[3] Rather than providing a universal theory of mind and cognition *à la* Lévi-Strauss, I use these accounts for methodological (rather than structural) purposes, inasmuch as my interest centres primarily on how these narratives promote a method for structuring important Watchi concepts of personhood, collective and individual identity, and religiosity, where human bodily images overlap with those of their gods. My focus will then shift to how such narratives are shaped by, and feed into, particular notions of Watchi sociality, bodily images and corporeal identity, individual and social experience, and relationships to nature. There is, of course no such thing as an hegemonic origin, nor do such mythical narratives displace other histories of settlement and migration.

In one such myth, the source of life is attributed to a male original creator appearing as a palm tree (*hunde*, a tree associated with vodhun Dairo) said to have descended from the sky in order to populate the earth with its seed. The trunk itself is considered male, and said to be very deeply rooted in the soil. This imagery is translated in everyday contexts, where men refer to this tree when invoking their moorings to a particular place and settlement: 'Planting a *hunde* in your dwelling shows that you are deeply rooted', and its branches are described as stiff and hard, conveying typical and ideal attributes of masculinity, male sexuality and settlement.[4] This image of the *hunde* is opposed to that of other palm trees whose branches are said to sway in the wind, thereby connoting their soft nature. Eating the nuts of a *hunde* signifies the end of the household, and is equated to an act of cannibalism, to 'eating one's own children'.

The nuts of this palm tree are – historically and contemporaneously – all conceptualised as being female, rendering the tree trunk itself male and (rather unusually) the seeds female.[5] Indeed, the original *hunde* is said to have carried 16 nuts, metaphorically representing the first 16 wives of this paradigmatic creator, who subsequently bore children, established the first 16 original settlements, and became the apical ancestresses of all the current clans populating the region. Significantly, while the tree trunk itself is considered as unequivocally male, it shares in the essence of femalehood in more than one way: its nuts are female, as I have just described, but the roots of *hunde* are also said to be unable to grow if a clay pot (*eze*) is absent from its base. The presence of the pot in

the ground is said to have preceded all other forms of existence, and it is believed to represent the essence of life itself. In addition, all the nuts deriving from this tree have to be collected in a clay pot, lest the picker dies. Furthermore, the sap of this tree was sometimes described as being red, like the blood of menstruation. I was unable to obtain any consistent data on this issue, and informants were themselves unable to ascertain the veracity of their claim as this tree is never cut down, or even damaged. Doing so would discontinue the existence of the household.

Several other overlapping myths of origin are employed to explain the accession of humans to their present territories. Vodhun are believed to possess a spiritual existence in the cosmological sphere, as precursors to their human counterparts. One narrative portrays Mawu, the supreme god, as having preceded the existence of vodhun and subsequently created these deities in order for them to give life to human beings. Mawu, also referred to as Mawu-Lisa, is most often ascribed a dual gendered identity.[6] Unlike vodhun, Mawu possesses no human form. It is likened to the wind, an amorphous and undefined yet powerful element which imbues terrestrial existence with its essence and vitality. I have heard Mawu's gender described in temporal terms, referring to its primordial existence as female and subsequently acquiring a coexisting male identity. In these accounts, vodhun come to occupy an intermediary position between Mawu and humans, both conceptually and physically. Deities are believed to be located in the cosmos, yet perceived as leading lives very similar to those of humans. Vodhun have spouses and 'children', although they do not, like humans, procreate in the proper physical sense. Their perpetuation rather depends on human engagement and agency: the gods' children are thus delivered by human hands.

In yet another narrative, the existence of both vodhun and humans is ascribed to the powers of a cosmological bird (a chicken, to be precise) which would have roosted on the world in order to make it come alive. This chicken hence stands as the creator of the world as it appears to humans, the originator of both divine and human life. Significantly, the earth itself is hatched by this bird and represented as a cooking pot, containing all living things. The pot is made of clay stemming from the earth, which represents yet another source of existence.

Finally, the origin of Watchi existence and human origin are at times located in a landscape called *bomé*, a place likened to a wide field of red clay, where humans return upon death in order to be remodelled and recycled back to human existence by *Boméno*, the mother of clay, who subsequently returns them to the world of the living. *Bomé* is thus another original source of life whose existence is sometimes attributed to the deeds of Mawu-Lisa (the dual

gendered supreme being). *Bomé* itself is associated with the female gender, and is presided over by a woman who is instrumental in the perpetuation of all human life. *Bomé* is said to be the dwelling of *Boméno*, or 'mother of *bomé*'. Rivière describes it as:

> ... [le] lieu de l'existence prénatale, sorte de réservoir de vies humaines, où des créatures de Dieu, infantiles et anthropomorphes, sans généalogie, attendent dans un état d'absence de souffrance, de vieillissement et d'inégalité, leur venue sur terre. Boméno joue à elle seule le rôle d'ancêtre coupant l'argile pour fabriquer les nouveaux nés. La tradition lui attribue bien un mari: Bométo, mais sans lui définir de notion procréatrice.
> [[the] place of pre-life existence, a kind of reservoir of human life, where creatures of God, childlike and anthropomorphic, without genealogy, await in a state of absence of suffering, ageing and inequality their arrival on earth. Boméno alone plays the role of ancestor, cutting clay which she shapes into human beings. Tradition does provide her with a husband: Bométo, but attributes him no procreative functions.] (1981: 75)[7]

In these narratives, clay, earth and pots provide important conceptual foci. Features of the 'natural' landscape such as nuts, trees and other significant landmarks convey a vivid imagery through which existence is both explained and mediated. The origin of human beings (*amé*) is directly associated with the earth or clay (*anyi*) and also with uncultivated fields (*bomé*).[8] The constructs surrounding clay as the origin of life extend beyond the human realm. The gods themselves come to life through this association, and only when they have been represented on earth in the form of a clay figurine are they said to be truly alive. Their spiritual existence *per se* is not in question, but communication between gods and humans can only be established when the visible manifestation of the gods in clay has been completed. In true Durkheimian fashion, gods are made to reflect the expectations of their human counterparts.

The references to conjoined, shifting and overlapping notions of gendered identity can be identitifed as recurring themes especially prevalent in the first two narratives, while the latter two refer to the world as essentially female. Two accounts also converge in at least one other respect: while the female nuts of the male *hunde* present the basis for all divination and legitimate the existence of the 16 original clans to populate the earth, the chicken which roosts the world into being also provides an archetypal imagery for divination. In addition, the grating motion of chickens on the ground as they scratch for food (referred to as *ka*) parallels that made by diviners when marking their divination board in consulting the Afa oracle (also referred to as *ka*). Another twist has to be added: when women dance for the vodhun in rituals, they perform certain steps which are likened to those of chickens[9] and are indeed said on occasion to dance like chickens, thus evoking the origins of both human and

metaphysical existence, enacting and embodying cosmos at one and the same time.[10]

At a pragmatic level, clay is used to make earthen pots (*eze*), where food is cooked and transformed by women for human consumption. These pots are also metaphorically associated with a woman's belly or womb (*ƒo*), where humans are made and cooked by the woman's body during gestation. The pot and hearth of the house are both equated with a woman's body, and are seen as the essence of the household as a unit. The pot represents the pragmatic and emotional centre of human existence and settlement, and is associated with belonging in more than one way, as indicated in the euphemistic phrase 'this is where my pot is' (*ezenye li fia*), commonly used by men to express the longing felt when having to be absent from their household and separated from their wives for long periods of time. The cooking performed by the women displays and enacts their expected caring and nurturing character, and is used as a metaphor to invoke the warmth and comfort provided at the heart of the household. Keeping one's pot and one's cooking wholesome thus ensures success in marriage, fruitful pregnancies and healthy progeny. The cooking pot needs to remain in one piece in order to ensure the continued nutritional survival of the household. Likewise, women's symbolic pots as wombs need to remain intact and unbroken in order to secure the fertility of the household and its perpetuation.[11] It is said of a woman who cannot cook that she will be unable to keep either husband or children, and that she will be prone to miscarriages and to losing her children in infancy. For a woman to be unable to cook when she reaches adolescence connotes a certain degree of carelessness, flightiness and indulgence, and an unwillingness to comply to expectations of responsibility. It also tacitly implies a propensity for sexual meanderings. A woman who does not cook for her husband might be suspected of cooking for someone else – a euphemism indicating infidelity – even if such suspicions remain unfounded. Likewise, the act of cooking for someone, particularly of the opposite sex, is considered so intimate that a married woman who would indeed cook for another man might be accused of infidelity or, at least, of expressing her inclination or intention to do so. The action of cooking could therefore be seen to ground a woman's sexuality within the domestic sphere, in the same way as her 'other pot', her womb, grounds the fertility of the household. Both convey ideal images of nurturing, stability and fecund existence. During one of the most important parts of initiation into a vodhun's secret society, female devotees are made to sit on four upturned pots with outstretched legs as confirmation of their fitness to carry forth the vodhun's ideal of embodying the world.[12] If one of the pots cracks or breaks, the

devotee will be banished from the shrine, and is said never to be able to procreate having, in effect, contributed to breaking the cosmos itself and, as a consequence, its future continuity and fertility. It should come as no surprise that the Watchi (and many other Ewe subgroups) refer to their descent in terms of locality: to share a common ancestral belonging implies sharing the same womb, and the term *fomé* (translated as lineage in many ethnographic accounts on the Ewe, see for instance Nukunya 1969, Verdon 1983), literally translates as '(being) in the womb', an existential reference rather than one of external linearity. The notion of clay located in *bomé* could thus be considered as all-encompassing since it provides the original raw material for all humans.

The processes of cooking, essential to the earthly existence and perpetuation of the household and emphasising women's handling of pots in the everyday production of food, and the metaphorical link between women and 'pots' expressed through the procreative forces of gestation and pregnancy, are complemented by other associations between women and pots activated through the mediating intervention of *Boméno*, the archetypal mother of clay. Women synchronically come to represent *Boméno* and contribute to shaping her existence. And besides being moulded in her image, they help create life and shape human beings into existence on earth with her assistance. This exclusive link imparts upon them the power of handling clay. As potters in a pragmatic sense, women transform the earth into cooking utensils for the general use and feeding of the community. In metaphorical terms, women as potters process the essence of life itself, turning it into a perpetually recyclable substance used for locating the metaphysical and spiritual powers of the deities.

The processes establishing cosmological beings such as vodhun amongst the community of the living are directly paralleled in sociality when new settlements are established or households segmented into new residential units. Each household needs to be grounded by the same principles as the ones that surround the instalment of a shrine. Each household will therefore become situated in its new location by the erection of a shrine for a vodhun associated with that particular clan, ensconced in a pot kept in a hut at the entrance of the settlement indicating its legitimacy and ensuring its proper protection. Significantly, the segmentation of a household or the anchoring of a completely new and larger settlement evolves around the setting up of a new *fomé*, or new womb, and will focus on the identity of a new vodhun shrine established on behalf of a woman, who will subsequently be deemed the apical ancestress of the segmented household, although descent in the generations that follow will tend to be traced in the male line until a new resettlement or segmentation occurs. The *fomé* or womb

of a woman therefore serves to establish the original settlement, while the house itself, generally headed by the most senior man of the settlement, provides legitimacy in the male line for descending generations. The erection of a vodhun shrine within the settlement will, as a result, be accompanied by the instalment of a hut sheltering the stool of lineage ancestors traced in the male line but not including the apical source of life herself. She remains firmly ensconced in the hut of the vodhun, and cannot be dislodged from its structure. The male descendants in turn will follow the stool, but this in itself is not enough to legitimate either new settlements nor proper cosmological security. A household without a vodhun to ensure its well-being is doomed to incur the wrath of the gods, and will therefore inevitably fail to thrive and procreate.[13] The planting of the *hunde* palm tree, which I discussed earlier, outside a settlement can thus be seen to root the male household (*afé*) in its new location provided the red clay pot representing the female womb of the apical ancestress is present at its base. The tree thus penetrates and fills this original, primordial pot in the same way as a man's penis fills a woman's womb during sexual intercourse, ensuring fertility and continuity.

OF HOUSE AND WOMB: BELONGING AND IDENTITY

Let us now examine how some of these concepts translate into everyday sociality. Ideally, I was told, children should belong to their father's household, and should come under his primary jurisdiction. Fathers are responsible for the financial well-being of their offspring, and should provide inheritance to all male descendants. Daughters are given usufructory rights over parcels of their father's land while alive, and may inherit such plots if the household is wealthy enough. Children of both sexes should live with their fathers, even in case of a divorce.

Naturally, this definitional type contrasts markedly with lived sociality, yet the discrepancies extend beyond a mere clash of ideal and praxis. These multi-layered relationships indicate an experiential conceptualisation of kinship that extends far beyond the anthropological definition of patrilineality.

One of Adjoah's sons, Kodjo, lived in a house on his own, set slightly on the outskirts of the marketplace, on one of the paths leading into the village. It was one of the few rendered houses around, was equipped with a generator to power a fridge, and was generally considered to be a fine house. Kodjo was in the early stages of setting up a photographic studio. He was in the process of acquiring the necessary equipment to develop and process films. His

mother, Adjoah, had had the house built for him from the proceeds of her own business as a *sodabi* trader, selling locally produced alcohol. She was also providing him with the necessary equipment. Kodjo's father, Koffi, had not been involved in this process, as he was securing the future of his eldest son, derived from a union with another wife. Adjoah herself was expecting to hand over her business as a trader to one of her daughters, but was helping her son as part of her parental duty, she would explain, as there was not enough land to go round.

These images can be further nuanced: it is customary to print out the owner's name and business address at the front of the 'taxis-brousse', the vans carrying passengers between the main towns along the coast. These vans, locally bound or destined to travel further afield in the country or across the national borders, most often announced the names of their owners through the use of self-adhesive stickers. These would almost invariably be women, designated by the honorary title of 'Mama' conferred upon successful and prominent female traders. In conversations with the drivers, who were always male, it appeared to be common practice for these men to work for matrilateral relatives. Sons and brothers often referred to their mothers' or sisters' success, and were used as trusted helping hands and paid employees. However, there was little chance of them inheriting such businesses, as they tended to be passed on from mothers to daughters. Many female traders in Lomé are jokingly referred to as Mama Benz, a humorous dig at their accumulated wealth, as they are likely to be driven around in Mercedes cars.

One of Hundalodji's teenage sons, Yawo, resided with his mother's brother in Lomé. His eldest brother, Denis, shared the same father but was born of another marital union. As senior brother Denis, who was around 16, had already been given a piece of land by their father, Kpaka. Denis was also being trained by his father in the art of (illicit) alcohol production, and regularly spent time in the distillery established in the household's inner courtyard. Yawo's close bond with his maternal uncle, a wealthy garage owner in the capital, ensured his attendance at secondary school. He was also being trained as a car mechanic, and was regularly helping out at his uncle's workshop. He hoped to be part of his uncle's business in future, and although he acknowledged that his mother's brother's son would most probably be in charge of the enterprise in future, he enjoyed a close relationship with his cousin, and liked working with him.

Sufuhunde, my 'co-wife' (*atusi*),[14] was relatively new to the village, having settled here after her marriage to Kpaka. As the last and relatively young wife of a prominent man in the village, she was aware of the difficulties facing her children, especially her son, the

eldest of her three children. She was Kpaka's fifth wife, and he was known to have fathered 28 children, 18 of whom were still alive.[15] She kept close ties with her own parents, who looked after her and helped her to set up her household, and regularly provided her with additional foodstuffs. She returned to her village during the agricultural sowing and, later, harvesting seasons, as she had not yet obtained a piece of land from her husband, and enjoyed the benefits of her own plot in her home village. She hoped, she said, that her son might one day secure this land for himself, as his chances of obtaining land from his own father remained slim.[16]

As for girls, the ideal image of a patrifocal household has to be further nuanced in many ways: as we have seen, girls are often apprenticed from an early age to their mothers, and aquire the necessary trading skills to succeed them. Several girls may jointly inherit their mother's business and, after her death, continue to trade together until independent and separate units can be established. Women are often directly responsible for the financial welfare of their children, and pay for their school fees if they can afford it or, as in Adjoah's case above, help set up their sons' businesses if the fathers' line of succession would otherwise afford them little chance of paternal inheritance. As for residence, girls and boys are generally closely tied to their mother's household. Sufuhunde, a close friend in her late teens, spent large portions of her time at her mother's mother's compound, and was indeed sent away to live with her for a few months during my original stay in 1989. She also recounted that she had earlier spent a few years residing with her grandmother when growing up.

The responsibility for the welfare of the household as a unit lay with both husband and wife (or wives in the case of a polygynous household). Gender divisions do exist, and household chores are normally performed by the women in the compound. The women normally cook food for their husband as well as their children. Young children normally share their mother's hut, and boys and girls alike help with basic household chores, although the girls normally tend to do so more consistently. However, it is not unusual to see young boys caring for babies or fetching water for their mothers. Children tend to remain with their mothers until reaching their early teens. At this stage, many girls go to live with an elderly female relative, often on the mother's side, helping out with everyday tasks. Adolescent boys often share a hut with patrilateral parallel cousins of the same age group. In due course, when marriage is contracted, the men will be provided with an individual hut by their father. The girls will move to their husband's village in the case of a locally exogamous marriage, or simply to his household if the alliance is endogamous. Children are also involved in agriculture,

and start working the fields at an early age. School holidays are explicitly made to coincide with the time of harvest to allow children to participate fully in these activities.

Women normally tend to carry most of the responsibility for the care of offspring. A male informant explained this emphasis on the responsibility of the mother in supplying for children's needs in the following way:

> If a man has several wives, he can more easily escape his responsibility to feed his children. Everyone knows that it would only create jealousy were he to help one of his wives and not the others, and he cannot be expected to provide for all of them, there simply are not the means.

Although gender shaped the division of labour, and no doubt was itself constructed through the performance of household activities, chores and responsibilities were also situationally defined. Prescribed as a woman's tasks, men did and would cook, fetch water at the well or sweep their own yards, but only if there was no woman around, or if the younger men of their own household were also absent.[17] Young boys would also perform similar tasks, as well as tend their younger siblings, cook for their fathers and generally perform tasks that were seen as the lot of women. My neighbour often left her youngest child in the care of her 6-year-old son. Grandfathers often performed a child-minding role. Gabriel, an unmarried young man of 28, who was also my assistant for the year, often had to cook for his father. Thus there was, ideally, a gendered division of labour, but the crossing of boundaries was nevertheless frequent. During initiation rituals, women stopped cooking altogether for several days, as their presence at the vodhun ritual was deemed more important. No formal complaints were heard on the part of men. A younger male child would accomplish this chore for his father during this time.

These examples have focused on relatively structural features of Watchi kinship, pointing to 'strategies' which are sometimes explicitly employed in order to secure certain rights for children. Women play an important role in these circumstances, as they are well placed to draw the attention of their own fathers and brothers to the plight of their children. However, beyond these strategic positionings lay important conceptual issues relating to identity and belonging. If, as we have seen, locality in a general and collective sense is partially predicated on the presence of vodhun and the metaphors that surround fertility, women, clay and emplacement, these concepts can be explored further when linked to individual notions of place, position within the household and belonging.

Two of the most significant units referred to in everyday life are *afé* and *fomé*. The first corresponds to the notion of the compound

or residential group. The second refers to the notion of local descent group. *Afé* can best be translated as house or home, although I believe that the connotations are much wider, and shall return to this point later. In the literature, *fomé* is usually translated as lineage (Nukunya 1969, Verdon 1983) or family (Adzomada 1983). However, using the term 'lineage' to translate *fomé* is, I believe, misleading, as the term is not imbued with any notion of linearity. Both *afé* and *fomé* are referred to when commenting upon the health of relatives at home or discussing events of personal importance that may have taken place there, and they are both included in the formal greetings used to welcome someone who has come to visit: *Afémetowo wofoa?* or *fométowo wofoa?*, both of which translate as 'How are the people of your home?', the first referring to the immediate household (including kin and affines), and the second to members of what I shall refer to as the local descent group.

Pinpointing the difference between *afé* and *fomé* is not an easy task. Most agree that they are not the same thing, yet seem unable to determine where one ends and the other begins. Usually, they will refer to the former as a place of residence only, and therefore prone to shifts throughout a person's life-cycle, while the second is seen as having more value in terms of one's affiliation to a descent group.

Verdon, discussing the case of the Abutia-Ewe in neighbouring Ghana, sees *afé* as a residential group sharing a place of residence owned by the person identified as 'the 'owner' or 'head' of the residential group' (1983: 127), and translates *fomé* as 'minimal lineage', by which is meant the lineage to which a child is ascribed as a member at birth. Most commonly, agnatic filiation will prevail, but it is apparently not unusual among the Abutia-Ewe to see a child incorporated into its mother's *fomé* under specific circumstances, particularly in cases of unrecognised paternity (1983: 47). This is the case for many Watchi as well, and affiliation to one's maternal or paternal descent group may depend on other factors such as pattern of residence, divorce, relationship between a male ego and mother's brother, and availability of fertile land. Verdon appears to have entirely separated *afé*, house, from *fomé*, by providing the first with an exclusively residential connotation and leaving the second imbued with all (and only) the characteristics of descent, filiation and genealogy.

Nukunya tells us the following about *afé* and *fomé*:

> the Anlo word *fomé* means multilateral kinship and refers to a 'kindred'. When, however, it is necessary for the Anlo to distinguish the lineage from other kin groups with bilateral connotations the terms *kponu*, entrance; *aféme*, house; or more commonly, *afédo*, ancestral home, is used for the former. (1969: 25)

He then goes on to assimilate (*afé*)*do* with *fomé*, arguing that the close link between them makes them conceptually interchangeable.

For many Watchi, the composite term *afédome* (*afé* means 'house' or 'home', and *dome* 'among', 'in the hole' or, again, 'in the belly') normally refers to a residential group sharing an historical ancestry and tracing back their origin to one common male ancestor. When consulted, informants normally specified that *afédome* should, strictly speaking, only include male descendants of a putative male ancestor, although when providing genealogies, they also included female descendants and ancestresses. In Adzomada's *Dictionnaire Ewe–Français des mots usuels et des locutions etrangères* (1983), *afédome* is translated as 'la souche d'habitation, la demeure originale', hence reflecting not only the notion of origin but also its combination with that of residence. *Fomé* also refers to the 'apical home' or place of origin, the first residence of the Ewe, and the point from which all other subgroups emerged. It appears as if the translation of this term as either family or lineage is inadequate, and cannot provide an accurate explanation of the wider conceptual components included in its Watchi-Ewe form. We must, therefore, look further afield.

Adzomada (1983) simply translates *fomé* as 'family'. But if one looks up the French word 'clan', *fomé* is provided as an equivalent. Thus this term has so far been equated with family, clan, lineage, minimal lineage and kindred. *Fomé* could be seen to refer to the agnatic local descent group, and genealogies, given only when pressed, seem to include the male descendants of a male ancestor, Komlan Gbuito, the great-grandfather of the present chief, believed to have been the founder of the village. Yet Komlan Gbuito was himself descended from an unnamed, ungendered apical ancestor or ancestress who figured only vaguely in historical narratives. However, when used in greetings, *fomé* retained a generalised connotation, and further specification would make clear whether reference to matrilateral or patrilateral kin was being made. On other occasions, when speaking of the families living in Atikesimé, *fomé* was used repeatedly to describe the five local descent groups living there, and only men were then included in the genealogies.

The etymology of the term suggests more complex connotations: *fo* is the word for the belly or stomach, with its obvious intimation of matrifiliation. De Surgy (1990: 95) goes as far as suggesting that *fomé* refers specifically and exclusively to the matrilineage and the descendants of a common uterine ancestor.[18] My data provide no indication that *fomé* excludes patrifiliation in favour of 'matrilin-eality', but seem to be compatible with de Surgy's assertion insofar as the genealogies of the various *fomé*, including mostly men, always lead back to an unnamed, female apical ancestress, considered to be the founder of the settlement, and providing the embodiment of the

original womb from which all subsequent generations have sprung. Semantically, *fomé* evokes the bodily representation of this apical ancestress as original womb of the settlement, and links her descendants together in present images of belonging and shared residence. The notion of *fomé* as a place, a belly, is thus compatible with subsequent male filiation. Anthropologically speaking, this could be termed a 'matrilineage', but the Watchi notions of locality and settlement seem to override those of linearity and genealogy.

The flexibility and overlap inherent in the taxonomy is used to accommodate several patterns of residence and filiation (Needham's concept of polythetic classification [1975: 357] provides a useful guide in this context). Divorce may alter a child's filiation, especially if the marriage is exogamous and the woman decides to return to her own village with her children. A woman who marries may be incorporated into her husband's local descent group if she develops particularly strong ties with her affines, although this is rarely the case. Most relationships with affines remain cool, and many have very limited and formal interaction with one another. Male informants stated that children only followed a divorced mother when they were very young, and should be returned to their father when they reached the age of 6 or 7. However, this ideal state does not always accord with practice. Children may have taken up residence with one of their maternal uncles, subsequently gaining access to land and other facilities among their matrikin. To return to one's patrilateral kin in such circumstances would not provide any advantages, and would most probably deprive a male child of the opportunity for matrilateral inheritance. A girl would normally inherit her mother's personal belongings, and sometimes take over her trade as well. Boys and girls alike received financial assistance directly from their mother, particularly if she had been a successful and powerful trader. It needs to be added that most traders in this region of West Africa are women. Togo, Benin and Nigeria are considered the epicentres of boisterous trade activities supplying the coast from Senegal to Cameroon. The primary areas of involvement are in agriculture, where traders will either sell their own produce, or trade in cereals and other foodstuffs acquired in the north of the country, where prices are lower, and resold at a profit in and around Lomé and the south-east. There is also a booming textiles market, and a proliferation of seamstresses involved in providing clients with the latest fashions (see Cordonnier 1987 for a detailed account of the textile trade in Lomé, and Comhaire-Sylvain 1982 for a more general outlook on women in Togo). Such businesses tend to be inherited by daughters, who often work as their mother's helpers while these are still alive and active.

CORD OF BLOOD AND LOCALITY

If *fomé* connotes images of wombs and bellies, it also evokes the imagery of pots. Women's wombs as pots are filled, through the procreative act, by male semen, which is then cooked in order to produce a healthy progeny. A pregnant woman will refer to herself as 'having a full pot' (*ezenye dogba*) and as having been plugged by a man's penis (*edeto lekpeun setunu ne ve*). The latter also refers to sexual intercourse in general, although a more common idiom describes this act as 'having someone inside one's flesh' (*do lãme ne*). Yet semen is only added to a substance inherent in a woman's womb, and with which it is subsequently made to mix. The blood located in the womb is primordial to the process of growth, and its existence has to precede the act of copulation in order to ensure fertility. The redness of pots is not conjectural, as it represents and mirrors the redness of the womb. Pots come to embody the shape, colour and processual changes which occur in women through their monthly and life-cycles, while also being fundamentally shaped and modelled by them. Women's wombs, when represented as pots for cooking, nurturing and producing humans, thus tie them to *Boméno*, the mother of clay in *bomé* – the primordial field of life – and orchestrator of all earthly life and fertility.

Yet if women as procreators and as founders of *fomé* are to be of any use as locative agents for a human household, and for a male *afé* in particular, they themselves need to be chased and made to settle. Women are often likened to wild animals (*alõlã*, meat of the wild), to beings of the bush or unihabited and untamed areas (*gbemelã*, meat of the bush). A woman who has been unfaithful to her husband is said to have 'put her foot in the bush' (*edho fo gbe*), a reference indicating her close association with an unruly state to which she is constantly drawn and to which she may always return, pulled away from such predicament only through the precarious institution of marriage and, to some extent, motherhood. This is perceived as particularly true since unmarried women freely engage in sexual intercourse prior to or between marital unions. In order to make women settle, they need to be chased, hunted like wild animals. Men courting women refer to themselves as hunters (*adelã*, the taker of meat) and marriage, although most often consensual, is preceded by the enactment of abduction, the forcible removal of the future bride from her father's household to that of her husband's, her body covered in a white sheet, ideally unknowing of her destination. We will later examine how devotees of the vodhun refer to themselves as coming from *kodho*, the place in the bush where clay is found, and emphasize this association by saying that they will always remain

there, no matter how hard male members of society attempt to drag them away from it. Yet although women's settlement, enacted and enforced through the powerful interference of men, and represented through the chase of wild animals made ready for consumption, is necessary for the future of located fertility and inhabited space, it is precisely their mobility across territory which renders possible the expansion of Watchi space. And, as the shedding of blood in the hunt is necessary for the survival of the group, so its presence in women is also a prerequisite for its reproduction.

A woman's belly may metaphorically be described as a pot, but it is considered as being not naturally empty, and already holding some other substance prior to pregnancy. A woman's pot is always associated with blood, *hun*, which occurs naturally in her belly, as is evidenced through menstruation, and this blood needs to be activated through intercourse and the insemination of male seed to create a child, thereby making the woman pregnant. The blood of a person is said to be provided by the mother, while the bones come from the father. The idiom used by a man who has made a woman pregnant is 'I have planted bones', *medo fu*. I received various accounts on this last feature, some of them apparently contradictory. Two of my informants, one man and one woman, disagreed, and said that the word used here was not *fu*, bones, but *fu*, which translates as hair, feathers, foam and whiteness. Bones are also associated with the colour white, as is male semen, referred to as *tsi*, water. In any case bones, feathers and hair are considered dry and hard things, while blood is *bobo*, soft.

The notion of blood, *hun*, deserves particular attention, as it is closely tied to that of the bodily substances present in a woman's belly, and therefore enables a better understanding of *fomé* as well.

A child, at birth, will be incorporated into its father's *fomé* if the genitor is known. If the genitor is not known, it will be incorporated into the mother's father's *fomé*. This link through the mother derives from the association of *hun*, blood, that exists between a child of either sex and its mother. The blood of the mother will determine the incorporation of the child into her own father's *fomé*, or 'belly'. Where the genitor, who is socially the only person recognised as the pater of his children, is known, the child will claim allegiance to its father's *fomé* and its mother's *hun*. Otherwise, the notions of *fomé* and *hun*, imparted to the child by the mother, will correspond.

Through *hun*, the child will gain access to the *fomé* of its mother, and come under the protection of the 'descendants of the belly', the *fométowo*, who will provide a complementary structure to the descent group of the father particularly in cases of separation between the spouses, if the father is unknown to the woman's relatives or refuses to recognise his progeny. If, in any circumstances,

the child could not claim or retain membership of the father's *fomé*, the mother's father's *fomé* would assume more importance. Men generally considered this latter type of incorporation as being weaker than the full membership perceived to be provided by a father's acknowledgement of his progeny, as a child's legal rights in its mother's father's *fomé* are not considered, by the men in particular, to be as strong as they would be in its father's, especially for boys as the direct sons of a man are often favoured before the sons of his sisters. Yet most households seem to incorporate such matrilateral relatives, and this structure seems to operate as a safety net for men and women alike, as land resources can be scarce, and a father will often favour one or two of his older sons leaving many of his other sons deprived of land. These other sons may consequently be as practically deprived of rights by their own father as they are ideologically perceived to be by the mother's brother. As women can lay claim to a plot of land in their father's village, they often help to establish the rights of their sons there.

The notion of blood appears to extend beyond this simple bond of 'filiation' and parallel descent 'ideology'. Fortes (1987) has argued that the religious structure of the Tallensi provided a subdued female descent ideology in the midst of an otherwise patrilineal society, expressed in elaborate ancestor cults where ancestresses play as important a role as their male counterparts. As for the notion of *hun*, its referents transgress the boundaries of the domestic, and penetrate the realm of the metaphysical. *Hun*, as we have seen, acts as a bodily reminder of a child's origin, in the composition of identity and belonging, and plays a crucial role in orienting the person within the household, at individual and collective levels (Bloch 1987). *Hun* is a physical marker of blood, yet carries metaphysical associations as it connotes the origins of the group, its movements and settlements, the myths of its origins, and it simultaneously penetrates the world of vodhun. The boundaries between the domestic and the religious are, in this sense, highly artificial, and, as we know, may well reflect only academic classifications and concerns. Yet, the emplacement of the body at the crossroads between the purely individual and the collective contributes to its involvement in several simultaneous discourses, relating to what anthropologists have come to define as kinship or cosmology (for a similar orientation, see van Binsbergen 1988). *Hun* may thus denote the physical reality of blood, the metaphors of belonging in time and place, the localisation of bodies in wombs and, as an extension, establish rights of residence and emplacement in a particular territory. Yet *hun* also connotes the gods themselves, as we shall see more closely in the next chapter. Myths and tales relating to the origins of the group thus evoke far more than intellectual construc-

tions justifying the presence of this particular group in a specific territory (Bay 1995, Blier 1995). Myths, narratives, metaphors all use bodily signifiers which engage the body in the process of settlement. The enactment of rituals, codified as it may be in structural terms, thus helps us to glimpse how the body is situated within the wider societal context, and how it appropriates this situatedness through the performance of codified behaviour (for similar orientations, see Boddy 1989, 1994, Brodwin 1996, Jackson 1996, Reynolds-Whyte 1997). In the same vein, language and the linguistic analyses provided here may be seen as far more that the simple multivocality of metaphors: the multiple signifiers may indeed themselves act as phenomelogical markers, triggering responses that go beyond the sheer mental representation of the word.

What, then, are the underlying axioms organising kinship? As we have seen, *afé* refers to 'home', 'house' or residential unit. As such, its primary references are to landscape, environment and spatial arrangement, and it designates a specific place generally headed by a senior male member of the compound. *Af*é does not include blood or notions of origin. *Fomé*, 'in the belly', as a locative term, invokes not linearity but a woman's womb and, more importantly, one's place inside it, uniting references of blood with place and locality. Full siblings emphasize that they are of the same womb, even though they socially tend to reside with, and belong to, their father's household and residential group. The agnatic bond uniting siblings is thus weakened if they fail to share the same womb of origin. However, the spatial referent here is both conceptual and physical: conceptual, in that *fomé* is not necessarily attached to a specific place, to be 'in the belly' does not define a child's subsequent place of residence; the physical referent of *fomé* locates the child first in the womb, and subsequently incorporates it into a descent group. One *fomé*, or local descent group, thus includes several *afé*, corresponding to the segmentation of its households when a residential unit becomes too large for the place it occupies. This segmentation will eventually lead, when spatial pressure becomes too great, to the creation of a separate *fomé* dependent on a woman's womb, and with its own internal segmentation into several male-headed *afé*. If we dissociate the *fomé* from its former definition as 'lineage', and accept its wider association with a woman's belly and local descent groups, the existence of female heads of households in Watchi society no longer appears an anomaly. *Hun*, finally, is another essential constituent of all individuals, and refers to an identity irrespective of locality.

Such bodily metaphors contribute to the existential framework of Watchi settlement and identity, and to the constitution of narratives of creation. Yet to equate blood and *fomé* with 'mother's side' and

house with that of the 'father' would eliminate the dynamic relationship that permeates the sociality of everyday interaction, where such concepts remain highly malleable. None of these terms directly refers to lineality as such. Instead, the referents are to blood and place at the same time, highlighting their interrelatedness in physical arrangements and conceptual orders.

SPIRITUAL BODIES

Both blood (*hun*) and womb (*fomé*) converge in providing a female component in the making of concepts of self and personhood, using bodily images as epicentres for the orientation of individual selves in a wider social sphere. Significantly, this gendered duality in the composition of identity is further echoed when referring to ancestors, *togbui*, while continuing to use the body and its representation as the core for positioning humans in society. The term refers to 'those men of the umbilical cord'. Only men can be ancestralised, yet what ties them together is their shared umbilicus (*gbui*, or *gbi* denotes the umbilical cord), the presence of a maternal bond at the origin of all life as unquestionable as existence itself.

As we have seen, the female *bomé*, the field of clay where life originates, is crucial to the perpetuation of life itself, and depends on the activities of *Boméno* to instil life into clay. Blood pervades *bomé*, as it provides the raw material which is likened to a woman's womb. The redness of clay acts as a reminder of the redness of the womb, its fertility enhanced through the blood of menstruation. Yet this rather exclusively female locale denoting the origin of humankind itself is, unsurprisingly perhaps, matched by another physical world where ancestors, that is male ancestors, are also said to dwell for a while after death. Male ancestors, inhabiting *tsife*, the 'house of water', are imbued in whiteness, the very stuff of malehood, semen, bones, and the hard parts of which humans are made. The whiteness of *tsife* is carried in the east, where the sun rises and light originates. Nevertheless, while the redness of blood, clay and wombs are essential to the making of humans, the whiteness of water, bones and ancestors play in creation in a different way. Ancestors in *tsife* procure wealth and well-being through the care they confer upon the living, preserving morality and good fortune among their descendants on earth but, unlike *Boméno*, are only indirectly involved in the process of creation. Those in *tsife* may act to preserve human fertility, but this fertility is presumed to already be there.[19]

Ancestors and vodhun are kept strictly separate. Anyone associated with the shrines of vodhun in the capacity of cult leaders,

healers, devotees and initiates[20] of vodhun secret societies where possession takes place, are never to enter the cycle of ancestorhood. They are said instead to return to life anew in order to feed the cosmological sphere by providing new cult leaders, healers, devotees, etc., thereby creating a descent line of 'returnees' (*amedzodzo*). People who become ancestors, by contrast, lead ordinary lives, and are not involved in vodhun in any systematic or structured fashion. The functions of chiefs and cult leaders are incompatible, since the first are intended to reach ancestorhood, while the latter are to be recycled into vodhun cosmology.

However, this does not exclude the notion of female spirits of the departed, nor that of their reincarnation, although women's access to eternal life follows a different path, far more closely linked to vodhun as cosmological entities.

BLOOD, CORDS AND ENCLOSURES

During initiation to the shrine of vodhun Aveyibo, the vodhun of the Black Forest, female initiates are made to wear plain, handwoven cotton wraps around their hips. Their affiliation to a shrine involves them in the collection of palm fibres, which they subsequently twine into ropes, *ka*, that are sold at market. The benefits of sale are retained by the shrine's leader, and redistributed in the form of food and ritual items necessary for the disciples' initiation.[21]

The manufacture of these ropes makes use of long pieces of palm fibre, which should be twisted together until they come to a natural end and have all been used up. They should never be cut. The process of manufacturing such ropes metaphorically intertwines substances drawn from the wild, from the forest, with bodily processes of relatedness and affiliation which evoke the relationship between devotees and deities.

Whereas the notion of blood, *hun*, as a fundamental constituent of personhood and part of the fabric of Watchi identity, is applied to all members of the community, *hunka* is reserved for those individuals (mostly women) who become devotees of vodhun societies through matrifiliation. *Hunka*, the 'cord of blood' (from *hun*: blood, and *ka*: cord or rope), is what designates initiation and membership into secret societies, and adhesion to a shrine. *Hunka* refers to an initiate succeeding a deceased matrilateral grandmother inside the shrine: *Ameka latso hunka?*, 'Who is going to take her cord of blood?' is often asked when an older *vodhunsi* dies. Although affiliation tends to follow matrilateral ties, *hunka* can also encompass other types of matrifiliation. If a precedent for initiation

is unknown, the new disciple is said to have taken the cord of the vodhun, the *vodhunka*.

Certain parallels can be drawn between the organisation of the descent group, *fomé*, and that of the *hunka*. Both refer to genealogical continuity, and both are linked with a notion of space and locality. Some of the referents used inside the shrines to describe and address its 'personnel' parallel the terminology of kinship used in Watchi secular organisation. Humans have spouses, and so do the vodhun. In their dwellings, deities are organised in a fashion similar to that of the compounds structured around the *fomé*. Devotees are called *hunsiviwo*, 'the little spouses of blood'. *Hunka* was thus defined as being 'like a *fomé*', whose application was restricted to vodhun shrines, yet where rules of membership were not explicitly and overtly outlined.

Significantly, vodhun are also referred to simply as *hun*, blood. This multi-vocality (Turner 1967: 50) of the term could lead to the translation of *hunka* as, alternately, 'the cord of blood' or 'the cord of vodhun'. There is no doubt that women are overtly associated with blood itself,[22] and potentially all linked with vodhun through *hunka*, which enables the vodhun to find continuity. The vodhun themselves are linked with blood, *hun*, both through the polysemy of meaning of this term, and also through sacrifice. Women are made to drink the blood of sacrificial animals during certain rituals, particularly when the bond between them and the gods needs to be strengthened. At the end of initiation of a *vodhunsi*, this action is of primary importance in sealing the bond between devotee and deity, and is referred to as the 'vodhun entering the head of the *vodhunsi*'. This multi-vocality may also help explain the deities' dual and sometimes ambiguous gender identities: even an unequivocally male vodhun such as Hevieso, with his powerful male attributes, comes to be defined within the context of female blood.

The similarities between *hunka* and *fomé* are not shared without distinction. Both are spatially defined, but whereas the *fomé* is located within the village, the *hunka*, through its association with vodhun, lies outside of it, in the wild (*gbeme*). As we have previously seen, *fomé*, although used to describe patrilateral kin within a descent group, share a common female apical ancestress, as the term refers to a woman's belly. Hence vodhun and *fomé* both recall specifically female attributes: the blood located inside a woman's belly, passed through her umbilical cord to initiates of secret societies, and the belly which contains all human life, representing the place of origin of the Watchi. The metaphor of pots is used in both contexts. In their wild form, vodhun remain potentially harmful to humans, and need to be grounded and contained in earthen pots in order for humans to be able to worship them. This process combines male and

female involvement: women, through their association with clay and the 'place where life is made', manufacture the pots, while men handle herbs and medicines used to bring the gods to life.

Most cult leaders, *huno*, are men, and it is they who are involved in containing the vodhun, erecting new shrines for them or perpetuating their physical presence in their role as caretakers. Similarly, men also try to contain and confine women, whom they perceive as free of spatial attachment. Both vodhun and the *fomé* can therefore be conceptualised as places which contain women (and blood). The metaphor of marriage materialises this 'control': women are spatially linked with the vodhun when they become their brides, and as brides through marriage become metaphorically contained within their husbands' *fomé*. Yet many devotees describe their relationships with vodhun as being freer than the ones they entertain with their husbands, despite the constraints and taboos which apply within shrines. *Huno* himself, as male head of a shrine, is metaphorically and physically imbued within the blood of female ancestors: his status is defined through matrifiliation, and cult leaders receive no ordinary funerals. Unlike other men without involvement with vodhun, they will not be buried within the confines of the village. Their remains will be taken away, disposed of by initiates and other cult leaders, and their soul will return to seek another male cult leader in the female line. Most importantly perhaps, in his capacity as cult leader, *huno* is designated as the 'mother of blood'. This symbolic inversion of *huno*'s gender contributes to his composite identity as the embodiment of both male and female attributes.

Fomé is further associated with the virilocal *afé*, the place of residence of the descent group. Deities also have houses in which to dwell, and where initiates are confined during initiation. This territory, however, is primarily linked to matrilocality. The *fomé* is also spatially located through its departed male members: the *togbuiganwo* have stools, *zikpuiwo*, which represent them physically and are kept in a hut by the head of each *fomé*. The female departed, acknowledged through the *hunka* are (selectively) pervasive: they have no stools, but they are said to be present where the vodhun dwell. The male departed are remembered individually, their names called out on ceremonial occasions, while female ancestors, remembered through *hunka*, are collectively commemorated through vodhun. They do not receive prayers or sacrifice, as it is not they, but the deities, who are addressed in sacrifices.

There are further complementarities between secular and religious spheres. Secular and political life are dominated by mostly male genealogies and most, but not all, 'departed elders' are men. *Tsifé*, the house of water where the dead dwell, is male, and refers to the

whiteness of male bones as well as semen. Yet ancestresses do exist, and manifest themselves through blood and the requirement for initiation of one of their female descendants. *Boméno*, the mother of clay and the source of life itself, recycles life by returning the dead to the realm of the living. Notions of gender are thus expressed in relation to men and women as earthly beings, but also in relation to the dead as departed elders and vodhun as returned devotees. Deities and devotees alike act as living proof of the continuity of this matrifilial bond.

Where an enclosure for initiation exists, it is generally in the form of a fence made of palm leaves, which surround the hut where the deity is sheltered. Occasionally, the shrine of a vodhun will be located in a forest that will itself serve as a natural enclosure. These shrines are mostly located outside the village, in the wasteland between the inhabited part of the locality and cultivated fields (for an extrapolation on the notion of a 'sacred void', see Parkin 1991b). The mud hut in which the vodhun is kept is surrounded by wild shrubs and trees that should never be cut or cleared. Vodhun are associated with nature and its powers, leading to prescriptive taboos concerning human activities during initiation: only nature's materials should be used for fetching water, hoeing the fields, cutting firewood and lighting fires (similar associations are described by Turner 1969: 100).

Initiation to secret societies takes place within these enclosures surrounding shrines, yet many a vodhun's shrine is established without such an attachment. What sets these sites apart is their connection with ancestors, such spirits that need to be perpetuated in time through the acquisition of a perpetual flow of *vodhunsiwo* as disciples.

It could be surmised that all vodhun shrines are indirectly linked to ancestors or deceased elders, since all descent groups require such an association when they become territorially established as residential units. Such protective shrines, with their vodhun, are inherited from one generation to the next, their existence perpetuated through the care and agency of the male heads of *fomé*. However, when referring to shrines with enclosures for initiation into secret societies, the notion of ancestors is somewhat different. What makes a shrine have initiates, devotees and followers are its links with female ancestors, who pass on their membership to female descendants. Such initiation will lead to the development of links with deities enacted through possession, divination and an emphasis, in public discourse at least, on secrecy and segregation. However, the 'leadership' or responsibility for custody will continue

to be inherited in the same manner as for any other descent group between males of descending generations.

Shrines with an enclosure are also distinguished from those without by the mode of their installation. As they are said to be the dwelling places of deities whose original manifestation had nothing to do with human interference, they tend to be located outside the territories where humans reside.

As we are about to see, the association of blood with place, settlement, the appropriation of and mobility across territories, extends beyond the experiential physical world into that of spirituality and vodhun. This is made all the more apparent as the idioms and discourses that pervade sociality, located as they are in bodily practice, are hardly confined to the realm of kinship relations and the mapping of human relationships only. The physical referents used in the representation of personal and collective identities find resonance in the world of vodhun, and echo the relationships which exist between humans and gods.

Establishing new human settlements is predicated upon the installation of a stool for the ancestors, paired with the insertion of a clay pot for the vodhun in each new compound derived from the segmentation of a descent group. Each descent group is thus in possession of such a pair of ritual objects and their associated spiritual protective powers. The clay used for the construction of human and religious huts is thus symbolically potent in more than one way: its pragmatic significance as a readily available building material is complemented by elaborate symbolic and mythological images linking it to female procreation, the redness of a woman's fertile womb and vodhun, which are also subsumed in blood through sacrifice, social and spiritual fertility, and a contractual relationship with women themselves. Thus domestic arrangements which derive from purely practical considerations relating to housing, shelter and social continuity are also connected to bodily images which reflect and help shape cosmological entities.

Huts which shelter vodhun are often of a similar size and also feature in the compounds. These huts were always made of mud, which could under no circumstances be substituted by concrete. The shrines were placed on the edges of the compounds, and had their entrances sealed by a wooden door, a bamboo fence or a piece of black, red and white cloth. A pot turned upside down was always placed on the top of its roof, indicating the presence of a vodhun. Legba, an individual protective deity considered particularly close to humans, was not sheltered inside a shrine. Normally a small figure

between 20 and 50 cm tall, it was placed directly outside the hut of its owner, withstanding rain and wind. Larger Legba figures, which protect descent groups, the marketplace or the whole village, were erected in public places and sheltered underneath a simple thatched roof. Offerings and remains of sacrifices often lay scattered around these public Legba.

As we have seen, while women are sometimes referred to as wild animals which need to be hunted down by men so that order can prevail, such metaphors also involve the men in hunting in new, unknown and potentially dangerous territories. Only through women can territories be expanded and male trees be planted, since the grounding pot of descent and emplacement, and the founding womb of '*fomé*' as place of gestation and as locality for settlement are unequivocally embodied in women. The analogy extends to vodhun, since they, too, are essential to the establishment of settlement and the provision of cosmic blessing and approval. The fixity of vodhun, like the fixity of women, determines locality and belonging by virtue of male legitimate settlement and the appropriating and locating sheltering properties of the house. Yet the non-fixity and movement of both deities and women are also essential elements in securing access to new – earthly and cosmological – territories and fertile procreation. The clay of pots and wombs used to locate and make effigies of the gods is also pervasive as it can be found anywhere in Watchi territory. Pots and wombs thereby demarcate belonging, but they also embody movement and the containment and expansion of history itself. Through their close link with vodhun, women are being hunted not only to be controlled, but also in order for the men who hunt them to have access to the space which they, as women, inhabit but which is also the natural dwelling places of the gods. The transformative processes involved in the dialectical relationships between humans and nature thereby position culture in 'places in between' (Bhabha 1994), since vodhun cosmology highlights this inherent mobility across potentially habitable territories. Women may be chased by men since they belong to the wild, yet they also embody the epitome of 'culture' and knowledge through their association with cosmology. By chasing women (or wild animals), men are also relinquishing power to the hunted, since they, the 'prey' always lead the way. The association of women with wild animals is, therefore, a double source of prestige: women, like animals, provide meat in the form of sexual intercourse, and in the form of children. But one property to be hunted is much more elusive to the hunter: knowledge of the vodhun itself, in its unmediated and experiential form. This remains

on the whole difficult of access to most men, at least if one takes account of the priviledged relationship that appears to exist between deities and women. I turn in the next chapter to an exploration of what constitutes vodhun and religiosity, examining the various relationships which connect humans and their gods, and shall then focus on the associations between vodhun and women when couched in idioms of possession, illness and identity.

3 MAKING GODS, KNOWING GODS

Vodhun and their world can be examined in several ways. There is, of course, the cosmology of gods, the structural organisation of the spiritual universe which could be treated as an ideological pole, a way of organising the world which would provide directives to the organisation of society, codifying behaviour through a prescriptive set of rules and enforcing morality through, for instance, the power of taboos. Cosmology and its unravelling might then take on a significance of their own, the role of the anthropologist and informants being primarily instrumental in the disclosure of other-worldly order. Griaule's school belongs here, as do many structuralist writings. However, as schools are never quite as clear-cut as might at first appear, the picture might gain some complexity by adding an element of Durkheimian reflexivity: the organisation of cosmos might thus be taken to reflect the structural organisation of society, gods being modelled on what humans would like them to be. In doing so, humans could create an ideology fit to legitimate their own structural relationships on earth. Such an interactive approach might provide clues relating to the dialectics of power in the sociality of humans, as reflected in cosmology.

Vodhun are part and parcel of both such packages. There is indeed an ideology, for lack of a better term, which links vodhun to one another in the greater order of things. There are, naturally, myths which many Watchi employ to illustrate this kind of historicity among their gods. Such cosmologies often exclude humans from the narratives, emphasising as they do the metaphysical order of the world. If humans are present, they are included through the nature of their encounter with their gods, and thus see their position legitimated in the wider cosmos in the same way as those whom they treat as supernatural beings. Cosmologies might indeed exist, and may well be called upon in particular situations to justify certain events, circumstances or behaviours, but they are by no means sufficient to provide an understanding of what constitutes a god or the relationships which link them to one another, or to humans. And although deities provide an idiom readily used to justify everyday initiatives, circumstances and predicaments, helping thus to legitimate certain social institutions and human action, interaction

with vodhun is neither purely structural nor functional. In other words, why vodhun? And why do humans at times emphasise such cosmologies, while other loci of interaction are also present?

While the previous chapter focused primarily on understanding concepts of territorial belonging, human locality and their intertwining within the social context of descent, the next two delve into how such a sense of belonging and – sometimes shifting – identity are also mediated through interaction with vodhun. Illness narratives play no small part in such diverse contexts, although vodhun are uneasily reduced strictly to healing discourses. Rather than take for granted that a vodhun is simply a god, a deity, or a cosmological being defined through external agency, the following sections will focus almost exclusively on fleshing out their identities. How are vodhun made to be part of sociality and knowledge of the world?

CASE STUDY 1

Approximately two months after my original arrival in Momé Hounkpati, I was called upon by B., one of the healers in the village, in order to accompany him on a visit to a patient. On our way, he related to me that although he had not yet examined her, he suspected her illness to be the doing of a vodhun. He had received the impromptu visit, in the late afternoon, from one of the girl's relatives, urging him to come immediately as she had suddenly fallen very ill, was unable or unwilling to speak, and had been struck by partial paralysis. As dusk fell, we arrived in the girl's compound. Several relatives surrounded her mat, laid down on the floor, observing the development of her illness while also providing whatever comfort they could. There was, I perceived, a certain sense of gloom. B. greeted them, and kneeled down to feel the girl's limbs, stretching them gently in the process. He asked her several questions, none of which elicited any response. She lay passively on her mat, seemingly indifferent to external events. B. rose again, conferred with some of the young girl's relatives, and confirmed to them his diagnosis. This was indeed the early manifestation of a vodhun, and it was yet impossible for him to identify which of the gods was causing such misfortune. Perhaps a diviner could tell, otherwise, the family and the girl herself would have to wait, although B. promised to provide some medicines which would alleviate some of her discomfort. Until a vodhun could be identified, she would not recover her ability to speak. B. also predicted that the girl would eventually need to be initiated into one of the secret societies in order for all her symptoms to disappear.

On our way home, B. added to his diagnosis. He said that he had met the girl on a previous occasion, as he had been called by her family to treat her for repeated headaches and occasional shaking. At the time, however, he had not diagnosed the presence of a vodhun. As this second home visit found the girl in a considerably more serious state, it was becoming obvious to everyone that a deity was involved. Yet, the girl had not yet suffered serious trance, nor had the vodhun manifested its name. Although B. was quite certain of the eventual outcome, and the need for the girl to be initiated in due course, nothing further could be done at present. Although he felt sorry for the girl and surmised that she would have to suffer further symptoms before a cure could be affected, he seemed to remain confident that the time for a remedy would come. A few months later, I encountered the girl undergoing initiation in vodhun Hevieso's *hunkpame*, the enclosure housing one of the secret societies.

CASE STUDY 2

D. was one of the most popular and prominent healers in Balime, a hamlet some 2 km from Sagada, the chiefly quarters. His courtyard was usually filled with visitors come for consultation, either on their own behalf or to seek advice concerning relatives. D. had become renowned for his success in treating long-term illnesses caused by either vodhun or sorcery, and specialised in particular in the diagnosis of 'madness'. He was deemed particularly skilled at distinguishing madness induced through human agency – that is, through sorcery – from the divinely inspired kind.

I spent much of my time at his shrine. As I arrived early in the morning on one of my courtesy visits, I noticed an adolescent girl, her ankle chained to the ground. Her eyes were at times acutely fixed on the people around her, and she addressed long diatribes to whoever was around, in a mixture of French and Ewe. I attempted to take notes of her speech, but her utterances were so rapid, and the thoughts so apparently disconnected, that I could not follow her discourse. She would constantly switch between a testimonial and narrative tone and an overtly accusatory and aggressive frame of mind, blaming her misfortunes on everyone around her. She would then suddenly fall silent, with an absent-minded look, oblivious to all, her eyes vacant. D. would ask her questions, without eliciting any response.

The girl, Ama, had arrived in Balime in the middle of the night, in a state of extreme agitation. Her mother had brought her here from Lomé, the capital, having heard of D.'s reputation for diagnosing and treating the causes of madness. He had immediately

proceeded to give her herbal ointments and medicines, and chained her to the ground so she could neither run away nor harm herself or others. It was decided she would remain in D.'s compound until her state of health improved. D.'s task in the next few days consisted of diagnosing the proper cause of her sudden madness.

The girl was around 16. As I continued to visit D. every day, she started recounting her own story to me. She spoke in very erudite and polished French, and attributed her own illness to jealousy. She had been, she said, among the brightest students in her school in the capital, winning several school competitions and having just been selected to receive a government grant to pursue her university degree. She was involved in extra-curricular activities, ran several after-school clubs, and had always been very popular among her peers. However, she had suddenly become ill overnight, and told me that 'They all hate me. It's sorcery you see. They have worked me, they have worked me' ('Ils m'ont travaillée'). Her composure would suddenly evaporate, and she would fall into silence again, or become extremely agitated and insult everyone around.[1]

She remained with D. for almost six months. Her symptoms improved, she was given herbal medicines every day. The standard treatment applied by D. (and a few other healers dealing with similar ailments) involved her taking concoctions of plants prepared especially for her. Every morning, she was also given eyedrops, in the form of black sap from freshly plucked medicinal leaves, which elicited much pain as the sap is considered hot, and therefore essential for treating afflictions attributed to witchcraft and sorcery. Most bodily orifices would be similarly plugged: the ears through the insertion of leaves, the nostrils by blowing balls of medicine through a small pipe.

Her mother, who had stayed with her for a few weeks at the beginning of her treatment, had long since returned to Lomé, and left Ama to be entirely cared for by D., who had taken her into his compound. For fear she might run away or otherwise harm herself and others, she had remained chained to her hut until the drugs administered had taken effect. She had since calmed down, become quite docile and lethargic, and lost a considerable amount of weight. She was returned to her family in an apathetic state, her countenance restrained, controlled and manageable. Her haggard looks were, at the end of treatment, accompanied by a rather absent-minded composure. D. considered his treatment to have been successful, yet half-heartedly also admitted 'there was nothing else he could do for her', and one would have to await further developments. Ama herself was barely able to speak, but told me that 'they would return'. At no stage had her illness been directly attributed to the workings of a vodhun. Sorcery was at stake, although D. suspected that the

perpetrator had enrolled a deity in order to help in this harmful enterprise. Neither initiation nor the instalment of a shrine was deemed appropriate recourses in the treatment of her illness. Although vodhun were thus excluded as primary causes in the diagnosis of Ama's madness, they remained instrumental in her cure as secondary agents. D. believed that Ama's path towards recovery would have to involve a proper identification of these vodhun. However, it was too early to tell, and further 'workings' by the human perpetrators would have to take place in order for proper identification to be achieved. D. was deemed powerful in dealing with such cases, and his collaboration with his vodhun considered successful.

CASE STUDY 3

The patient was a young man, Koffi, who had arrived at D.'s compound in circumstances very similar to those of the young girl mentioned above. He too had been struck by madness and, when I first met him, displayed extremely aggressive behaviour, lashing out at people, insulting them, shouting at them, threatening to strike. Like Ama, he had come from Lomé, where he had been a very dedicated and successful pupil. He had suddenly fallen ill, incapable of concentrating on any of his school work, and was acutely aware that he would most probably be unable to return during the current school year, which in effect signalled the end of his education and the demise of future career plans.

His presence at D.'s shrine coincided, for a few months, with that of Ama, with whom he would sometimes converse. They received the same treatment, as far as medicines were concerned. However, D.'s diagnoses of these two cases were very different: while Ama was said to suffer the effects of a particularly harmful case of sorcery, Koffi's madness was deemed to have been caused by a vodhun. D. was confident that he would improve quite rapidly. This did indeed occur. When treatment ceased, Koffi was instructed that he needed to install a shrine on behalf of a vodhun. As long as he continued to care for this deity properly, he would be afforded future protection.

These three cases epitomise some of the most common ways in which vodhun manifest themselves to humans, and the various paths leading to their identification in the midst of human sociality. They also highlight the various relationships humans might entertain with vodhun, and the need for various strategies and open-ended diagnoses. Perceived to live in an ethereal cosmos, most vodhun are part of human experience in an abstract sense only, until such a time when it becomes inevitable to acknowledge their

presence. The relationship between humans and their deities is therefore such that the possibility always remains open for their inclusion in people's lives, however remote and, at times, irrelevant they might be perceived as being. Thus for Koffi and Ama, sorcery and vodhun had always been deemed to belong to another world, not simply cosmologically, but principally in terms of sociality and experience. Both had been educated in schools in the capital, in a schooling system still influenced by French colonial policy, and apparently couched in the epistemology of Cartesian scientific rigour. Both Ama and Koffi prided themselves in having been excellent students, among the best attending their respective schools. Yet both had, unexpectedly and without 'believing in' either sorcery or vodhun, found themselves deeply involved in such practices, as cure could not be sought elsewhere. They had even, they each told me in their individual ways, come to believe in the power of vodhun, by necessity or conviction, as these had provided the only treatments which had alleviated some of their distress.

VODHUN'S BODIES, HUMAN BODIES: ILLS AND MISDEMEANOURS

Experience of vodhun is often couched within the idioms of illness, misfortune, and subsequent cure and happiness. These provide the dominant contexts for discussing vodhun. Repeated illness, misfortune or failure to thrive socially or economically, might prompt comments such as 'perhaps a vodhun is bothering you', implying the potential presence of a god paired with the ignorance of the sufferer. The path to a cure is thus mediated through the intervention of deities and also, and perhaps most importantly, through the acquisition by the patient of particular kinds of knowledge related to specific deities. The semantic relationship established through the diagnosis of a cosmologically induced illness between deity and ill forever alters the personality of both, and simultaneously leads to a reshaping of social relationships. Such alterations are, generally, permanent. Once acknowledged, the link tying deity and humans cannot be dismissed without impunity.

It has been emphasised in recent anthropological research that illness itself can become a mediating feature in shaping social relations (Csordas 1994, Good et al. 1992, Jackson 1996, Sansom 1982, Scarry 1985). Effective cure, in a purely medical sense, may not be the only desired outcome, and a cure may be deemed unsuccessful if it has only addressed purely physical symptoms. The aetiology of illness, while acknowledged to be highly culturally specific, is also paired with particular social circumstances that help define the parameters within which illness and misfortune occur.

This is not new. After all, Evans-Pritchard's seminal contribution to the study of misfortune departed from earlier debates on the rationality of natives as it focused almost exclusively on the sociality of this practice. What has emerged since, particularly in anthropological debates relating to illness and medicine, is a questioning of the intellectual foundations upon which scientific rationality rests, as it is seen to deny the physical and emotional fundamentals of experience in the acquisition and production of knowledge. In the process, the body has become situated in the world, no longer seen as a locus for the objectification of intellectual processes, but given pride of place as a mediator in the absorption of social codes and as producer of shifting ones. Bodies, in this sense, are unpredictable. No longer seen simply as objects to be acted upon by external mental powers, they become part and parcel of the individual's appropriation of the outer social world and projection upon it.

In the context of vodhun, bodies become the seats upon which gods come to perch. They snatch them (*tso ame*), penetrate them (*do lame ne*), abduct them (*ade ame*), throttle them, suffocate them and soothe them. Illness provides the first clue that something is amiss, and finds its way into men's and women's bodies in such a way that, if a vodhun is involved, little doubt is left as to causality. The body mediates directly in the experience of vodhun. Indeed, there are no other ways of knowing about the gods: even in cases where illness is absent, such as when a vodhun freely descends into a compound and demands attention and a shrine of its own, failure to heed such demands will inevitably result in illness, misfortune or death. In the three case studies presented earlier, vodhun lurked as potential causes of illness for the three patients involved, as the symptoms displayed were all acknowledged to be possible manifestations of spiritually induced illnesses.

In addition, it has also been emphasised in the literature on healing and medicine, particularly in the context of African practices and aetiologies, that knowledge of, and probings into, the social context of patients by 'traditional' medical practitioners provided one of the keys to effective curing. References abound where healers are said to seek out as much information as possible on the patients' sociality (Field 1937, 1960, Turner 1968), conflicts, past experiences and episodes of illness; and the social group surrounding the patient has also been given significant space in this discourse (Corin 1979, Janzen 1978, Parkin 1979). Although the social circumstances of patients undeniably provide a key to the occurrence of illness and effecting cure (and certainly present valuable clues to the anthropologist's understanding of the overall situation) this emphasis is not always present in the encounter between healer and the ill, nor is it necessarily essential to healing and curing. Rather, illnesses

appear to follow certain paths, leading the encounter between healer, patients and possible intermediaries such as family and kin members, to be highly codified according to relatively specific conceptual maps, which help unravel *contextually relevant* information leading to diagnosis and action (Parkin 1991a, Sansom 1982). What emerges in such encounters are relatively wide categories of illness, set within a specific and narrow set of categories of cure, where the idioms used remain sufficiently open-ended to incorporate a wide set of experiences while also leading to a narrowing down of the patient's symptoms and distress to a few identifiable categories. The cultural and linguistic semantics of illness appear to operate around clues that are vague and simultaneously specific, all-encompassing yet exclusive.[2]

Significantly, the reflexive relationship that involves humans and gods in the aetiology and cure of illness is further demonstrated in the complex web of obligations that tie humans and cosmos. There is an ironic twist to such relationships: humans may have been rescued from severe social or physical disablement and, sometimes, death by their gods, leading them to commit themselves for life to serving their deities for fear of reprisals, yet the deities themselves are instrumental in causing such miserable conditions in the first place. The experience of gods may be, a posteriori, described as salvation, yet also has to be examined in light of the direct causality and in marking a turning point in the redefinition of human relationships. Gender identities, among other things, are highly affected and predicated upon the relationships that develop between humans and gods. Vodhun may thus be seen to induce severe illness, trance and possession in women, leading them to undergo initiation into secret societies and become devotees. Men are differently afflicted: they suffer impotence, lose their prestige, are faced with devastating financial losses in their business ventures, and may be ordered by the afflicting vodhun to install a shrine on its behalf. Women's and men's knowledge of their gods, while fundamentally similar in many ways, is also subject to considerable variations largely predicated on their different experiences of vodhun. Ultimately, such different paths to straightening out experiences of illness have to be examined in light of the rearrangements affected in human relationships.

The various aetiologies of illness, the progressive diagnosis, the multiplicity of treatments, testify further to the malleable links that tie vodhun to humans, and to the fundamentally changing nature of these relationships. I now turn to a typology of vodhun and of the ways in which they are represented, ideologically and experientially, through idioms of illness, identity, collective belonging and individual knowledge. Issues relating to the presence or absence of vodhun, to their manifestation to humans, to their perpetual

existence at metaphysical and spiritual levels, matched by their sometimes erratic presence among humans, are linked to issues of continuity in the maintenance of power, where knowledge of medicine and healing are also instrumental.

The term vodhun, best translated as 'deity' or 'god', is used to describe a wide range of beliefs, events and experiences. These include the notion of an all-encompassing power orchestrating the lives of humans, ritual beliefs, gods, ancestors, illness and health, and prosperity and misfortune. Vodhun manifest themselves in this world positively through fertility (twins holding a particularly potent position, being deified and identified directly as vodhun), success and good fortune, or negatively through affliction, possession, general failure, infertility, impotence and certain anomalies such as, *inter alia*, individuals suffering from Down's syndrome, albinos and children born with teeth (these individuals also being considered vodhun). Prayer, sacrifice, food and sexual taboos, initiation and the installation of shrines are the prime devices for maintaining a positive relationship between humans and their gods. Vodhun are said to be pervasive, to permeate all aspects of human life, on earth and beyond. They are present in Watchi cosmology, but also manifest themselves physically on earth.

Vodhun exist within a context that involves kinship, agency, and also healing and witchcraft. The well-being of humans is guaranteed by their vodhuns, who protect them and ensure their continued existence. However, humans must in return comply with specific taboos and fulfil certain obligations towards these cosmological guardians. Vodhun can provoke illness, affliction and misfortune, and make requests of humans that lead to special relationships being contracted between deity and afflicted. The nature of these relationships is complex, as several different types of 'alliance' can be established. An illness may be considered the spontaneous action of a vodhun, desiring to enter into such a relationship with a human counterpart. However, as relationships with vodhun are also highly individualised, conflicts and disputes may come to be settled using vodhun as intermediaries of human actions. Vodhun are thus either directly and spontaneously associated with certain illnesses, or used by humans to inflict misfortune upon co-villagers. In such cases, sorcery is at stake, yet set within the framework of vodhun as powerful agents for human intentions. The existence of vodhun is intimately linked with the power of medicines, the ultimate control of these being in the hands of humans.

Much of the literature on this part of Africa highlights important similarities between the vodhun in Benin and Togo, the *orisa* in Nigeria and, to a lesser extent, the *obosom* and *suman* in Ghana.

Some of the most authoritative anthropological sources on vodhun in Togo and neighbouring Benin derive from the work of French anthropologists. Among the older accounts are Bernard Maupoil (1943) and Pierre Verger (1957). More recent approaches have been presented by Marc Augé (1988), Albert de Surgy (1981, 1988) and Claude Rivière (1981, see also Bay 1995, Blier 1995). All of these have in common a perspective in which vodhun are placed within a pantheon of gods, using an imagery often similar to that applied to Greek mythology. One of the most prominent features is the construction of a hierarchical classification providing a framework within which the vodhun are ranked depending on their properties, powers and, above all, their position in the mythology of the creation of the world.

According to these authors, the vodhun's position in the hierarchy of the pantheon is dependent upon their punitive powers and propensity to inflict illness and misfortune upon human beings. Augé and Maupoil, in particular, claim that the strength of vodhun is defined by their efficacy in inflicting misfortune, or providing assistance and relief in the form of general prosperity, fertility and health.

The problem with the concept of a pantheon is that it presents characteristics associated with different vodhun as absolute values. Hence, according to Augé, for example, Sakpata, the deity of smallpox, would irrevocably chastise whoever violates his taboos, and Hevieso, deity of thunder and lightning, would strike down whoever enters his shrine without the preliminary sacrifices. Humans are described as being in awe of their gods, submissive to their will and whims. Of the available texts, Augé's account is more perceptive and more nuanced than many of the others, as he maintains that humans create their gods, introducing an element of dialectic exchange and interdependence. However, his explanation of the creation of gods by humans is highly structural, using a healthy dose of Cartesian inspiration to explain the relationship. Man ('l'Homme', to repeat Augé's phraseology), he claims, is able to worship stones because they provide a sounding board for his own thoughts about himself and the world. The material world is thus created through classification, through conscious mental processes that determine the human propensity to control inanimate environments. By imbuing material things ('la matière') with a spiritual essence, Man is allegedly able to relate to his natural environment through the mediation of gods, spirits, ancestors and other cosmological beings. Thus the creation of gods by humans is an intellectual exercise proving the propensity to think, reflect and explain, and could be summed up in the famous French adage: 'Je pense, donc je suis.' The undertones of Lévi-Strauss are inescapable, in that the

world is 'good to think' and therefore crucial in determining culture as an exclusively human construct. The position of the 'paën' (pagan, Augé 1988: 20) is thereby redeemed.

The notion of a pantheon could be, and I believe should be, dismissed on several accounts. Perhaps most convincing is the absence of any exegetic explanation supporting the model of a pantheon, and any such classification must consequently be seen purely as a theoretical model or construct created by Western anthropologists. Hence the comparison with Greek cosmology (see particularly de Surgy 1988, in discussing universal features of sacrifice, and Fortes 1959, in relation to notions of personhood and destiny) appears particularly tenuous. In addition, the image that the Watchi have of their vodhun is much more fragmented than this hierarchical and well-organised model of a pantheon would have us believe. Most of my informants, those with lay knowledge as well as the more specialised cult leaders, were able to provide elaborate accounts of their own vodhun, or of those which had at some stage come to their notice through, for example, an initiation ceremony, a prolonged illness or a relative installing a shrine. However, they could provide little detail about other vodhun with whom they had not been in contact, either because they simply did not know, or because they were not supposed to know. As knowledge of vodhun is simultaneously overtly public and intensely private, everyone I spoke to, lay as well as specialist, appeared to know a fair deal about the various vodhun. Nevertheless, to demonstrate too much public knowledge of a deity, any deity, with whom no special and sanctioned links had been established was deemed highly suspect and potentially punishable. As a result, the cult leaders involved tended to remain relatively vague when discussing vodhun in the broad sense, stating that they could not place them in an overall cosmology other than in very general terms, such as 'Hevieso is very powerful, it can paralyse you', or 'Mami Wata can also kill, but generally she is kind and peaceful and will bring wealth and good fortune.' When asked to explain specific aspects of a vodhun's character with which they were unfamiliar, I was invariably advised to 'go and see so and so [a specific cult leader] in order to know more about [a particular vodhun], because they will be able to give you the true story. I can only talk about my vodhun, because it is the one that I know.' No vodhun was deemed inherently more powerful than any other. The vodhun's power was seen in relative rather than absolute terms, and their position in the cosmology was consequently malleable.

Another major criticism to be levelled at these theoretical constructions is that they stress only the theological aspect of religion. There results a fixity in the cosmology where vodhun are excised from other spheres of Watchi experience. This emphasis on theology

also allows for the construction of theoretical models, perceived as coherent systems, as is suggested in de Surgy's title, *Le Système religieux des Evhé* (1988). Of course, there exists a cosmology, but it is experiential as well as ideological, and the two are intimately intertwined. Knowledge of vodhun is hardly acquired through the primary and exclusive channel of cosmological hierarchies that serve to organise and structure such a 'system'. Religious knowledge in this instance is highly predicated on experience, and the relevance of spirituality at particular junctions of life, and this experience is often mediated through other channels than cosmology and myth (Jackson 1996, Parkin 1992).

VODHUN IN THE FLESH

My own first encounter with vodhun deities, as far as visual representation is concerned, was rather direct and unmediated: as my friend Etienne was introducing me to the family that would come to be my host in Momé Hounkpati, I noticed a large number of clay effigies erected here and there across the compound, some of them sheltered under a thatch roof, others openly exposed to nature's whims. After Etienne had left, I asked what they were: '*vodhunwo*' (pl.), Huntosudi answered. Within the confines of the village, a proliferation of vodhun can be found, and a compound may sometimes have more than one. I was later to learn that some of the most important vodhun are hidden from view, sheltered inside huts with closed doors, fences, black, red and white cloths, or sometimes with no door at all. I was almost sanctioned on my second day in Momé Hounkpati for attempting to remove the fence protecting one such entrance, believing this hut to be the communal latrine. I later learned to recognise the distinguishing features which characterise such dwellings, at least when these are not made obviously visible, as is the case for many prominent shrines. Others, however, remain hidden from view, and are not intended for exposure.

Most vodhun have shrines, *vodhunxo* or *vodhunfe*, the 'room/house of the vodhun', protected with a roof and a door, and marked by an up-turned clay pot at its apex. Some of these shrines are surrounded by a fence of high palm leaves, forming an enclosure, *vodhunkpamé* or simply *hunkpamé* (*kpa*, container or boundary, and *mé*, in, hence the enclosure of vodhun, or enclosure of blood, as the term is multi-vocal), associated with secret societies and initiation. It is common for such shrines to be sited close to large trees, water or other significant natural features.

Vodhun is more than the abstract concept of a deity existing elsewhere and affecting the lives of humans only at metaphysical

level. It is endowed with a physical power and an earthly representation which make it very much an integral part of every compound. Vodhun can be installed to protect individuals, members of a compound, a *fomé* (local descent group), the village as a whole, the marketplace or other public sites. The sculpture representing the vodhun will be protected and sheltered inside a hut, or shrine, which either can be situated within the compound of a specific *fomé* or, occasionally, be separated from human dwellings such that they sit alone. Shrines can also form a cluster, several of them sitting within a common enclosure. Although a shrine will normally have been built for one particular vodhun only, it will seldom be on its own in this hut, often sharing its residence with a smaller vodhun considered to be its spouse and a number of secondary deities, which in turn can be found elsewhere, independently, as major deities. Hence a vodhun's position within a shrine is highly variable: it can acquire the status of major deity within one shrine, but be of secondary importance elsewhere. In its construction, the place of residence of the vodhun echoes the structure of human households. The shrine will normally be referred to as the home of the principal deity only, and the other vodhun will be referred to only when appropriate, such as in prayers when they are particularly invoked.

Within the hut, the vodhun is represented in clay, *anyi*, although some modern versions have now been erected in concrete. The body is normally bulbous, a bulky lump of clay on which an intimation of two arms has been sketched on either side. It has eyes made of cowrie shells, and a hole forms the mouth for it to receive and partake in sacrifices, and to speak to humans when communicating spiritual messages to them. The process of grounding vodhun in the community of humans involves their containment within a clay pot, modelled by women and filled mostly by male spiritual leaders, who place medicinal plants inside in order to boost the earthly powers of the gods. The clay pot containing the god is, in most instances, laid on the ground upside down, as it contains the powers of the vodhun. Yearly ceremonies are held to boost the powers of the gods, thereby ensuring their continued prosperity and efficacy. Plants and animal parts are inserted into the pot holding the essence of the deity's identity, thus also enabling a strengthening of the bond between shrine-keeper and deity. Their mutual dependency is thereby also affirmed.

The particular attributes of each vodhun are then added, modelled to portray its individual identity. If the vodhun is male, an iron bar or piece of wood representing an erect penis is placed between its legs, while some female deities such as Mami Wata are generally endowed with a prominent bosom. In addition, specific attributes are made to represent the particularities of that god: Hevieso is given

a double-headed axe, the symbol of thunder and lightning, and sometimes a rifle, a more modern representation of its strength, the sound of firing a gun being likened to the sound of thunder. Mami Wata, female deity of wealth, purity and cleanliness, is made of talcum powder and perfume rather than clay, hence representing wealth and simultaneously endowing it on her owner.[3] Eda, the python,[4] will have snake-like clay figures wound around its body, and the walls of the shrine will be painted with sinuous snakes.

A few vodhun do not fit these descriptions. Sakpata, deity of smallpox, also symbolising the earth, is pictured in the material world as a clay pot with a proliferation of holes on its surface, alternatively depicted as protruding spikes. These are likened to the eruptions of sores on the skin that appear during a smallpox infection, and which are said to be a direct manifestation of the deity. Sakpata is also given the name Vodhun Anyigbato, the 'proprietor of the earth', as smallpox is believed to contaminate the earth itself. Another vodhun, Bloku, was described as a crocodile spirit, and a dried skin was hung on the wall as a visual manifestation of its earthly existence. A vodhun called Legbavi was perched on a pedestal in a courtyard and was contained in a calabash full of water.[5]

Associations with nature are considered important. The most powerful vodhun, people say, are those who, by their own accord, have come to settle in the wild that surrounds humans. They inhabit large baobab trees, termite mounds, rivers, the sea, large stones or even some animals (such as pythons, crocodiles and panthers). Thus, in these instances, human assistance was not necessary to help the vodhun obtain a dwelling, although a shrine will tend to be built on the site of the initial manifestation to provide the deity with shelter and protection. This is also done to protect humans, as the sight of a 'naked' deity could kill onlookers. Other deities acquire a dwelling, and become sited among humans, as a result of human involvement: a diviner may have identified the cause of some trouble and advised on such an action. Nevertheless, all deities retain a fundamental association with nature, irrespective of their initial mode of manifestation, albeit the degree of wildness attributed to them may differ. Being chosen to discover a vodhun that has fallen to earth imbues a person with more spirituality than having had a shrine voluntarily installed for personal protection. Somewhere in between, we find those who have discovered their gods through illness, misfortune or violent trance.

While Augé focuses on what he refers to as pagan representations of nature through the deification of matter ('la matière'), others (Århem 1998; Descola 1994; Douglas 1966, 1975) argue that the propensity to use and transform nature in such ways seems to be universal, albeit in culturally specific ways. All cultures appear to reify

elements of nature, either through religious and ritual forms such as the Ndembu's use of the *mudyi* tree, or through environmental awareness in the form of pressure groups. As Augé (1988) puts it, what motivates Man (Augé's idiom) to devote his attention to stones, pieces of wood, rivers, the sea and the earth? Why do such inanimate objects become deified? For Augé, Man's ability to create the world in his own thought and imagination materialises this world, makes it more present through its subjugation and objectification.

Like Augé, Descola (1994) ponders the universality of such characterisations. And although he agrees that the relationship with nature may take different forms cross-culturally, giving rise to distinct notions of 'nature' itself, he notes that certain features of the natural environment seem to be acted upon universally, not so much because they act as archetypes (in a Jungian sense), but rather because human sociality appears to focus ontologically on certain key features of the environment which become conducive to the emergence and development of fruitful social praxis. Nature is thus appropriated by humans in order for it to be socialised, while serving as a focus for socially significant human interaction. The objectification of nature, in this sense, is a necessary means to its domestication and socialisation, through its incorporation into the human domain. In this view, the process is thereby inherently social in character. Nature needs to be socialised in order for it to be understood, and only through this appropriation can it be of any use in 're-presenting' human sociality: the externalising process is also essential in creating a human identity distinctive from nature. Descola's interpretation, through its highly sophisticated rendering of nature and the social, is also inherently problematic: what he terms the objectification of nature must remain a highly ambiguous exercise, since objectification *per se* also involves an artificial distance between the human, which is alive, and the object, which is rendered closer to inanimate matter. Nature and human identity are seen as ontologically distinct categories, rather than transformative and interactive processes. If seen as discursive action, the socialisation of nature is bound to alter the essence of nature itself and, by the same token, of human identity *per se*.

The belief in the existence of ontological classifications is itself problematic, since their presence can neither be confirmed nor denied, and the argument therefore relies on a circularity that is difficult to disentangle. Douglas engaged us in an early and similar discussion relating to universal perceptions of the body and its products (1966, 1975). Admittedly, in the quest for human universals, such notions appear appealing. However, they rely on an externalising concept of nature, where nature is, in itself, a thing which needs objectification (either in order to become fully social,

as in Descola's interpretation, or in order to prove man's capacity to think and reflect upon his environment, as propounded by Augé or, before him, Lévi-Strauss, and by psychologically minded anthropologists). Neither view focuses on the 'making' of nature as a category. Nature either provides raw material, is constituted of matter ('la matière'), is the product of human thought or is endowed with natural symbols. These things are assumed to be already there. Moreover, such interpretations tend to view nature as external to, and distinct from, 'human nature'. Humans act upon nature as privileged creation in order to understand and socialise it, remaining distant from and domineering natural processes, rather than being part of them.

Trying to resolve the issue by focusing on the materiality of nature appears to be missing the point and is, ultimately, an unanswerable conundrum. Nature, like ethnicity, does not possess an essence that makes it inherently meaningful. An understanding of nature, based on the notion of raw material, is bound to be as misleading as an understanding of ethnicity based on the assumption of race. Concepts of nature are connected with boundaries, as Douglas and others (Boddy 1989, Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987) have repeatedly pointed out, but these boundaries are not fixed. The construction, maintenance, negotiation and transformation of boundaries pertaining to nature, the human body or ethnicity are all elements which are instrumental in the definition of these concepts in the first place (see also Stokes 1994 on a phenomenology of music, and Weiner 1991 on poetry). Only by focusing on these dynamics can nature be better understood. The process by which nature is created in the first place, appropriated, imbued with meaning and transformed into a mirroring image of human society, would emphasise the malleability of such a concept. Nature is, indeed, good to think, but only inasmuch as it provides the means for a socially dynamic exchange that involves human sociality as well as a phenomenological positioning of humans within place. The concept of nature is itself bound to be affected in the flow of information about and around it. Thus the objectification of nature does not bring it into the social sphere, rather it involves it in a dialectical relationship where nature does more than simply reflect society (such as in totemism). Nature is itself acted upon in order continually to transform its meaning, in relation to social, moral and experiential codes. Nature becomes socially meaningful because it provides the means through which humans can recognise identities and places, and transcend these when necessary.

Vodhun, like women, are made to represent certain features deemed to be inherently 'natural' by men. Women prior to marriage are likened to wild animals that need to be chased and settled by

men in order to achieve a socially viable state of reproduction. Likewise wild vodhun, in their untamed form, are dangerous to humans, and particularly to men. They roam the land, inhabit 'natural' features such as trees, rivers, stones and wild animals, they can descend upon unsuspecting humans, particularly women, whose health and sanity they threaten. They can indeed snatch them away, temporarily removing them from the social realm of ordinary gender relationships, and return them into an altered sociality where gender codes have been rearranged and modified. Yet vodhun, like women, can also be tamed and domesticated by men, and interaction can be made safe and viable. Indeed, such domesticated deities are essential for the perpetuation of life itself, as their blessing ensures human reproduction.

Watchi notions of nature, and of its construction, are at best multi-faceted. The vodhun contribute to a sense of belonging to the place of settlement, and provide a subsequent justification to such a claim, but they are not alone in doing so. Humans are dialectically involved in the shaping of the identities of their deities, and in allowing their presence on earth in the first place. The processes involved in the shaping of vodhun's identities, shrines and receptacles, such as pots, also involve humans in the direct shaping of their environment and in the appropriation of nature, in an abstract sense, and of place and locality at pragmatic levels. Creating a cosmology positions gods in the human community, legitimating claims on territory, movement through time and space, and ensuring the continuity of human life itself, but it also maps out cosmological territories which humans come to inhabit through their association with vodhun. Knowing the world therefore implies a direct knowledge of earthly territories transferred on to metaphysical landscapes of belonging, enacted and made implicit by virtue of knowledge itself. Nature is not objectified through this process, nor is it simply socialised to bring it within human bounds. Nature, in this sense, does not exist simply in society, but is also viewed as society. The image of nature within human society is thus matched by an image of humans within nature.

KNOWING GODS: OF RELATIVITY AND HIERARCHY

In my critique, I have opposed structural theoretical models primarily because they concentrate on theological constructions rather than on the processual acquisition of religious knowledge through experience. These models also lock human beings into a subordinate position, where gods are incorporated into a dominating, awe-inspiring structure where little room is left for

interference or even participation, other than the rather vaguely denoted action of 'worship'.

Deities are more malleable, and their position in myths and cosmology far more difficult to establish. Verger (1957: 31) acknowledges the flexibility inherent in the religious concepts surrounding vodhun. Among the Watchi, different informants will place the deities in different positions depending on their own relationship with them. Vodhun's strength will vary depending on the aims and skills of their human 'counterparts'. The relationship is further enhanced by the fact that each deity solves different categories of affliction, thus providing solutions directly linked to the conditions suffered by particular individuals at a specific point in time. Thus Mami Wata is understandably considered by her guardian to be the most powerful deity because, in the past, she helped cure the guardian of the evils of sorcery. Another will deem Hevieso the strongest vodhun, because it saved a human life from paralysis, internal haemorrhage or swelling of the body.

So the powers of vodhun fluctuate, as do their characteristics. It appears as if the potency attributed to vodhun depends on this mobility, and the concept that they are open to human manipulation. The power of vodhun will also rely on the depth of knowledge of its cult leader, for example in the use of particular plants and formulae used when installing a shrine for the deity. Hence it is more than the vodhun and its powers that are involved, as the powers that any particular cult leader is able to muster and invest in the vodhun are also crucial to its representation.

Far from being identified simply by absolute attributes such as, for instance, the power to kill, the propensity for revenge or the ability to cure, vodhun and their strengths are intimately linked with the intentions and skills of their human counterparts, on whom they depend and to whom they offer protection. Vodhun and humans are both part of a relationship that is defined through continuing interaction. There is no use asking for assistance if the call for help is directed at the wrong deity. Vodhun can fall out of favour and be forgotten for long periods of time, since their perpetuation or decline is intimately linked to the disposition of their human guardians. If a vodhun is perceived no longer to satisfy the needs of its human guardians, regardless of its original power or its notional position in the cosmological hierarchy, it will be neglected and eventually forgotten. Yet this is more than a mere matter of spiritual complacency or dissatisfaction, as it touches directly on human relationships: the life and perpetuation of a vodhun is highly dependent on the ability of its guardian to attract, convince and maintain followers. This is, in turn, a potent vehicle for the acquisition and maintenance of power (Barber 1981, Barnes 1990, McCarthy-Brown

1989, Morton-Williams 1960, 1964). An impotent vodhun, no longer able to satisfy the needs of its followers, may fall into disuse without threatening the existence of its human caretakers.

A vodhun that has been forgotten in such a way can reappear through a potential disciple of the same *fomé* several generations later and demand to be revived. It will manifest and express itself anew through violent possession trances, illness, misfortune, financial failure, impotence, infertility or a combination of these symptoms. The deity may ask for an old shrine to be restored to its former state (normally through a man), in order to attract followers again, or it may require that the person afflicted through illness or possession be initiated into its secret society (this occurs mainly to women). Thus a vodhun can disappear and emerge again some time later, keeping the same characteristics and making demands on descendants of its former guardian or devotee.

Each vodhun, or name of a vodhun, could be said to be of nominal value only, used mainly as a generic term. One could describe categories of 'Hevieso', 'Eda', 'Mami Wata', etc., where every cult leader of 'Hevieso' controls a particular Hevieso of which only he/she knows the full composition. While some characteristics act as defining features of specific categories of vodhun, this far from precludes the addition of endless variations resulting from the actions of individual cult leaders. Indeed, vodhun of the same name gradually acquire different characteristics, eventually leading to separate identities while keeping the same nomenclature. The particular traits acquired through this 'duplication' are directly associated with the skills and intentions of the 'guardian' of the cult, making the position of each deity a highly negotiable affair, extending beyond its placement in an overall cosmology or role in myths of creation.[6] Significantly, what appears is not a chart of absolute strengths attributed to deities, but a web of relationships where the link between individuals and vodhun determines their strength. As one female informant declared:

> My vodhun is here to protect me. It is very strong, and saved my life in the past, when I gave birth to stillborn children and many of my other children died or were very sick. Only Vodhun Tro could save me, that is what the diviner told me. No other vodhun could have helped, because this was the message of Tro, and Tro alone. If I had installed a shrine for another vodhun, my children would have continued to die and suffer illnesses.

This individualistic relationship defines much of the way in which vodhun are perceived: my own will protect me, other people's might cause my miseries. Fulfilling obligations towards one's chosen deity is a requirement of the mutually protective relationships that tie the two together, and negligence or transgression may cause further

misery. Yet if humans act as agents for their gods, bringing them to life and manipulating means at their disposal to enhance the power of their own associated gods, they have little control of what goes on next door. This distinction between vodhun that one controls, and those with which one has no relationship, is far more important in determining the power of a deity than any fixed place it holds in the cosmology.[7]

'My Vodhun, Our Vodhun?'

The shrine of a vodhun can be installed by an individual as a response to prolonged misfortune, or as a device to boost personal interests under the protection of a deity. Some individuals may also be identified at birth as having a special relationship with a particular deity, and the associated responsibilities involve the installation of a shrine and continued devotion through the offering of regular sacrifices, libations and prayers. These shrines are strictly personal, and, in theory at least, cannot be passed on to another member of the *fomé* after death. When the individual dies, the clay sculpture representing the vodhun is simply destroyed or left to crumble, and the link is severed. This manifestation of the deity then disappears from circulation among the living, but may reappear again at a later stage. The ebb and flow thus created ensures the potential perpetuation of any deity.

Other vodhun are directly associated with descent groups. Every *fomé* has a vodhun to protect it, but this association can take various forms. There is, first of all, the vodhun whose shrine was installed by the head of the *fomé* at the time of segmentation of a residential group, the one that establishes usufructory rights over land, and legitimises the settlement of the group. Such vodhun are not discarded, but inherited from one generation to the next, and continue to protect the descendants of the same *fomé*. The responsibility for its maintenance generally falls upon the living male head. These vodhun of the *fomé* have shrines, but enclosures for the initiation of devotees are absent. Their powers of protection and influence are strictly limited to a particular residential group.

There are, however, other vodhun, also associated with particular *fomé*, whose range of action is very different. These are the vodhun which also have a *hunkpamé*, an enclosure, where initiation takes place. The custody of such a vodhun falls into the hands of a particular *fomé* and is hereditary, but this group cannot claim exclusive access to it, since all the initiates and devotees of the secret societies can also seek its protection and assistance. Most custodians of such vodhun shrines are men, and pass on this role to one of their

male offspring in the same *fomé*. However, some vodhun always claim a woman in this role, inherited in the female line. Both male and female custodians of these shrines are referred to as *huno*, the 'mother of blood'.

The difference between the first type of vodhun of the *fomé*, and the second, lies in the mode of its installation and transmission. When a descent group segments, the new head (*fomefio*), will have to erect a vodhun shrine to establish and protect the new identity of his segment.[8] This is done by seeking the assistance of a diviner or another *huno* to acquire the basic and necessary knowledge. By contrast, those vodhun who have an enclosure are said to have revealed themselves spontaneously to the *fomé* of which they are now part. They also tend to be directly linked with the history of the village, to 'natural' and original settlement. Indeed, it is said that 'the vodhun have an enclosure (*hunkpamé*) if they have ancestors'. Needless to say, shrines with a *hunkpamé* are less common than those simply associated with each descent group of the village. In Atikesimé, there were two such shrines, one for Hevieso, the other for Eda. There were also a few scattered around the surrounding hamlets.

Other types of relationships between vodhun and human beings can be identified. Occasionally, people will be referred to as *vodhunvi*. The term, regardless of the age of the person to whom it is applied, imparts the meaning of 'the child of the vodhun' as well as 'the small vodhun', indicating a reflective relationship between them and a deity. These 'children' are generally devotees such as initiates, children categorised as anomalous in some way, and certain individuals identified, through divination, as being close to a deity.[9] Apart from being considered the children of the vodhun (*vodhunvi*), they will also be directly assimilated with it, being referred to, and addressed, as vodhun themselves. They are said to have been 'born with the vodhun'. In every such case, a shrine will have to be erected for the deity, and hence simultaneously for the child. Were such a child to die immediately after birth, the installation of a shrine would nevertheless remain imperative, lest the family be struck by misfortune and death. A member of the deceased's *fomé* would be designated to care for the shrine. There is no inheritance of the vodhun in this case.

Anomalous births are attributed to specific deities. Any breech delivery is ascribed to Lumo and, if a child is born with its feet first, Ago is said to be at work. Although receiving a first name of their own, these children will also be referred to as Lumosi or Agosi, hence indicating their direct affiliation with the deity.[10]

The link can be detected early in life, as in the cases mentioned above where the indications are physically apparent, but it can also

remain undetected for many years until the person becomes ill or perceives some other sign interpretable as a vodhun manifesting itself. Such signs signify a late indication of a state present since childhood. Divination is used to determine which deity is concerned and what type of action or affiliation might be required. This legitimation of one's status in relation to the vodhun is a recurring theme: the signs that one receives as an adult are taken as a manifestation of a permanent relationship with a deity of which humans have hitherto been unaware.

To be 'caught' (*tso*) by the vodhun to become an initiate or one of its children, or to be encouraged to become a cult leader, are actions attributed entirely to the will of the vodhun. Human intervention is said not to be part of this process. A sudden illness or violent trance may indicate the presence of the god, but it is said to have always been there. Its sudden manifestation occurs not on a whim, but as a sign of dissatisfaction over prolonged neglect. The verb *li* (to be, to exist) is used when referring to the vodhun, indicating a permanent presence.

Women who undergo initiation into one of the vodhun's secret societies will often relate the necessity for initiation to a sudden and violent, or progressive and prolonged, episode of illness, incurable elsewhere and finally diagnosed as the presence of a vodhun. Yet although belonging to a shrine often enhances the status of an initiate, vodhun are said to act entirely of their own volition and cannot act on command. They are said to be impervious to human attempts enticing them to strike with illness for the purpose of enhancing someone's status. Yet a powerful and successful trader once told me 'I would not be so successful if I did not belong to a shrine.' When I asked further 'Can women induce such illnesses to promote their business?', I was immediately told off. 'Of course not,' said my friend, 'it's the vodhun who decides. You don't have anything to do with it, it's simply to do with illness.' She paused to serve a customer, then added, 'It used to be like that though. Rich [women] traders could buy initiation. We don't do that now.'

Vodhun are present in people's lives through the mythical and particular attributes which help identify them, and also through the creation of analogies drawn between the deities and human beings, and from forces lying outside human control. Such analogies are used to gain knowledge of gods. 'Vodhun are like humans', said to live a life similar to that of humans. These analogies include, for example, references to the sexual attributes and gender of the deities, showing direct similarities to the sexuality and construction of gender prevalent among humans.

We have seen how relationships with vodhun come to be shaped through experiences of illness which often affect bodily functions,

and lead to a reorientation of social relationships. Yet vodhun are multi-faceted beings, representing and reflecting concepts of nature, gender, illness, earthly and cosmological belonging and location, and bringing into focus social relationships. Vodhun can be seen to bring (the categories of) nature and the wild to human consciousness by affecting individual bodies, yet also help to shape human understanding of gendered identity through the direct experience of vodhun.

In the case studies, Adjoa's, Ama's and Koffi's illnesses had all been attributed to cosmological agency, yet been directed to follow very different paths after diagnosis.

VODHUN, NATURE, GENDER

Anthropological literature abounds with ethnographies highlighting the presumed link between women and nature. Women menstruate, give birth, breastfeed and rear children. Like animals. Apart from their civilising influences, men's involvement in the making of human society contributes to the creation of culture and to the taming of women, rendering them less animal-like.[11] As and of themselves, women are incapable of such achievements and, if dragged along by men, can at best achieve a half-civilised state of being. Ethnographies of possession, not least, have often characterised such experiences as illness resulting from the social constraints put upon women as a direct consequence of their close association with nature.

Women are often directly associated with the wild. During their initiation, they are forced into the bush, enact rituals that emphasise this connection, and chant songs that directly acknowledge such an association. In secular contexts, women are sometimes referred to as wild animals, living in the bush, or men may say that they are 'going hunting' when engaging in amorous activities. Yet the metaphoric content of linguistic formulae, ritual actions, bodily practice and experience is difficult to reduce to representations of male superiority and female subordination.[12]

If women are associated with the bush, so are vodhun. Vodhun live in the wild, and their powers derive from forces associated with the wild, over which human beings have little control. Vodhun control the fertility of humans and land, fortune and misfortune, illness and death. Some are directly linked to specific illnesses, such as smallpox, Down's syndrome, swelling of the body. These illnesses are considered 'natural', since no human agency is involved. This link with 'nature' is further emphasised through the 'naturalness' of vodhun, which simply exist as metaphysical entities. However, these

relationships are made more complex by the agency of humans, which is fundamental to bringing their gods to life.

This association of vodhun with nature by no means depreciates their value or gives them a status inferior to that of human beings or, in particular, to men. The creation of culture is an act involving men and women alike. Gender divisions do exist, and determine the different involvement of men and women inside vodhun cults. These positions are highly specialised, and form a complex organisational structure that draws upon kinship ideology, religion and gender relationships.

4 GROUNDING VODHUN, UNMAKING GENDER

If clay provides the idiom for ensuring the existence and regeneration of all earthly human life, the pots produced by women serve another purpose outside the strictly domestic realm of nurturing. The universe itself is imaged as an upturned pot, containing deities, humans and all natural elements, and all vodhun shrines are topped with an upside-down pot representing this containment. Clay pots are, in addition, an essential element in shaping the cosmological and terrestrial existence of vodhun themselves, as they are used in the constitution and grounding of deities in the human community. They constitute the primary material object used in the process of locating the gods inside the shrines erected on their behalf.

Significantly, the sexual idioms used to describe the conjoining of men and women at their most intimate are extended to encompass one of the most important relationships in the religious domain, namely that between devotees and vodhun during acts of possession. Women who are possessed consider the gods to be their partners in a cosmological marriage, and they are readily penetrated, having their flesh 'entered into' and mounted by the deities. Devotees are described as the spouses (*vodhunsi*) of the gods, although such unions do not preclude human alliances. Yet if women are invaded in this way, possession remains one of the most potent avenues for grounding the deities among humans, and involving them in acts of communication. Women become the pots into which the vodhun descend and are contained, allowing gods to dwell inside in an act of expressive and regenerative copulation enabling the perpetuation of cosmos through human action and cooperation, while the human universe is ensured continuation through divine intervention and approval. By the same token, women are able to 'speak their gods' (*fo vodhun*) during possession, entering into an altered state of consciousness which allows them to perceive and convey the wishes of their gods and, more poignantly perhaps, to acquire their identities through the merging of bodily and spiritual substances. Indeed, women devotees are sometimes referred to, and directly addressed

by the name 'Vodhun', indicating a total amalgamation and appropriation of conjoined identities.

Vodhun abduct their devotees in the same way as men are said to abduct their future wives. The twist, however, is significant: women may be abducted by their gods during possession, leading to a lack of control and submission to the whims of the gods, but vodhun in their shrines are themselves contained in pots made by women, and women also become their containers when possessed, thus making this relationship highly dualistic and malleable. The generation and re-enactment of the world through acts of cosmic copulation transcend and merge human and divine identities.

Women could perhaps best be described as the containers of life and, to an extent, of cosmos, since they provide the raw material for the (pro-)creation and perpetuation of the life of human beings, while also representing the ultimate containers for the gods. However, they are more than simple receptacles of male semen and cosmic vodhun, since they themselves provide the original container and substance through which vodhun and humans are created in the first place, namely the blood of procreation whose redness[1] is mirrored in the pots which they carry, represent and create, all reflecting processes orchestrated by the rhythmic recycling of *Boméno* herself.

The nature of initiates' and devotees' relationship with their deities, which is primarily enacted through initiation and possession, sets them very much apart from uninitiated members of the Watchi community. Nevertheless, all women are considered potential targets of the vodhun's attentions, and some 60 to 70 per cent of women adhere to secret societies. Seen in a wider context, possession is a mode of expressing a specific locality (Werbner 1977). In this case, the exclusive relationship between women and vodhun is an extension of their involvement in creating a sense of belonging to the territory which the Watchi appear to have occupied since the seventeenth century. Identifying locality and maintaining a sense of belonging are highly predicated upon female possession.

Vodhun are generally characterised by their 'natural' features, and their closeness to what is perceived to lie outside human control. They are fundamentally tied to natural and pre-social habitats located outside human settlements, in the wild bush (*gbeme*) which constitutes the primary dwelling places of untamed animals hunted for meat. For instance, Sakpata, vodhun of smallpox or other outwardly similar diseases causing eruptions on the skin, is said to reside in the earth. Some of my informants would show me the ground, or grab a handful of dust, when talking about him. Significantly, Sakpata is also referred to by the name vodhun Anyigbato, the 'owner of the earth', and is closely associated with new

settlements, but also with displacements of population. As a disease, smallpox is believed to reside in the earth, and former epidemics affecting large numbers of the population were attributed to the wrath of Sakpata, often leading to the relocation of entire communities seeking refuge elsewhere. Vodhun Toxosu is associated with fresh water, rivers and waterways, and is believed to cause encephalitis and other forms of swelling, while Mami Wata is said to dwell in the sea. Others seem on first examination to be less directly associated with place, such as Hevieso, linked to thunder, lightning and violent storms; Eda, represented by the python but also by the rainbow, and Ga, the deity of iron. These latter more abstract links to locality far from preclude such vodhun from becoming highly localised and situated on earth. As god of thunder and lightning, Hevieso is said to manifest itself to humans in the shape of monolithic stones strewn across the landscape, Eda the python and rainbow straddles the universe by planting its tail in water while grazing the earth for food, and is said to reside in large (baobab) trees, and a find of iron ore will indicate the presence of Ga. Such relationships to natural features of the environment are iconographic and also metonymic. Material features such as these are used to represent deities at a metaphorical level, but they are, in themselves, also imbued with the power of the god. The relationship is therefore dualistic and interactive since the material object itself is both essence and representation.

In their cosmological manifestation, vodhun are said not to be of much use to humans. They are neither particularly vengeful nor benign in their intentions, but possess a propensity for mischief and the infliction of misfortune. Yet vodhun cannot be invoked or propitiated by humans in this original, neutral, state. Prayers cannot be offered, nor sacrifices be made, to a deity in this free-floating, cosmological ether. In order to become more accessible to the needs and demands of humans, and in order for its own expectations to be satisfied, a vodhun must be brought to earth, and grounded in particular locations for its wrath to subside and its powers to be fully brought to bear on humans. The action of situating the gods in this way has to be performed by humans themselves, and involves gods and humans in a mutual process of creation. This grounding process is achieved primarily through the installation of a shrine acknowledging the location of the deity on the site, an action which also incorporates the use of clay, plants, animals and medicines in the making of an effigy of, and for, the deity (see Rivière 1981, de Surgy 1994). As a result, the dialectical relationship whereby humans situate their gods on earth implicitly and explicitly engages humans in a relationship that portrays the socialisation of nature, and whereby the positioning of a vodhun partly signifies the appropria-

tion of nature, in the form of clay, plants and animals. However, nature is more than simply socialised in the process and for the purpose of creating cosmos, since it is simultaneously transformed into a habitable landscape and, by the same token, serves to locate humans in a metaphysical and cosmological landscape (Århem 1998, Ottino 1998, Toren 1995). The identities of nature, humans and vodhun are all transformed through these exchanges of substances. How, then, is a site selected? And what does the installation of a shrine involve?

Those who recount incidents when they have suffered the wrath of their gods insist that the vodhun themselves feel the need to be remembered. The most common occurrence described is that of a vodhun manifesting itself through punitive action (Augé 1988). The Watchi often make reference to violent possession trances, to unknown and lengthy episodes of illness, or to inexplicable misfortune and loss of wealth as finally being attributed to the interference of a vodhun. Other, equally dramatic events, can alert humans to a deity's presence. For instance, some may manifest themselves directly, without the use of illness or possession as an intermediary. Informants have recounted how, when out walking, they may have stumbled across a Neolithic stone that proved to be Hevieso (the object is believed to have fallen from the sky during a storm), or come across a natural axe blade signifying the presence of Ga, god of iron. Mami Wata is encountered in waterways, in the guise of a white mermaid, and the sighting of a python in a baobab tree reveals Eda, the rainbow. In all such cases, shrines for the deity concerned will need to be erected in a relevant location, defined partly by the action or event related to the identity of the vodhun itself (the location of a shrine to Hevieso, for instance, could be designated as the place where a thunderbolt has struck), and partly by the mode of its manifestation.

Once a link between deity and human has been indicated in one such way, the installation of a shrine will normally be required. A diviner will direct the afflicted individual to an already established cult leader who will, for a fee, help establish a new shrine in the client's name. Although this process of establishing shrines technically and originally duplicates the identity of the already existing deity and its cult leader, vodhun do over time evolve personalities of their own (see also de Surgy 1994), a process tightly linked with the identities of their human counterparts.

The processes involved in grounding vodhun on earth, making them amenable to worship and propitiation, and responsive to humans' quest for protection, are partly intended to domesticate the unpredictability of deities, transforming their primeval association with the wild and undomesticated bush into a relationship where

humans wield enhanced control over their gods. This process is, in itself, highly gendered as it engages Watchi men and women in distinctly codified relationships with their deities, while also transforming human identities through this contact. I have so far explored the association of vodhun with natural features of the landscape, such as the earth itself, trees, rivers, stones and natural phenomena such as thunder and lightning, and how humans conceptualise locality through the use of a wide category of nature. These elements have been described as necessary for the communication of humans and deities, but also as a precondition for human settlement. I now turn to the gendered grounding of gods in the society of humans.

OF GODS AND CONTAINERS: POSSESSION AND TRANSCENDENCE

Spirit possession features prominently in Watchi religious experience, beliefs and ritual practices. Adherence to the shrines dedicated to these deities can take many forms, and possession (and subsequent initiation to secret societies associated with this phenomenon) constitutes one form of worship among many others. Spirit possession is experienced primarily by women, and some 95 per cent of devotees to cults of possession are women. It can occur at any stage in a woman's life, although most episodes of possession seem to take place in adolescence and early adulthood. I estimate that in the village where my first fieldwork was conducted, approximately 60 per cent of the female population had been initiated into cults of spirit possession.

My particular interest in this context lies in the examination of what spirit possession communicates in Watchi sociality. I will explore the links between the experience of possession and initiation into secret societies associated with particular deities, and the role that kinship plays in defining individual relationships to these deities. I will also be concerned with the ways in which possession is a constitutive process that serves to shape concepts of individual and social self, and that also plays on constructs of otherness. Boddy's (1988, 1989) point that Hofriyati possession helps create a gendered, female understanding of a moral self through its mirroring in images of spiritual otherness is useful in this context. However, the outcome of this reflection is fundamentally different in the Watchi case, since women do not come away with an image of themselves that inherently enhances their gendered identity simply as women. Rather, they appear to highlight a more composite social identity, as will become clear later. What sense of self is created through possession? What, and

who, do spirits represent? And how is otherness understood and conveyed in Watchi cosmology and sociality?

UNRULY WILDERNESS AND BODILY INSCRIPTIONS

As a general phenomenon, possession has already received considerable attention, and theories relating to its structure (Bourguignon 1973, Eliade 1964, de Heusch 1981), function (Constantinides 1985, Gellner 1994, Gussler 1973, Lewis 1971, 1991) and, more recently, meaning, experience and knowledge (Boddy 1989, 1994, Crapanzano 1977, 1980, Irvine 1982, Lambek 1980, 1981, 1988, Zempléni 1977) have proliferated over the past 30 years.

Most writers seem to agree that possession corresponds to an altered state of consciousness (Bourguignon 1973, Crapanzano 1977, Rouget 1985, Ward 1989), although this definition has more recently been subject to criticism due, primarily, to the wide range of altered states of consciousness which may manifest themselves in ways other than possession and trance (see Lévy et al. 1996). Furthermore, an overemphasis on the definitional aspects of what constitutes altered states of consciousness may lead to an analysis devoid of social context, focusing on mental processes rather than on the social production of meaning and intersubjective communication (Chandra shekar 1989, Ward 1989). While attention was mainly focused, in earlier writings, on establishing a universalistic explanatory model[2] in order to delineate and understand what constitutes possession as a phenomenon, the emphasis has now shifted to a socially situated understanding of its occurrence (see Boddy 1994 for a comprehensive review of theoretical approaches). Possession has thus lost its place as a central paradigm for theoretical extrapolation, in order to become positioned within a wider societal and theoretical framework.

As has been pointed out in recent writings, the experience of possession is in many ways inherently linked to concepts and constructs of selfhood (see in particular Boddy 1988, 1989, Kramer 1993, Lambek 1981, 1988), and comes to articulate the individual construction of the self while simultaneously socialising it, and shaping it to conform to external moral codes and social norms. The experience of possession is thus highly individual since it directly affects the body. However, although enacted by and through the self, the experience simultaneously remains highly codified, since it inscribes messages on to the body of the possessed which reflect existing social codes, and contribute to their maintenance and perpetuation (Besnier 1996, Boddy 1988, 1989, 1994, Kapferer 1983, Lambek 1980, 1988; and see Peters and Price-Williams 1980, on

shamanism). The body may thus be seen as the seat of subjective experiences, which are intersubjectively enacted, since they reflect social norms and values. Yet, rather than simply reproducing meaning, the body also becomes an active agent in the production of social knowledge (Jenkins and Valiente 1994: 163–5, Lyon and Barbalet 1994: 50–1, Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, 1990).

Importantly, if possession serves to mould, create and reify specific notions of self deemed important to the communal construction of society, it also highlights exegetic notions of otherness. Spirits, as cosmological beings outside the realm of common, everyday, human experience, often threaten the ordered moral universe: through possession, they can enter an enclosed, bounded and sealed space (the body and, by extension, society), endanger its morality and jeopardise the ordinary, and ordered, sense of self. Significantly, however, this sense of otherness is also inherently part of the self, which can always be undone, remodelled and reshaped through external agency and life events (see also Kramer 1993). Spirits, and the havoc they might inflict, are therefore fundamental to maintaining a sense of self, precisely through their otherness and their inverted moral codes. Since women are, universally, more prone to becoming possessed, it has recently been argued that they are targeted by spirits not because they are women, but that they become women, and obtain their gendered identity, through the experience of possession (see Boddy 1988, 1994, Kratz 1994, Lambek 1981).

How well does this apply to possession by vodhun? It is certainly the case that these deities, as spirits, represent an identity outside the human self and, as such, are potentially threatening to the ordered and social moral code. Spirits descend upon humans and make them do things that are unintentional and, sometimes, dangerous, immoral and reprehensible, thus reversing the common understanding and adherence to rules and codes. They easily fit into the analytical category of the 'other'. However, although it is indeed the case that most of the possessed are women, possession does not convincingly appear constitutive of a specifically female exegetic gendered identity. In this chapter I shall address how deities, and the multiple gendered identities attributed to them, interact with an understanding of human gender, which is both confirmed and dislodged, in the context of possession.

Possession, however, is far from being a hegemonic experience, and is subject to several and distinct levels of explanation. As I have already mentioned, it is partly attributed to changes in the construction of selfhood. Yet it is also linked, by the Watchi, to discourses about kinship, the construction and understanding of a wider human identity, and also to the shifts and changes that occur in social and spiritual relationships through the mediating agency

of spirits. Possession is therefore, in addition to its phenomenological aspects, a form of communication embedded in the semantic negotiation of social meaning (see Besnier 1996, Irvine 1982, Parkin 1991a). Therefore, since possession is instrumental in redefining social relationships, and in altering the status of individuals, I shall explore what it means to become possessed, and how this experience alters the relationships between genders and, also, between those women who have and those who have not undergone initiation as a result of possession.

Vodhun are endowed with a spirit capable of entering human bodies, thus possessing them (*tso*, literally 'to snatch').[3] The polytheistic nature of the wider complex of Ewe religion has already attracted much attention (Augé 1988, Barber 1990, Maupoil 1943, Rivière 1981, de Surgy 1988, and Verger 1957 on the neighbouring *orisa* of the Yoruba). Gods are characterised by their distinct identities, partly defined by the identity of their guardians, and by their propensity to inflict illness upon humans when dissatisfied with the level of attention which they receive. Specific vodhun are linked with particular illnesses: Sakpata, for instance, is the patron of smallpox or other outwardly similar diseases affecting the surface of the skin, Toxosu is said to control encephalitis, Down's syndrome, the birth of albino children and other 'anomalous' human categories, Hevieso is linked with severe swelling of the limbs and certain forms of paralysis, Mami Wata generates wealth, and can thus also be the cause of ruinous financial ventures and other types of misfortunes if dissatisfied. Afflictions suffered by members of the community can therefore be attributed to cosmological agency. Possession, in its first symptomatic manifestation, is treated as a cosmologically induced affliction.

However obvious discourses of health and illness may become in the a posteriori reconstruction and justification given to explain the occurrence of possession, the composite identity, agency and powers of the gods cannot be subjected to such simple reductionism (for a critique of naturalistic explanations of possession see Boddy 1994, Csordas 1987, Lambek 1989, Lévy et al. 1996). While there exists an explicit correspondence between some vodhun and specific illnesses there are, nevertheless, many deities which bear no such associations, and which may manifest themselves in ways that exclude the idioms of illness and possession. Most importantly, however, Watchi discourses about their gods transcend this basic concern with health and illness. Although some vodhun are, at one level, immediately recognised through these direct associations with specific illnesses, there exist other, equally exegetic, discourses to explain the presence of vodhun, the occurrence of possession and the influence each of

these phenomena exerts on social relationships. The existence of vodhun, and the manifestation of possession, have to be understood in a context wider than mere aetiology of illness, however tempting such reductionism may be.

Vodhun can be divided into two categories, but such a distinction is strictly analytical. The first category represents all deities in the larger cosmology, scattered through Watchi and the larger Ewe territory, but without any particular location enabling direct worship. The second category of deities, comprising a much smaller pool of vodhun extracted from the first, are represented on earth by effigies, altars, stones, animal skins (such as alligators, leopards, pythons) or other devices, providing humans with an identifiable object and place of worship. Any deity in the first category could be brought down to earth, so to speak, by becoming relevant to a particular individual or group of individuals, who would then install an altar on its behalf. Thus vodhun are subject to a constant flow of exchange and interaction with their human counterparts, processes which enable them to become spiritually viable and substantiated on earth. It could be said, although this remain a highly theoretical point, that vodhun are best viewed as gods when dwelling in their unattainable cosmos, while they become endowed with a spirit once they are worshipped by humans. Since vodhun are, to paraphrase McCarthy-Brown (1989, see also Barnes 1989), constantly (re-) invented through systematic forgetting and strategic remembering, the spirit of the deity which possesses humans is thus socially activated depending on its propensity, and ability, to fulfil human needs. Vodhun, and the shrines erected for them by humans, can further be divided into personal and collective shrines. Personal shrines are installed and catered for by individual members of the community, and are normally destroyed or simply left to degenerate after the death of the keeper. These shrines do not contain enclosures for the initiation of devotees into secret societies, and no possession takes place within their confines. By contrast, collective shrines are associated with vodhun deemed to entertain a relationship with the founding ancestors of the locality, and it is within these shrines that possession, initiation into secret societies, and the activities of membership take place.[4] The act of possession enables the deities to become detached from the metaphysical realm which they normally inhabit, bringing them down to earth, for them to be contained in human form for the duration of the trance. This allows them to express their wishes through the women whom they inhabit, and to receive, in exchange, a direct act of devotion.

The following scenario is described as a common manifestation of the presence of a vodhun: a woman or young girl will suddenly enter into a violent trance, her eyes bulging, her limbs flailing

around her body, her mouth contorted in a rictus of pain and surprise, with foam sometimes dripping down from her lips.[5] Onlookers can readily identify this as the onslaught of an attack by spirits. During this initial trance, no-one will usually interfere, as the identity of the particular vodhun involved is as yet unknown. The woman will be left to experience her possession to the full, there will be no music, no chanting, nor any accompaniment by other women prone to being possessed. Some older women in the community may attend her, protecting her from being physically hurt during the trance, preventing her from running into trees, buildings or other potentially dangerous structures in her path. The vodhun causing the episode of possession is believed to lead its future initiate to a shrine bearing its name. The woman or girl simply follows the path indicated to her by the spirit. Once she has arrived at the designated shrine, she collapses in exhaustion. Formal initiation into the secret society[6] of the vodhun which has just made itself known to her must take place, and will usually begin a few days later, once the feeling of exhaustion associated with the original episode of possession has subsided. The uncontrolled, violent trance thus experienced is essential to the identification of the deity concerned, and will be left to run its course as a matter of principle, until the deity in question has been identified. It will, however, in future be replaced by a more purposeful and controlled trance, occurring primarily during ceremonial rituals in honour of the vodhun. Any further uncontrolled trance experienced by the same devotee after initiation will be seen as an indication of a breach of taboo, or as a new demand being made by another god.

Failure to acknowledge the presence of a deity will lead to ever more powerful attacks of possession, ultimately resulting in death if no positive action is undertaken to formalise the relationship between vodhun as spirit, and devotee as recipient, through institutionalised initiation. However, since the formal acknowledgement of this bond is generally extremely onerous, such an enterprise tends to be postponed until the episodes of possession or misfortune become debilitating, no longer enabling their host or victim to function normally in a social context. The formalisation of the bond between vodhun and afflicted through initiation thus confirms their respective commitment to the establishment of a long-term relationship, where the interests of both parties can be served and, above all, negotiated over time. In addition, this process integrates the afflicted into a community of ex-patients (see also Corin 1979: 330).

If violent possession trance is considered by the Watchi an indicator of a vodhun's presence, it is only one among several other triggers for initiation. As has been noted, prolonged illness, repeated experiences of misfortune or the inheritance of a spirit, are all

pathways which may lead to a more formalised and socially sanctioned link to a deity and its spirit. The procedure for identifying a vodhun is quite different in this context, as it will involve the use of divination. Once a devotee identified in this latter way has become initiated into her god's secret society she, too, will be prone to possession by spirits, legitimating her status as a 'spouse' to the deity. After initiation, possession is seen strictly as a form of communication with the cosmological realm.

TRANSGRESSING GODS

Vodhun are described as regulating social relationships and providing humans with appropriate protection. However, heads of households, religious leaders, healers and other individuals inclined to erect shrines for these deities are continuously involved in boosting the power of their own god through the use of medicinal plants, and the offering of sacrifices and libations, and openly acknowledge that while vodhun are omnipotent and permeate all life, humans have the ability to locate them and make them work to one's advantage. Some individuals are thus involved in providing a more specific place for the gods. Indeed, although vodhun are said to exist independently at a metaphysical level, and irrespective of human involvement, they can only be propitiated and asked for assistance once an effigy has been constructed for them and been duly protected by a surrounding shrine (for more detail see Barber 1981, Lovell 1993). Another form of identifying and 'locating' vodhun is through possession and initiation. Women who become possessed are said to provide the deities with a receptacle. One of the idioms referred to, that women are the pots which the vodhun enters, *nyonua so kple eze, Vodhun ge de eme eze*, parallels other analogies made by the Watchi which equate a woman's uterus to a pot, *eze*, and further describe the state of pregnancy as one where pots/women are completely full, *eze le dogba* (see Chapter 2). Another idiom used to refer to possession describes the woman as being ridden by the deity like a horse *Vodhun la do lãme nu*, which has overt sexual connotations, and finds a parallel in the act of copulation between spouses, as the same turn of phrase is used in such contexts.

Vodhun are seen as gendered entities: they are referred to as being either male (*ntsu*), female (*nyonu*), or both. However, the latter definition is highly situational: some vodhun are acknowledged to have dual gender identities, but these properties can come to operate at different times. Such vodhun are often described as being 'sometimes male, sometimes female' or, alternatively, as being 'male and female at the same time'. In prayers and sacrifices, the male and

female sides can be addressed jointly or independently (Vodhun Sotowo being one example). Most vodhun, however, are readily identified as being single sexed, and are always accompanied, cosmologically and in their shrines, by a spouse of the opposite sex. Thus Hevieso, male god of thunder and lightning, and Agbi, female deity of blood, form a pair. Mami Wata is unequivocally female, but has a male guardian and counterpart, Sogbo. Vodhun Sotowo is considered to have a male and a female side, while Sakpata, god of smallpox, is sometimes described as having dual sexual attributes, and sometimes considered to be only male.This situational codification is also dependent on temporal dimensions: Sakpata is described as being mostly male during the daytime, while it (I use the ungendered and neutral pronoun with intent in this context) transforms itself at will at night, appearing to humans either as an old man or decrepit woman, furtively walking down isolated paths.[7] The possibility of an encounter with a vodhun is framed within a sexual context, and likened to the action of 'seeing the [male or female] genitals of the god' (*kpo vodhun fwe avha* or *kpo vodhun fwe mo*). While walking with a friend, we once came across an untidy, unkept and crumbling shrine, eroded by rain and wind, which elicited Garbiel to exclaim: 'Il doit faire attention celui-là, on voit le sexe de son vodhun.' Seeing the genitals of a deity is considered highly inappropriate, and sanctionable. Vodhun are to be protected from the human gaze, appearing to them only on structured, highly regulated and codified occasions such as rituals or during specific propitiations, and at the gods' initiative. Any other type of encounter would lead to illness, unpredictable trance, or death if left unchecked.

Thus vodhun adhere to multiple gender categories, and can play on these identities when revealing themselves to humans. There is, in this context, an element of unpredictability, since it is the gods, not humans, that select the guise under which they desire to be seen. In possession, this is highly significant, since gods with such dual sexual identities can alternate between these when entering the body of their host. Admittedly, deities with a single sexual identity, such as the male Hevieso, or the female Mami Wata, are not subject to such reversals. However, their spiritual spouse (Agbi in the case of Hevieso, and Sogbo for Mami Wata) will be present as a possessing spirit to represent their other sex.

Women who come to experience possession subsequently refer to this as a life-changing event. However, although most of the 20 or so initiates I spoke to during fieldwork described this in terms of health, affliction and their relationships to the vodhun, it is also clear that the implications of initiation and the change in status that it brings have far-reaching consequences in redefining human rela-

tionships. In this sense, beyond the individual transformation in identity and subjective experience affected through the process of initiation, this affiliation to a vodhun's secret society mediates other transformations at a societal level, simultaneously rearranging the relationships between men and women, and altering those between women who have, and those who have not, undergone initiation.

In their public interaction with one another, men and women tend to entertain relatively easy-going relationships. For instance, jokes are openly made as to the marital status of a new acquaintance, and both men and women frequently engage in making advances to members of the opposite sex. Both can jokingly and publicly address each other as *sronye!*, 'my spouse!' even if already married to other partners. Meeting a good friend with whom one might entertain a future (sometimes illicit) relationship often prompts utterances such as *made srõ* (literally 'let me take you', an expression with overtly sexual overtones), a term generally used when proposing marriage to someone, and used by members of either sex.[8] The marketplace is seen as a meeting ground for amorous pursuits, and market day was anticipated with great excitement by the young in particular, who often referred to this place with a hint of mischief. Obviously, although not all Watchi men and women go to market in order to find a partner or a lover to engage in licit or illicit relationships, this is still considered by most as an area where such activities are commonly expected, and publicly acknowledged, regularly giving rise to gossip and acute observation of one another's behaviour. In private, however, relationships between men and women tend to be more strictly codified.

Women in general are sometimes referred to by men as 'being like bats' (*aguto*), which connotes their provenance from the bush (*gbeme*) and areas which lie outside of human space, but also refers to their perceived propensity for promiscuity and inconstancy in their relationships with men, borne out by high instability in marriage: 'Like bats, women will go and hang on other trees[9] when bored or unhappy.' Women are not only said to be prone to committing adultery, doing so also seems to return them, in the eyes of men, to the realm of untamed habitat and, by association, an untamed state of existence similar to that of animals. On several occasions during fieldwork, I overheard men use another common association, particularly in conversations held among themselves and in relating amorous pursuits, which describes women as *gbemelã*, 'animals of the bush' or, literally, 'meat of the bush', an association which, in such contexts, firmly positions women in the realm of the 'bush', *gbeme*, the space normally inhabited by wild animals which are hunted by men. An unfaithful woman is said to 'put her foot in the bush' (*da afo le gbeme*), implying that for a woman to engage in

extra-marital sex involves her in asocial (pre-social) behaviour.[10] However, for a man to address or refer directly to an initiate or devotee of the vodhun as *gbemelã* would be considered such an insult that the offender could be punished by death. On one occasion, when discussing this issue with me, three of my male informants found the insult itself so embarrassing that they could barely utter the words to me. One of them suggested that to directly liken any woman, but particularly an initiate or devotee, to an animal of the bush was extremely insulting, as it intimated that women would copulate on all fours, a sign of bestiality, and give birth like animals. The close bond between initiates and divinities heightened the seriousness of the insult, but also provided these women with enhanced protection from the gods.

The relationship between men and women seems to undergo an important transformation through the process of initiation and access to acceptable forms of possession. More impunity seems to apply when the woman's status remains entirely secular. In the first instance, the position of initiates seems to be enhanced by the cosmological protection afforded through initiation and membership of a vodhun's secret society, both in their relationship with men and in relation to other, non-initiated women. Insults should never be (but regularly are!) conferred on a woman, it is said, regardless of her social and religious status. I witnessed a purification ceremony where an initiate had been insulted by her husband, who had ordered her to 'eat excrement' (*edu mi*), another of the most demeaning insults the Watchi know. She had, by this action, become polluted, and could not proceed with her initiatory process until her husband had paid for her to be purified. He had refused to do so for a long time, and the longer the delay, the more expensive the requirements for purification. In the end, both sets of relatives joined forces to entice him to proceed. Part of the ritual involved the initiate walking about the village for two days denouncing the husband for his action, insulting him heartily in the process, deriding his physical appearance, sexual attributes and prowess, and ascribing to him all the evils in the world. In another incident, a dispute erupted between two women in the marketplace, one of them a devotee. The dispute escalated to a feverish pitch, both of them screaming at each other and attracting the attention (and condemnation) of many onlookers as the devotee was almost publicly disrobed by her antagonist. Many of the women present refused to side with either of them in terms of the argument itself, but strongly condemned the non-initiate and forcibly pulled her away from the scene as 'she did not know what she was doing'. Undressing a devotee is tantamount to heresy, and would almost certainly have killed both women, I was told.

While women in general were commonly depreciated by men for being unreliable in their emotional attachments, and were considered prone to infidelity, these descriptions also tended to be ambiguous. *Gbemelã*, animals (meat) of the bush, are a coveted prize, gained through the acquisition of hunting skills, and conferring considerable social prestige upon successful men. Equally, hunting or pursuing women provides prestige, especially if such pursuit results in marriage. However, women, like animals, have the propensity to run away. Equating women with animals in such circumstances conveys a clear ambiguity: that while animals of the bush and women are perceived as disorganised and asocial in the way in which they form relationships and procreate, they are also the ultimate intermediary through which men gain prestige. And while men acquire prestige through their active participation in the hunt, they always remain one step behind their prey. Women, in effect, like animals, are making the running, and men can only follow.

An added element of excitement in the hunt is directly linked to men's amorous pursuit and conquest of devotees of the vodhun. These women are considered the ultimate prey, are very hotly pursued, yet held in awe because of the taboos and restrictions attached to their personae. They are described by most people around them, men and women alike, as extremely flirtatious, seductive and enticing to men. The scarifications, hairstyles and ornaments worn by devotees were deemed by men to be powerfully attractive. Indeed, one of my informants even complained that 'the vodhun always take the most beautiful girls', thus competing with men in the realm of seduction and courtship. Another of my male informants, known for his intractable attraction to women, described to me his persistent yet always cautious advances to several devotees. He stated that, since many of the taboos are unknown to lay people (or so it is claimed), one has to tread carefully. There was a clearly implicit message in his utterance: devotees may refer to their taboos when personally dissatisfied, thus invoking spiritual impediments to frame their own personal preferences, regardless of whether such taboos existed or not. The game of seduction and courtship between devotees and men, the great majority of whom are not devotees of vodhun secret societies, is thus enthralling and fraught with danger. Yet, marrying a devotee confers enhanced status on the husband, and many of the most prominent men in the village were married to devotees. The chief's polygynous household comprised three wives, all of them members of secret societies. Three of my four co-wives were devotees of the shrine of Dairo, and Kpaka, their husband, was a highly regarded elder. Having undertaken such a step, the husband also commits himself to a relationship with his wife's spirit, whose taboos and demands he, too, has to respect and honour.

There is an irony in this, since vodhun are themselves considered to be wild, untamed and potentially highly dangerous through their unpredictable and undomesticated behaviour. Vodhun, in their natural state, are to be found outside inhabited space, at crossroads, and in solitary places not easily accessible to humans. They are, as we have seen, closely associated with natural features of the landscape such as wild bush, rivers, streams, large trees, and certain animals such as the python, crocodiles, leopards and other potent creatures. Devotees, through their inherent link with, and possession by, vodhun, are thus both closer to nature than men (to paraphrase Ortner 1974) and, at the same time, more highly cultured, since initiation and membership into the secret societies are also considered as the ultimate achievements in terms of knowledge and status.[11] Vodhun are wild and amoral, yet they also represent and help define spiritual power and ultimate morality. Men's involvement in hunting women helps to 'locate' them (through marriage and, ideally, virilocal settlement), to stabilise their presence within the confines of inhabited space. Importantly, the same applies to deities: vodhun can only be propitiated and worshipped once they have been 'grounded' in a shrine, and their presence as a particular deity been marked by an altar which differentiates it from the amorphous mass of largely unidentified beings populating the wider Watchi cosmology. While women themselves act as containers for vodhun during possession (a relationship defined as a marital union), women are in turn contained through men's actions upon them in amorous and marital relationships. However, the direct association established between women and vodhun through possession also serves to channel the deities' spiritual and, at times, punitive powers against men who have abused and offended women. A dissatisfied vodhun, like women, can ultimately desert the community, leaving havoc behind. Both women and vodhun have the power to punish men. An association with the vodhun thus inherently alters a husband's relationship to his wife (see also Lambek 1981).

Where men are concerned, nature, women, gods and the wild represent the highly fertile landscape where game can be acquired and prestige secured. And, while the wild areas of the bush are populated by vodhun, game and, potentially, women, who always show a propensity for preferring such habitat, the pinnacle of culture and status is also associated with these areas. Women have a priviledged access to knowledge of vodhun through the very nature of their (achieved) identity, and are therefore elevated precisely through this association with the wild. The bush may well be pre-social and unruly, but power also inheres in chaos (cf. Parkin 1985a). By locating herbs in clay, trees in pots, vodhun in shrines and

children in wombs, men enact their attemps at containing what might otherwise always run away. Vodhun might suddenly abandon a community, and women cut across territories through the various tasks they perform – the collection of wood and water, tending to fields or entering a trance – through virilocal settlement upon marriage, or by being taken away and becoming the spouse of a deity. Men and vodhun thus compete with one another for the attention and devotion of women, but men ultimately always comply with the wishes of their gods, as these provide the ultimate blessing legitimating settlement.

Possession, as a general phenomenon, thus involves vodhun, humans and trance (as specific experience) in a set of dialectical exchanges which serve to (re-)define relationships between humans and the cosmos, and between humans intersubjectively. More specifically, possession can be seen as regulating behaviour between devotee and deity, between humans, but also between different categories of gendered persons. At this stage, the term 'possession' needs to be further deconstructed, as there are clear indications that it involves at least three distinct sets of metamorphoses. We have seen how trance itself changes in character and content, involving, in its original manifestation, an uncontrolled experience that cannot be attributed to any particular spirit. As the possessed gains experience, through initiation, her relationship to spirit and body will change: she will experience more 'controlled' physical manifestations of possession through this act of communication with an identifiable deity, and this in turn will publicly testify to her long-term commitment to this relationship. The concept of possession is therefore not static, but follows a progression of events and requirements which alter the meaning of the experience for the devotee herself, but also for those observing her. The meaning attributed to possession is therefore partly dictated by devotee and audience in their observation of the performance of trance at public events. As Irvine (1982: 257) observes: 'interpretation is a creative process ... involving active collusion among participants'.[12]

A second transformation is affected in the identity of vodhun themselves: through possession, each vodhun is allowed to 'come to earth', and thus acquires an identity directly experienced by its devotees. The vodhun thus becomes human, in both metaphorical and physical terms: the devotees act as human containers for the deities, providing them with an identifiable and bounded body. Being brought down to earth in this way enables vodhun to acquire a more specific identity which differentiates it, at the particular juncture when possession occurs, from other cosmological entities which are not involved in possession at that particular point in time. Vodhun are publicly displayed, an act crucial to the proper acknowl-

edgement of their existence and continued potency. Possession enables vital substances to flow and be exchanged between humans and gods, in the process ensuring their respective survival. Finally, humans are themselves transformed: at the individual level, initiation re-orders the identity of the possessed from passive victims of trance to active devotees of a vodhun, securing future health and prosperity. The devotee's spiritual status is also altered: she is now able to appropriate the identity and attributes of the deity, in the process transforming herself into her god. She also becomes its mouthpiece, able to communicate with the cosmological realm, and able to mediate these messages to fellow humans.

In the long term, this type of possession, achieved through initiation, is the only form which is acceptable to humans, since only this can be of use to the community at large. However, the devotee's position is altered in other ways: her social relationships prior to initiation are redefined and remodelled after the event. Devotees refer to themselves as being closer to the divine, as being particularly able to communicate with vodhun, and therefore as being of use to others. They often claim for themselves a higher status than non-initiated women, who are (as yet?) unable to become possessed. Life with the vodhun is often portrayed by devotees as blissful, free from illness, misfortune, and general trouble. As one of them said to me, 'Having vodhun makes your heart happy.'

However, this self-image is disputed by non-initiates, who perceive themselves as free from the spiritual and social constraints imposed by the gods: they have no taboos to abide by, and they do not fear the insults that men can sometimes direct at women. They are also freer to respond to such insults without the interference of the gods, or the requirement for their protection. Finally, experience and knowledge of possession also alters devotees' relationships with men. While the devotees' higher spiritual status most often acts as a protection against abuse (and while most men who marry initiates did, by their own accord, admit to me that they sometimes needed to tread with care), it also confers upon them an enhanced vulnerability to the unpredictability of marital relationships. Similarly, men who marry devotees, or who see their wives experience trance for the first time and engage in subsequent initiation, also perceive themselves as being more vulnerable to the deities' punitive actions, even though these men are also, as I have noted, socially and politically more empowered through their wives' association with the cosmological realm.

At a most pragmatic level, gender relations are fundamentally altered during the period of initiation itself, since this involves many restrictions being placed on a woman's ability to use everyday tools

and utensils for agricultural duties, cooking, fetching water and performing other domestic tasks.[13] Many of these can be, and regularly are, performed by other female relatives within the household, but initiation does restrain the normal demands a man can place upon his wife, leading him to perform many such tasks in her stead. During the ritual marking the end of initiation, the village is more or less deserted of all its womenfolk, who are to be found at the vodhun's shrine. Men are simply left to cook and care for themselves. Alternatively, they are seen enrolling the services of adolescent boys to cater to their domestic needs.

OF CORDS, BLOOD AND POSSESSION

Having explored some of the phenomenological and existential modalities of possession, and the social dialectics which stem from such experience, I now turn to organisational aspects of vodhun secret societies and their association with possession.

It has commonly and almost universally been noted that, where possession does occur, women are more prone than men to falling prey to spirits. One of the most commonly propounded theories in seeking to explain such a predisposition has focused on the structure of gender organisation in society at large, and attributed a cathartic function to the occurrence of possession (a view very much favoured by Lewis [1971] and his countless followers [Gellner 1994, Lewis et al. 1991]). Where women are oppressed, where their religious rights, obligations and needs cannot be fulfilled within the confines of the dominant religious mode, spirits provide the idiom *par excellence* to let off steam and express frustration, while remaining within the boundaries of accepted resistance, since it is the spirits, not humans, that threaten to destabilise the normative, and morally codified, social structure. Yet, placated spirits – and they can, if one relies on the available literature on the subject, usually be placated, generally by the male spouses of the possessed – revert to compliance when their desires have been fulfilled and their appetite for goods, perfumes, offerings and a human vessel to inhabit, has been satiated. Rebellion does not therefore threaten social structure, in purely Gluckman-inspired fashion (Gluckman 1954), but enables it to be maintained as a result of such levelling mechanisms. Since women are perceived as weaker than men in most societies, this structural-functionalist model provided an explanation that was simultaneously universal and framed within an easily understandable idiom for most Western scholars (and seems equally popular among indigenous anthropologists, as is clearly demonstrated by the

contributors to Lewis's most recent venture in this realm (1991; see also Constantinides 1985).

Structurally speaking, all the elements of Lewis's thesis seem to be in place in Watchi possession: women become possessed, men usually do not; the former are greater in number in the secret societies associated with vodhun deities; and women are often referred to in 'secular' contexts as being inferior to men in status and prestige. Superficially, we could be dealing with a peripheral cult, catering to the needs of the weak and the oppressed, allowing a voice to marginal beings through the interference of their spirits, since men are obliged to cater for the needs of their wives' spirits, and must abide by their taboos. The presence of a few men in the secret societies (approximately 5 per cent of disciples are male) would serve to strengthen this argument: men who do not comply with the male ideals of the community use initiation to compensate for their weaknesses. Having thus joined a predominantly female world, they can escape the pressures demanded of their male counterparts.

Such externalistic models fail to account for the occurrence of possession among women from within the framework of a given society. The criteria by which women are judged to be peripheral to their own society are never specified, and this leaves such a model wanting in rigour and clarity. There are other obvious difficulties in applying such theories to vodhun practices in particular. First of all, vodhun as a religious complex constitutes the primary system of belief for all Watchi, and is therefore central to men and women alike (unlike, as Lewis and Co. would have it, spirits within Islam). In order to unravel the significance (or lack of it) of gender in Watchi possession, we need to look more closely at the processes involved in adherence to vodhun secret societies, and the way in which connections between gods and humans are validated.

It has been suggested that women are made into the chosen vehicles for the prevarications and utterances of spirits since they are considered closer to divine spirituality and perception (Berger 1995, Leslie 1983, Ogden 1996), and therefore more sensitive to divine encounters, and more easily able to perceive them. Lambek and Boddy have indirectly redefined the question of gender by shifting their attention to another dimension of possession. Rather than focus on a universal predisposition women might have because of their weaker constitution, the emphasis here lies on finding the various identities which are created through possession. Since possession inherently involves a redefinition of one's everyday sense of self, the experience itself necessarily leads to individual and relational shifts in experience and behaviour. Rather than afflicting women as receptacles for spirits, preconditioned to become possessed

because of their inherent marginality, possession would instead contribute to the constitution of their womanhood.

The relevant aspects of this debate, in the present context, apply to the various ways in which selfhood comes to be moulded and constituted, especially for the possessed. Selfhood itself is, of course, a composite concept, constituted through a multiplicity of processes, at various points in the life-cycle, in order to define a person's relational position to others. Selfhood, as identity, is in this sense never static. When it comes to the larger Ewe group, selfhood has been examined by anthropological scholars primarily in relation to Afa (Maupoil 1943, de Surgy 1981; see also Lovell 1993), a system of divination and oracular speech which also determines the destiny and future life events of every individual born into the society. The ritual of *Xo Afa* (to take, or receive, *Afa*) is performed at a young age, and serves to determine the position of a child within the kinship group and in the wider cosmology. Albeit an important exegetic construct, my concern at present focuses on the ways in which possession serves to mould and reflect notions of the self, primarily those of (female) initiates and devotees. Selfhood therefore involves the necessary participation in specific and designated rituals, and also comprises important, less strictly codified life events, such as affliction, misfortune, trance and initiation, as defining elements of an individual's identity and understanding of the self. The achievement of selfhood is thus best seen as a cumulative enterprise.

The violent trances that originally indicate possession by a vodhun, although seemingly random in the choice of a recipient for the spirit, appear to follow paths that informants describe as predictable and, albeit with hindsight, easily identifiable. Violent possession should be avoided, as it is very dangerous for the possessed to find themselves in such a state. However, it is said that the presence of the god, and its impending demands during the original, unpredictable and uncontrolled possession trances, could easily have been detected through the use of divination long before the occurrence afflicting the future initiate. The reason stated is simple: initiation is seen strictly in terms of inheritance, and female initiates are said to inherit membership through a deceased maternal grandmother, herself a former initiate in one of the secret societies. Upon the death of such a person, divination will be used to decide who will, *ipso facto*, succeed her as a new member. The new adept will often be in her infancy and initiation, because it is regarded as relatively expensive, will often be deferred. Although this situation is in contradiction with the ideal held by most people, that initiation should take place immediately, it is nevertheless relatively common. Ultimately, if the demand of the vodhun for a new disciple to replace the deceased has not been fulfilled, the situation will result in violent

trance, leading the subject to the shrine of her deceased maternal relative. The timing of ritual initiation is therefore secondary to the primacy given to matrifiliation, since this matrifiliation is said, a posteriori, to underlie all initiations, including those triggered by illness and sudden and violent possession.

Yet, in the context of Watchi possession, the question 'Why women?' bears an ambiguous relevance. Initiates and devotees are described as the spouses of vodhun, but the terms used, *vodhunsi* or *vodhunsro*, are themselves both ungendered, and apply equally to male and female initiates. The ungendered *sro* is also used by men and women in non-religious contexts to refer to one's spouse. As has already become clear, women are, in the contexts of possession and initiation, the primary targets of spirits, and some 95 per cent of all devotees within the vodhun secret societies are women. When asked why this is the case, the most common answer I obtained was the obvious: 'Because vodhun like women, as men like women!' Since the idiom of possession links the possessed and their spirits in a bond of marriage, this is not surprising. Devotees are referred to as the spouses of the vodhun, and vodhun possess their vessels by mounting them like spouses do. However, since the sex of vodhun is itself not always clearly defined or fixed, it was also made clear to me that, even though vodhun may express a preference for women, the sex of the devotee was also considered irrelevant. Many men had been called to become initiates, and some of them had indeed experienced the first calling in the form of uncontrolled trance, and had been expected to undergo initiation. Most families expressed a strong reluctance towards having male initiates in their midst, and it is therefore common practice to negotiate such undertakings with the deity involved, in an attempt to alter and transform the nature of the future relationship between deity and human subject. As a result, when a man experienced the warning signs that are commonly associated with a deity's request for initiation, the family would negotiate (using a diviner as an intermediary) for an alternative female member, in the female line, to replace the boy or man being called to join the vodhun. Another, equally acceptable solution would be to negotiate for the afflicted to become a cult leader of a newly erected shrine for the god. In other words, vodhun prefer women, but any woman within the secret societies might equally have been a man. Only in one instance were such alternative solutions rejected by all parties: this involved male children born into the vodhun secret society while the mother was herself undergoing initiation.

Since initiation is inherited, possession by spirits cannot simply be attributed to structural and functional differences in the gender roles ascribed, respectively, to men and women in a given society.

Although, in the Watchi context, it is indeed acknowledged by possessed and observers that it is the vodhun that snatches, abducts and possesses, the act further indicates and revives the matrifiliation that underlies recruitment to membership of the shrines. During possession, women are thereby also instrumental in remembering links with the past, and are pivotal in invoking ancestors important to the community at large. Lambek (1988) points in a similar direction when he stresses that the identity of the spirits is crucial in understanding the gendered dimension of possession. Women are therefore pivotal in remembering links with the past, and their possession is crucial in the articulation of kinship ties (1988: 725, see also Corin 1979). For Watchi devotees, possession acts as a reminder, primarily, of their link with female ancestresses, but possessed women are also said to become the mouthpieces of all ancestors attending rituals of possession held by humans. As vodhun are central to communal well-being, the link entertained by women with their gods through initiation, possession, spirit mediumship and general religiosity is critical to the maintenance of the moral order. Indeed, when referring to their gods, Watchi informants often substituted the term 'vodhun' with the shorter denomination *hun*, which means blood, and connotes their association with women, wombs, and the blood and potential life, contained therein (see Chapter 2). The relationship between a devotee and her deceased mother's mother is also described in these terms. Another twist is added: female devotees are also addressed directly as 'Vodhun' by members of the community at large, which indicates a merging of identities, although no possession is involved in these cases. This is merely a term of address, and it is readily used. Courtship of an initiate or devotee will often involve a man making sexual advances while addressing his prospective partner as 'Vodhun'.

TYING AND UNTYING SELVES

It is now time to return to the relationship between humans, gods and aspects of 'identity' in Watchi possession. The experience of possession by spirits has been referred to as involving a merging of identities, or a displacement of identity (Chandra shekar 1989, Lambek 1981). Although strictly analytical, the distinction is important because, in the first of these instances, the identities of person and god become one, the host acting as the spirit, while, in the second instance, spirit possession leads to the displacement of a person's identity, to be replaced during possession by that of the spirit. Accordingly, this would account for the amnesia described by most hosts prone to this kind of experience. While the spirit enters

the body of the possessed, the identity of the host is displaced, and she herself 'is absent from her body' (Lambek 1981: 41). This supports Lambek's argument that host and spirit are indeed seen as separate entities, which have to negotiate a space (the host's body) as an arena for dialogue and communication. Spirits remind humans of their presence through possession, requiring sacrifices, libations, prayers and devotees (possession then takes on the guise of a human sacrifice), while humans attempt to avoid these obligations in the first place, trying to maintain their distinctiveness from spirits. In possession, the interface between humans and gods is at its most obvious: both are forced to enter into a satisfactory alliance with one another. Spirits will be ensured cosmological continuity, and human beings peace of mind, since they will in future be afforded spiritual protection against further attacks, illnesses and misfortunes inflicted by the spirits.

Whether possession involves the displacement of the 'self' (suggesting the exclusion of human identity in favour of a spiritual one) or its merging with the identity of the possessing spirit (pointing to the coexistence of human and spiritual identities) seems difficult to answer in light of my Watchi material. These two paths do not appear to be mutually exclusive. Women who become the hosts of vodhun during possession will admit to not remembering any specific details about their episodes of possession, which might indicate a displacement of the self in favour of that of the possessing spirit. One of the idioms used, that of 'entering the head', is similar to the description Lambek provides. The spirit rises to the head of its host, 'taking temporary control of all bodily and mental functions' (Lambek 1981: 40). However, the Watchi also use the idioms of abduction and intercourse, which negate the notion of displacement, and indicate instead a cohabitation of spirit and human, a joint collaboration in intercourse, and the performance of a spiritually procreative act. The host becomes a vessel for the spirit, but the identities of both coexist inside her at this particular time. Although vodhun are explicitly said to be unable to procreate, all their initiates are referred to as their children as well as their spouses. The turn of phrase is contextual: the terminology of affinity (the possessed being referred to, and referring to themselves, as the spouses of deities during possession, involved in an act of copulation) will be used by devotees and observers alike when referring to the relationship between deity and possessed (hence making possible and legitimate the idiom of intercourse), while most people will refer to themselves as the children of vodhun when describing the protection provided them by their gods. In addition, devotees refer to the gods and their spirits as being 'in the hand' of the possessed (*vodhun le asi nye*), a term which designates ownership

(a form of possession) in secular contexts. Hence initiates (and some cult leaders) 'have' deities. In this sense, deities and possessed become one another's alter ego.

For many of my informants, exegetic idioms referring to the experience and description of spirit possession are varied, contextual and also overlapping. Thus, while a displacement of the self may be discerned at some junctures of possession episodes, the discourses which describe the event amalgamate several modes of explanation. By their own admission, the Watchi acknowledge the dual, shifting and, at times, multiple sexual identities of their gods. If, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, possession helps define both self and 'other' in a dialectical process, the significance of Watchi possession becomes clear: spirits represent the 'other' (Kramer 1993, Stoller 1995), that which lies outside common human experience, but this 'other' has multiple connotations. The spirits of vodhun are, of course, considered as powerful, non-human, cosmological agents, and therefore represent an ideal image of otherness, since it contrasts well with what is perceived to be human. Nevertheless, this projection of otherness is made more complex by the human attributes accorded to spirits. In particular, the gendered identity of spirits partly frames them in a human mould, and gender plays an important role in the encouter between vodhun and devotees during possession. Since many spirits are, at least temporarily, identified as male, possession could be understood in terms of the appropriation of malehood by a predominantly female body of devotees. Yet the fact that most devotees are, indeed, women could be attributed to the need to emphasise the matrifiliation which underlies possession and initiation, and also all experiences associated with vodhun as a central religious paradigm in Watchi society. Men who become part of possession cults are already submerged in the female idiom of blood, since they have been born inside this structure. Rather than representing an anomalous image of what constitues Watchi 'malehood' as gendered identity, they could be said to have become rather more submerged in female blood than most men in society at large.

It could also be surmised that initiates and devotees, as recipients for the gods during possession, see their gendered identity displaced by the deity, which itself is no longer clearly gendered. The non-fixity of the affinal terminology, which makes no distinction between male and female as spouse to the god (or to a person of the opposite sex in a purely human marriage), points us in this direction. Thus, if humans and gods become merged, gender also shifts, and male and female become composite parts of one another, an amalgamation of several bodies. Possession, in this sense, abolishes and transcends the distinction between men and women, since the

merging of the identities of the possessed and the spirit that possesses abolishes their respective gender boundaries. Container and contained become fused. The experience of ritualistic possession is thus explained in transcendental terms: it overrides social categories, bridges the worlds of living and dead, of gods and humans, and of genders. That men and women should, ideally, be interchangeable, as devotees of vodhun and as vessels for the spirits, would support this argument. Identities as male/female, human/spirit are re-articulated in the process of possession, thus negating, but also merging and transcending, any distinctions between them, while simultaneously expressing their separateness as entities. This is clearly reflected in the reference the Watchi make to themselves and their gods in the context of possession: humans are sometimes themselves, sometimes their spirits, they are objects of desire (vodhun take them, as in sexual intercourse), and subjects of their vodhun at the same time (they hold the gods in their hands). Self becomes other, and vice versa. If there is, at one level, a play on the dualities of humans and gods, and on the dualities of gender, there is also a constant reassertion of the absence, and transcendence, of those dualities. Identities, in terms of selfhood, gender relations, and associations between humans and the cosmos, are not fixed. Rather, they are generated, mirrored and negotiated in the public fields of language, experience and public display.

The territory of female knowledge invokes unmediated associations with and encompassment of vodhun, directly mapped on to and located in women's bodies and enacted through an immediate reflection and appropriation of cosmological locality and natural landscape. Women in general provide and reflect the raw material of existence in the form of unmoulded clay and blood-filled wombs. More particularly, initiates and devotees of secret societies take these associations one step further by becoming direct embodiments of their gods during possession. Indeed, they are called 'vodhun', and acquire particular forms of knowledge where these links are made more explicit in songs, enacted rituals and possession itself. Territories of male knowledge involve the custodianship of vodhun, yet remain partly constrained by their gender, since male shrine-keepers cannot accede to the secret knowledge imparted to women during initiation, which is almost exclusively a female affair.

While women most blatantly embody this notion of cyclic containment, and contribute to the appropriation and representation of nature through these associations with vodhun, clay, pots and wombs, some men are also involved in the process of grounding the gods and locating them on earth for settlement and the general benefit of the community. Women may be seen as

containers for the gods, but these receptacles also need to be filled with substances that are primordially handled by men. Most shrines are in the hands (literally, *vodhun li asinye*, 'the god is in my hand') of male keepers or guardians, who act as custodians of the vodhun and also perform healing.

If vodhun are therefore associated with nature in its raw, uncontrolled and dangerous form, their domestication and localisation involve nature in reversed form: the use of plants and specific animals, which are also taken from the wild (*gbeme*), neutralises the destructive forces of the gods while making them simultaneously accessible and controllable. However, while the deities' immediate association with nature excludes humans from the equation, their taming incorporates them as agents through the use of nature itself.

This existential dimension derives some of its strength from, is reflected and enacted in, and is in turn shaped and made manifest through, everyday interactions and religious circumstances. There were times when some of my informants seemed acutely aware of the cultural imposition of gender attributes and identities placed on them as human (and sexed) beings. While possession, illness and contact with vodhun as spiritual entities for instance, helped to define womanhood and create potent female identities, knowledge of vodhun – through everyday contact, rituals and secret knowledge for those directly associated with shrines – also provided occasions for the celebration of the neutrality of sexual differences. This awareness seems to provide the key to the understanding of the rituals of reversal which take place within the shrines (Myerhoff 1976 touches upon similar themes when decribing the interface between humans and spirits in the realm of reversal). Thus instead of analysing rituals of reversal where, in this instance, women dress as men, as acts of rebellion against oppression, viewing them as playing with the existential dimension of gender identities may prove a more fruitful analysis: rather than presenting a safety valve against oppression, they allow for the breaking down of gender boundaries, while stripping bare identities. The fixity of gender is thus brought into question. Women can try their hand at being 'men', and bring to light the importance of simply being human, in an 'original' and naked state, prior to the impositions of any notion of gender as well as personhood itself. The very basic dress code that applies to both men and women, the criss-crossing of otherwise stable structures associated with binary poles such as right and left, white and black, and male and female, lead me to believe that more is at play than a temporary, ritually enacted rebellion against order. Indeed, men and women alike use their left hand for greetings within all vodhun shrines, while uttering '*ame, ame*', (human being, human being) instead of using proper names. If we accept that the

concept of nature is itself culturally created, then it is perhaps a state of 'pre-nature' that is being emphasised, where an ungendered personhood provides the essence of human existence, while simultaneously acknowledging the imaginative, ephemeral and experimental quality of culturally (re-)constructed gender identities.

These features are further reflected at a deeper level of cosmology, as they apply to vodhun as well. Deities are gendered, but the complexity of gendering deserves mention. Some are always considered male, others are always female. Others are said to be male and female at the same time, and some see their gender identity temporally defined by humans, making them 'sometimes male, sometimes female'. Thus 'biological' models of the sex of the person are used to explain an individual's position in the universe, and it provides an image upon which gods are also modelled. These concepts of human biology and sexuality also reflect the sexually ambiguous nature of cosmological beings. The link between vodhun and their human counterparts in general, and with initiates in particular, indicates a merging of their mutual identities through worship, ritual actions and possession. It is, ultimately, the ambiguity of gender attributes that is expressed. The ambiguity and reversals of the sexual identities of vodhun thus merely mirror the same characteristics among their human counterparts. Indeed, Durkheim would have revelled in the metaphors by which vodhun are made to reflect human sociality.

5 HEALING MODERNITIES, ENGENDERING DIFFERENCE

Much of my ethnography has been concerned with the production of meanings in ritual context, enacted through bodily practice, and anchored in everyday metaphors of being.[1] Rituals themselves are hardly unchanging, and constantly recast themselves anew (see de Coppet 1992, Masquelier 1993, Taussig 1993). Rather than replicate unchanging traditions *ad infinitum*, they provide (and probably always have provided) an ideal layered and multi-dimensional framework for the production of shifting meanings sited in bodily practice. Such processual shifts are not new: change can hardly be attributed exclusively to the advent of modernity, colonialism or post-independent states in Africa, however violent, and however important such processes have been in the shaping of current politics. Such processes do not stand in isolation, and are part of long-standing historical shifts (Amselle 1998). Not only can tradition be invented (in Hobsbawm and Ranger's terms, 1983), but it is, in itself, constantly on the move.

The production of ethnography has increasingly come to be seen as an obsolete enterprise, particularly as its historical antecedents focused so exclusively on the representation of ritual as cultural essence, as containment of identity. Mudimbe (1988) denounced ethnographic production as the epitome of the invention of bounded ahistorical wholes so typical of the colonial enterprise, and so representative of the anthropological discipline: however dynamic theory might become, ethnographic data often remain unrepeatable, irreplaceable and, consequently, caught in an ethnographic moment that can hardly be replicated.[2] Rituals and their examination, in particular have been targeted by such criticism, as they have been treated as the *prima facie* example of social cohesion in the face of conflict. In this light, the reiterated contrast between tradition and change, the old and modernity, the local and processes of globalisation, simplified as it is, becomes more easily graspable.

Ritual has also continued to exercise the anthropological imagination, partly through sheer habit of practice – the discipline's habitus – but also because rituals are perceived to provide a fruitful

site for the production of knowledge, as the body is openly and markedly acted upon in ritual, while (re-)presenting a creative site for the expression of transformation (de Coppet 1992, Grimes 1982). Functionalist writings for so long remained constrained by their own limitations in the quest for the ideal and bounded society, that the interpretation they gave to ritual could only be seen to replicate and safeguard a bounded whole, in true culturalist fashion. In a changing world, ritual remained, in interpretation at least, a means of taming 'modernity', of bringing it within the bounds of an understandable and known social order. Ritual, in this sense, seldom propelled persons and communities into the 'modern' world, but served instead the cathartic function of making the outside less threatening, thus stabilising its influence by emphasising the weight of tradition. True to a structural(-functionalist) spirit, the opposition of tradition and modernity settled in the midst of other binary oppositions.

The theme of modernity, for lack of a better term, has been latent in previous chapters (as it is indeed in most things which concern vodhun), whether when describing the onslaught of possession in pubescent school-attending young women or men, or when discussing processes of initiation where contact with modern manufactured objects is prohibited in favour of 'old', natural ones. So far, my interpretation of these events and experiences has focused almost exclusively on exegetic idioms relating to vodhun and on the shifting contexts and altered relationships – cosmological and human – that derive from such contact. I have also tended to emphasise an approach to possession focusing on gender and its demise, and on the various identities that are at play in rituals of possession and reversal.

Yet things do not stop there. However important these features, the sphere of vodhun makes obvious the convergences between different life-paths in the most blatant way. And, as possession plays a crucial role in the dismantling of gender and its re-enactment and experience in other forms, the realm of vodhun also helps articulate other aspects of gender relationships, as they are made evident in the organisation of medical knowledge.

CASE STUDY 1

By 1990, Kufhunhen had become one of the most powerful healers in the region surrounding Momé Hounkpati. Her shrine to vodhun Tro Kpethundeka was a large but hidden compound within her compound, a set of rendered huts whose entrances were oriented towards a large square in the centre of the village. She was a sought-after healer and the constant stream of visitors and many followers

at her shrine bore testimony to her popularity and success. She was surrounded by a group of assistants, some 10–15 young men from neighbouring households and villages, who helped her keep the shrine in good order and performed sacrifices on her behalf. Most afternoons of the week, the assistants, visiting patients and relatives could be seen dozing in her courtyard after completion of the many ceremonies held to propitiate the deity and restore order and fortune among the community of the afflicted.

Kufhunhen was a long-widowed older woman. She had had, by her own account, a chequered past and credited her vodhun for having brought her peace. She had come to settle in Momé Hounkpati upon marriage, and had set up trade in her new place of residence without difficulty. Like most women in the south-east, she had traded petty goods in order to support her family, and found ways to generate an income from various ventures including the sale of *sodabi*, the local brew; cooked snacks easily prepared at home from surplus agricultural products; and cereals. Like many women in the village and region she had become, for a while, a travelling trader, taking her produce to Lomé where prices are higher and there are more opportunities for expansion. She had become quite successful, but her good fortune in business ventures had been accompanied by growing unease between her and her late husband. She had been called upon to become an initiate when in her late 30s, having for some time suffered bouts of possession and intermittent but recurring illness. After initiation, misfortune had revisited her. She lost three children to illness in the course of three years, and further pregnancies had resulted in repeated miscarriages. When I met her, she had one remaining adult son living in Lomé. Some 20 years previously, she had consulted several healers, who had implicitly indicated that she may have become the victim of witchcraft, or may have neglected to erect a shrine for a vodhun in order to continue enjoying such good fortune in her business ventures. The consultations had remained inconclusive, and she had not acted upon them for lack of a more precise course of action.

While recounting this particular part of her life history, Kufhunhen had suddenly switched from the first to the third person, and begun describing what had brought her to embrace vodhun Kpethundeka and erect a shrine on his behalf. She described how, having consulted a diviner, she had subsequently been invited by a friend to attend a vodhun ceremony where a patient was to be treated for 'misfortune'. As it turned out, the patient was a woman who had suffered several miscarriages, and had seen three of her young children die in their first year of life. The healer had started to perform a public ceremony, and his patient had been taken to the middle of the square where a divination session was to be held. The

woman had been made to explain how her children had died, what she had done to help them and whom she believed to be responsible. Several names had been put to the oracle, and all had been rejected. The healer had then mentioned the woman's own name, and the consultation had taken a dramatic turn. Vodhun Kpethundeka (for it was the same deity) had revealed that the woman had 'eaten her children' (the usual euphemism for witchcraft), an accusation which she had squarely refuted. As she had persisted in her denials, the vodhun had become angry, and finally had lifted her off the ground and thrown her down violently several yards away. What had happened to her afterwards was not included in Kufhunhen's narrative. Rather, she concluded by saying: 'That is how I came to understand that vodhun Kpethundeka was very powerful, and that he could help me. I went home and started the proceedings to have a shrine installed in my house.'

VODHUN GONE BAD

This narrative raises several issues. It should be noted first of all that it shares many similarities with other narratives about vodhun and how they come to be directly involved in people's lives (see also Chapter 3). The onslaught of illness, repeated misfortune, barrenness, strained marital relationships, are part of these experiences. As becomes apparent through this short life history, Kufhunhen's success also gives rise to jealousy. She is warned, in rather unspecific form when she first consults a healer, that she may need to protect herself from other people's witchcraft if she wishes to continue enjoying such success, a piece of advice that remains unheeded due to the unspecific nature of the threat. When she comes across vodhun Kpethundeka some time later, the threat of witchcraft has become more precise and inverted. It is now directed against her: she is herself a witch, a woman who eats her children (Field [1937, 1960] notes that many alleged victims of witchcraft often accuse themselves of being witches; see also Lallemand 1988). My encounters with Kufhunhen over many months led me to believe that the story she told was, indeed, her own.

The issue of the relationship between vodhun, witchcraft and 'modernity' needs to be examined more closely. Vodhun are, as we have seen, mostly defined as divinities, cosmological beings whose presence on earth is necessary for the well-being and perpetuation of humankind. Although vodhun have the power to punish and forgive, they remain unpredictable and able to inflict as well as cure illnesses and misfortune. Their presence in effect lies at the essence of existence. By contrast, witchcraft (*ebo*) is most accurately described

as a malevolent action requiring human intervention and, as in many other parts of Africa, can become embedded in certain descent groups where it is inherited among family members. It is said that new recruits join these cannibalistic congregations by unwittingly eating human flesh presented to them at banquets, and become forever indebted to their hosts whose appetite for more they must subsequently contribute to satisfy. The link between perceived cannibalistic rites and witchcraft is crucial to understanding, at least partially, the connection between witchcraft and vodhun, through a chain of connections that render the victims of bad deaths particularly powerful in both contexts. Victims of cannibalistic practice are said to have died a bad death, in the same way as victims of bad death in general are crucial to sustaining the power of vodhun. In addition, if witchcraft causes bad death through malevolent human agency, so do vodhun of their own volition. Crucially, *ebo* cannot be made to work without the complicity of vodhun. Witchcraft as a technical means of inflicting harm requires the spiritual involvement of deities to achieve its aims. Equally, treating witchcraft will involve the divine in restoring order.

References to illness, punishment, failure and misfortune are recurring themes in the explanations provided of the personalities of the deities with which humans interact. Although all dissatisfied vodhun have the power to bring misfortune upon human beings, it is the pre-established link existing between a specific deity and those identified as its followers that will determine the potential to heal and the course to follow in treating an illness. Moreover, certain illnesses can be described as stable and predetermined in as much as they are always associated with particular deities, and do not give rise to speculation among humans about other possible origins and causes for the affliction. The type of affliction can thus be readily identified and lead to diagnosis and potential cure. For instance, Hevieso is typically identified as responsible for extreme swelling of the limbs, vodhun Anyigbato[3] causes smallpox or any other similar eruptions on the skin, while Toxosu is responsible for epilepsy. However, where deities are considered to be the source of affliction, the role of humans in the matter does not always follow a predictable pattern. One can be the victim of an illness inflicted by the vodhun because one is 'born with it' and has failed to take the appropriate measures to ensure a good relationship with the deity. Or illness can be caused by transgression (generally by the patient personally, but sometimes by a relative), an offence leading to long-lasting illness where human agency is directly implied, albeit sometimes through ignorance. Human agency is also at work when

the assistance of vodhun is enrolled to inflict illness and misfortune upon others for vindictive purposes.

Most vodhun are induced to become the allies of human beings, but they nevertheless retain unpredictable powers that can be harmful to the existence of the living. Cult leaders play a primordial role in harnessing the powers of deities through the acquisition and control of esoteric knowledge relating to plants, animals and other, more metaphysical means. In their role as healers, cult leaders thus help to shape the identities of their vodhun and, simultaneously, become agents mediating between the realms of the living and the gods, in times of hardship and misfortune. The esoteric knowledge acquired by these healers serves the dual purpose of locating the powers of the deities on earth and impressing upon members of the community the importance of their own healing skills. Yet although the acquisition of knowledge is governed by rules of access which depend, primarily, on kinship, this hardly excludes the use of other, more entrepreneurial, strategies.

Plants, *ama*, are fundamental in the constitution of knowledge relating to therapeutic processes. They are instrumental in determining the position of healers, both in relation to one another and in relation to the vodhun. Through the use of plants, a cult leader establishes an independent identity for the particular manifestation of a vodhun he/she controls, different from other vodhun with the same generic name.

Whether or not plants are directly handled in the interaction between healer and patients, they are always present at some stage in a healer's practice. They are an inescapable feature in the process of acquiring knowledge of therapeutic practices, and can therefore be considered as primary repositories for knowledge. One healer once admitted that vodhun were no more than plants, and could not be stronger than their constituent parts; that it was the herbs that determined the deities' strength and power, ultimately implying that human interference could command the actions of divinities. By means of this process, herbs become much more than mere instruments in healing: they are essential to gain control over vodhun and fellow human beings. A healer explained: 'The plants are here to give me power, but also to protect me. When I treat patients, their pain is transferred on to my body. The plants alleviate their suffering but also mine.'

Ebo, charms, are characteristically known to belong to the realm of witchcraft and obscure powers. However all spiritual healers will admit to having these. The use of charms and the extent of their incorporation in healing practices indicate a healer's status. The greater their own inherent powers, the more healers will rely on *ama*, and the fewer the requirements for the involvement of *ebo* in their

interaction with patients. The use of *ebo* was, for some, an indication that a healer had not acquired full knowledge. Implicit in such a claim is that the use of *ebo* can fluctuate over the life-course of individual healers.

The healers themselves point to the role and use of *ebo* as a crucial element in determining the type of knowledge they perceive themselves to adhere to. Those who employ *ebo* as a mainly protective device, rather than an active component in their medical practice, normally perceive themselves as being superior in status to those healers who derive their immediate power from *ebo* while in direct contact with patients. This distinction is also associated with transmitted or acquired power. The longer the tradition of healing within the *fomé*, the less prominent the use of *ebo* in treating patients. Young healers who had no such 'pedigree' boosted their credibility and power by engaging in counter-sorcery and extensive use of *ebo*.

The boundaries between morally acceptable forms of healing and practices perceived as reprehensible are further blurred by the admission, on the part of healers, that sorcerers employ the same methods and use the same herbs, charms and amulets to constitute their powers. The difference lies in the manner in which the herbs and charms are concocted and combined, and in the context of their use. In other words, all use the same foundation, and the fundamental knowledge of *ama* and *ebo* is the same for all. The difference arises at the level of intention, leading to various assemblages of these constituent elements, and determining the status of the person as healer or sorcerer.

Neither medicinal plants nor charms and amulets can be activated without the power of words, or incantations, *gbesa* (literally translated as the 'words of sacrifice'). And words can be made all the more powerful when they are part of inherited knowledge, transmitted from one generation to the next, inside the same kinship group. These medicinal plants and amulets offer the healers the guarantee of accumulated strength and credibility. As the number of satisfied patients increases, the credibility of the healer is equally enhanced.

Ebo fall into a different category from *ama*, plants, but the two remain inextricably linked inasmuch as *ebo* can never be activated without the presence of herbs as essential components in their constitution. *Ebo* are made of plants, but contain, primarily, substances (bones, blood, hides, vital organs, heads) associated with those animals perceived as powerful (crocodiles, panthers, chameleons, snakes). The most powerful *ebo* are also said to contain human bodily parts (vital organs such as the liver, heart, pancreas, and limbs), obtained from victims of accidental death.

The victims of accidental deaths cannot accede to the status of ancestors.[4] Their spirit, or *luvho*,[5] remains restless and is particularly powerful and efficient if enrolled by sorcerers for punitive expeditions. I was taken to a burial ground outside the village, where lay the bodies of victims of accidental death or other 'bad' deaths, and referred to as *zumé* or *dzogbemé*.[6] Not far from this burial ground, deeper into the forest and protected from sight, lay a multitude of earthen pots, placed in a circle, and half-filled in rainwater. Each pot contained herbs as well as the remnants of sacrificed animals, such as goats and rams. Victims of bad deaths being particularly vindictive, they were often involved in inflicting damage and creating havoc among their living counterparts. Animal sacrifices were used as substitutes for living humans, to placate the vindictive spirits of victims of bad death who always sought, I was told, to make close living relatives join them in misfortune. Through such appeasing sacrifices, the living were left free from the vicissitudes of evil inflicted by the dead.

It is commonly accepted that bodily parts, such as the heart, liver and limbs of the victims of bad deaths are often dug up at night and used in the manufacture of *ebo*. Correspondingly, the blood of victims of fatal road accidents is quickly cleaned away from the road, lest it be used for such purposes. One informant, having endured a long-lasting illness, was advised by some relatives to seek the assistance of a healer specialising in the treatment of sorcery. This informant admitted to having been disturbed and bewildered by the request of the healer: in order for his pain to subside, he was required to find the human leg of a victim of bad death. On another occasion, when passing through *zumé*, my assistant confided that victims of accidental deaths were never left to rest there for long: the remains were soon dug up for use by healers or sorcerers.

The victims of bad death are undeniably perceived to be extremely powerful in the therapeutic process, whatever the aim of the user. These victims are particularly praised for their angry temperament and their restless requirement for vengeance, which renders them efficient if enrolled by sorcerers. However, they also represent an essential component in the physical and metaphysical manufacture of protective *ebo*. The informant mentioned in the above case was puzzled since the healer's request placed him in a dilemma: he rejected the idea of using human bodily parts, especially as he would have had to go to the burial ground alone in the middle of the night. At the same time, he was keen to find a cure for an ailment no-one had been able to identify and cure. He had been to many healers, who had all advised him on different courses of action. None of them had proved beneficial. I lost touch with him before he had reached a decision.

Reference to the dead points to a differentiation between the invocation of ancestors, *togbuiwo*, and the use of victims of accidental death in the context of healing and in association with vodhun. While the protection of ancestors is associated with continuity and long-term legitimacy, victims of accidental death provide immediate, vindictive but short-lived power.

Thus the victims of accidental or violent death are 'stigmatised' in various ways. The cause of their death leads to their seclusion from the burial grounds inside the residential area of the village; they cannot be incorporated into the continuity of the kinship group; and their tombs are prone to desecration with ensuing exploitation of their bodies for dangerous and socially disruptive practices.

Analytically, this link between the notion of inversion, of disturbed order and evil, associated with attributes of power, offers valuable insights. As in Needham's case of 'The Left Hand of the Mugwe' (1973), what is considered abnormal, a reversal in relation to ordinary life and secular society, is also intrinsically imbued with power because of this inversion. Indeed, it is precisely from this association with danger and the unknown that power is derived and nurtured (see also Girard 1977). These characteristics are attributed to the victims of bad deaths, but the relationship can be extended to include the notion of the vodhun themselves. They, too, are associated with wilderness, with danger and with the left. They, too, give rise to a reversal of order and the application of taboos in their contact with human beings.

The legitimacy of knowledge and of the power that derives from it cannot be isolated from the question of morality (Arens and Karp 1989, Rigby 1968, see also Arens 1989). Certain medical practices are acknowledged to be disruptive to the social order, yet it is not their existence itself that is condemned, but the use made of them by human beings. The flexibility that makes good and evil so intrinsically linked, blurs the boundaries between those considered witches and healers dealing in so called counter-sorcery (for a discussion on the ambiguity of evil, see Parkin 1985a, 1985b). One aspect of these practices is considered legitimate, while the other remains within the realm of the obscure and anti-social.[7] Moreover, involvement in such activities can be modified, so that what was once considered by the community as immoral can become accepted as serving the moral good.

Morality is, of course, an ambiguous term, all the more so since vodhun and *ebo* cannot be kept apart, and are represented as monistic manifestations of good and evil simultaneously. Both form part of a continuum where they can be transformed by human manipulation and social circumstances. This implies that healers, for instance, can transform their status and give new meanings to their

knowledge, a feature greatly enhanced by a cosmology of spirits and deities which is as malleable in its moral code as that of its human counterparts.

When theorised in classical anthropology in particular, witchcraft has often been considered as an indicator of structural tensions in social context. It has consequently been described as a 'social strain gauge' (Gluckman 1954, Marwick 1965), and Evans-Pritchard's (1937) early and seminal study was among the first to highlight the connection between the source of witchcraft accusations and social tensions such as those arising between co-wives in polygamous marriages for instance. While witchcraft might thus be seen as a levelling mechanism, alleviating social tension and reproducing the social order, it has also been viewed as a highly disruptive practice which threatens the moral order and creates havoc in social relationships (Douglas 1970). Witchcraft and envy are undeniably linked, and the connection is made obvious through the revelation of accusations against those who enjoy rapid success without fulfilling what others perceive as their moral obligation.

For Kufhunhen and many with her, striking a balance between the quest for success and the avoidance of accusations of witchcraft and associated misfortunes appears to have been a long-term endeavour. Vodhun stand in an ambiguous position in relation to witchcraft, as they might provide protection against it in certain instances but can also be enrolled by witches to inflict misfortune. Being afflicted by misfortune might be attributed equally to human neglect of the divine as to witchcraft, and the same goes for sudden and unchecked success.

In early anthropological accounts of symbolism and ritual, the problem of witchcraft and its expression through physical and mental illness has consistently been reintegrated into the 'social sphere' where it is seen to belong. Evans-Pritchard, Fortes, Turner, Marwick and Horton, to name but a few, maintained that accusations of witchcraft allowed for individual responsibility to be evaded in favour of group responsibility; the primary function of accusations of witchcraft being to exert collective power and control, thus regulating social behaviour, obligations and duties towards the collectivity as a whole and towards ancestors and kin. Witchcraft and sorcery are thus explained in terms of their function as mechanisms of social and collective control. It has been said to act as a powerful levelling mechanism.

This argument has been easily adopted within medical anthropology, as illness and misfortune are so readily associated with witchcraft in many ethnographic contexts (see for instance Ngubane 1977). As a consequence, illness has similarly often been viewed as an indicator of social tensions and conflicts (Augé 1975a, Janzen

1978), where illness cannot be cured if the social relationships and conflicts surrounding the patient remain unexamined. Therefore, the first task of the traditional healer called upon to cure a patient will involve the disclosure of such dissensions (Field 1960, de Rosny 1974, 1992), and a cure will remain unsuccessful if the social group is unwilling to offer its assistance (see also Turner 1968). It is through the restoration of social order and the abolition of conflict that witchcraft and associated illnesses are dismissed. One could argue for the demise of the study of witchcraft as a separate area of enquiry, since witchcraft hardly represents a particular set of beliefs (see also Parkin 1985a). In the south-east of Togo, witchcraft denotes both the cause of, and response to, unacceptable events. The use of *ebo*, or ambiguous medicine, implies the manipulation of forces which fall outside the control of ordinary humans, and which only a select number of individuals can command. Witchcraft thus becomes an extreme form of evil or morally unacceptable conduct, but does not exclude the notion of good or the possibility of its application.

Classical approaches to witchcraft have left little scope for the existence of the individual, as the supremacy of the abstract concept of social order and collective identity has prevailed over the assertion of individual self. In the more structuralist approach of many French anthropologists (such as Augé 1975a, Lallemand 1988, de Rosny 1992, Zempléni 1977), the individual is played down in favour of a more preponderant emphasis on the coherence of ideology. In this latter view, a separate identity can only be achieved through the appropriation of a sense of individual responsibility. The Freudian psychological undertones should not be underestimated.

It has by extension also been argued that traditional medicine can offer the ideal framework for alleviating conflicts between old and new (Augé 1975a, Jules-Rosette 1979, Lan 1985, Mullings 1984, de Rosny 1992), sometimes expressed through an increase in accusations of witchcraft. In a time of social, cultural and political upheaval, new demands are made upon the individual, and the emergence of new roles leads to a conflict between traditional – mainly collectivistic – sets of behaviour, and new – individualistic – ones. Traditional medicine, using old symbols but new sets of inter-relationships, mediates between the two worlds, in the process providing the patient with an individual sense of identity and, more importantly, of personal responsibility (Augé 1975a, 1975b, Mullings 1984). In this view, the old collectivistic sphere does not allow for the identity of the individual to be acknowledged, nor is it seen to stress personal responsibility for one's actions. By contrast, the new context offers little relief in terms of a support network. The healer is ideally positioned in the middle. One could wonder, however, how someone located within the traditional sphere provides a sense

of the individual self if this sense of identity is said to be absent in the domain of tradition in the first place.

Yet if morality appears so intricately linked with the idiom of witchcraft, it is also axiomatic in mediating the appropriation of modernity. Kufhunhen and a number of other sufferers tend to express, through their illnesses and experiences, the unravelling of complex and multi-faceted relationships: relationships to others in their immediate vicinity, husbands and wives, parents, siblings and children, but also relationships to the outside in a wider sense. The fact that many pupils are taken directly from their schools and into a vodhun's shrine to become initiates is a powerful statement of proprietorship. In effect, the vodhun always win in the short term, but often leave room for the accommodation of 'modernity' once their presence and influence have been properly established.

If we acknowledge that witchcraft and its ambiguous status are primarily linked to morality, we may find a way of accommodating changing modes of morality. What is more, witchcraft may indeed represent only one possible response to shifts in the moral code. Several ethnographies have pointed in this direction when dealing with the rather amorphous theme of 'modernity'. Some have noted, for instance, that accusations of witchcraft have increased with ever-expanding modernisation and concomitant corruption and mismanagement of state resources (Bayart 1989, Fisiy and Geschiere 1996, Hours 1986). In other contexts, conversion to Christianity, particularly when represented by independent churches, has provided a potent response in the face of fundamental shifts in expectations on individuals, their quest for personal success, the accumulation of wealth and, not least, relationships to the post-independence state and its failure to come to grips with viable economic policies (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, Greene 1996b, Meyer 1995, Mullings 1984). Most importantly perhaps, many independent churches have acted as powerful anti-witchcraft movements.

VODHUN IN A STATE OF AUTHENTICITY

Upon returning from my very first fieldwork in the late 1980s, my supervisor repeatedly pressed me about the role and presence of Christianity in the life of the community I had lived in. I felt at the time that I had to disappoint him. Although Christianity was undeniably part of the societal fabric in Togo, its impact in the south-east had remained relatively limited and, while independent churches had sizeable congregations in neighbouring Benin and Ghana, where they proliferated, their establishment in Togo had been seriously hampered by Togolese legislation. Until the early 1990s,

President Eyadéma's politics of authenticity, modelled on Mobutu's dreams in Zaire, had led to the promotion of local traditions and religious modes of expression. The Catholic church, with its roots in colonial policy and the making of the state, was deemed the official religion, alongside local and ethnic modes of expression (see also Toulabor 1989). The Catholic church could thus neither threaten the state nor local traditions, as the scope of its involvement in local traditions and in proselytising activities was checked by the President in person. However, this was soon to change.

For a long time vodhun appeared to have provided fertile ground for facing 'modernity' and challenging the state, all the while benefiting from the protection afforded by Eyadéma's politics of authenticity. Thus vodhun appear to tame modernity by calling upon school children to become devotees, or by 'snatching' successful traders who have failed to pay due respect to the gods. Possession may then appear as a powerful idiom for facing what lies outside of itself, for appropriating the otherness represented by the state. The argument has been made before (see Kramer 1993, Stoller 1995, Taussig 1993). After all, if possession can help in merging the divine and the earthly, it should also be capable of obliterating the boundaries between tradition and the modern, between the local and the wider world.[8]

Until recently, vodhun in the south-east enjoyed a privileged position in its relation to the state, where it retained the support of political institutions keen to support the President's edict on cultural authenticity and enthusiastically promoting vodhun as a tourist attraction. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that this openness towards local religious practices has also included a great deal of ambiguity towards what is often deemed, politically, too primitive for the good of the country, and official vodhun ceremonies performed at cultural (and therefore political) festivals have been sanitised versions of what might have taken place without the presence of government officials. There is little doubt, too, that this apparent openness towards local practices has proved a potent tool of political control. Yet the game has been played both ways: the sanitised performances presented to officials are tacitly played out by cult leaders unwilling to allow for greater introspection into their practices. What has remained clear is that, until very recently, matters touching on vodhun practices were left out of the judicial system. In 1989 and 1990, the local court of Momé Hounkpati, which acted for the 18 neighbouring hamlets, consistently refused to deal with cases that involved vodhun in any way. Defendants who had sought the services of a cult leader prior to bringing their cases and complaints to court were often told to settle the issue there, as the court could do little to help them when the conflict had

escalated to such levels. I attended the weekly court proceedings for several months, and it became clear that matters of the vodhun – however justified it may have been to take these to an open court – remained clearly outside its jurisdiction.

Yet, it was recently reported that:

> [p]olice in Togo ... had found a hunchback's hump, vulture eggs, hyena paws and a panther's pelt when they raided the church of a pastor accused of using satanic practices to woo worshippers. Police said on Togolese television they raided Pastor Kokouvi Agbekossi's Church of the Lord for the Adoption on Monday after an anonymous tip-off and found three ceramic pots, one by the entrance and two near the altar.
>
> All were crammed full of fetishes, objects believed to have magical powers. Because human remains had been found in the church, there would probably be an investigation, police said, and they were holding Agbekossi and witch-doctor Roger Dossou Tchoumado. The pastor said he had enlisted Tchoumado to supply the objects, giving him a down-payment of $112 and a promise of more money once business started to flourish.
>
> Chief Police Commissioner Yoma Pissang called on people in Togo to 'unmask these unscrupulous individuals' who set up churches to wheedle money out of parishioners. But still hopeful of getting the rest of his money from the pastor, Tchoumado said the case showed fetishism should be favored over 'imported religions'.
>
> 'These so-called pastors say they have their own God, but if they still need to use us secretly, despite denigrating us on television and radio, then it's a victory', he said.
>
> Competition is fierce in Togo between rival churches representing numerous interpretations of Christianity. Over 400 requests to create places of worship are pending.[9]

The political events of the early 1990s, and the unrest that has prevailed since, have greatly affected the rather artificial policy of authenticity and the reification of tradition for so long instituted as hallmarks of the postcolonial state in Togo. The proliferation of independent churches, most of them already established in Ghana, Benin or Nigeria, and many of them financed by American sponsors, is quickly altering the religious landscape in Togo and hence also the relationship of vodhun with the state. Yet what is also clear is that this religious complex will not easily relinquish its position, and most *vodhuntowo*, people of the vodhun, find the use of religious paraphernalia such as wild animals and alleged human sacrificial victims within the compounds of a pastor's church unacceptable. Independent churches are perceived to be usurping potent vodhun symbols, and represent a threat never posed by the Christian churches established in the colonial era. Most importantly, official political and judicial institutions appear to show more tolerance towards practitioners of vodhun making use of animal and (possibly) human bodily parts than towards the independent churches said to do the same.

The insertion of such practices in the midst of Christian worship is considered inadmissible and punishable by law. Eyebrows may have been raised towards vodhun in the past, yet without eliciting the response described in recent press releases when dealing with newly established Christian churches. Significantly, while vodhun disputes have largely remained matters to be settled outside the courts, the same cannot be said where independent churches are concerned.

GENDERED PREDICAMENTS

The contestation of religious power and authority further brings into focus the issue of gender and, in particular, the respective positions of women and men in religious institutions. The prominence of vodhun in the region of the south-east, the difficult penetration of colonial Christianity and the relatively limited impact of independent churches are to be inserted in a gendered discourse.[10]

CASE STUDY 2

Jean was a relatively young *huno*, a priest of a vodhun shrine. While still in his early 30s, he had returned to his natal village having spent several years in the capital. He had left secondary school at the age of 17, where he had always been considered by his teachers to be a good student. However, he had failed his final exams and, unable to complete his Baccalauréat, had sought the help of relatives in Lomé. For years, he had worked as a car mechanic and done odd jobs in the capital. Although by his own account, he considered himself to have been rather successful, he had found his dependency on patrons and relatives difficult to bear in adult life. He had hoped to accumulate enough money to enable him to set up his own car workshop, but had come to realise that this would not materialise. He had then decided to return to his village, where he had married and was, at the time of our first encounter, father to two young children.

He considered himself lucky to have escaped the pressures of the city where, he said, he was only one among so many other 'descolarisés'. His expectations had been high, and the years after leaving school had been difficult. Upon return to Momé Hounkpati, he had sought the assistance of a vodhun priest to help him install a personal shrine for vodhun Kadabi, considered to be linked to witchcraft. The protection afforded him by the deity had proved beneficial, and he had since established his own healing practice. He offered consultations to visitors, and was acquiring a burgeoning reputation for having sound healing skills.

We had lengthy conversations about the identity of his vodhun, its provenance and continuity. Some of the 'oldest' healers quietly

considered him and his peers as charlatans. For them, legitimacy rested on the principle of the longevity of the shrine, its perpetuation down generations. However, Jean himself continually pointed to the possible links with the past his shrine could already call upon: although new in the present context, his vodhun had hardly appeared from nowhere, and could claim some long forgotten ancestry and attachments to some of Jean's male ancestors. It had then fallen into oblivion. Jean referred to the diviner he had originally consulted: vodhun which have manifested themselves in the past continue to have an affinity with the descendants of their original keeper. Jean may have paid to have the shrine installed and this link with the past resurrected, but there was in fact little new about his shrine. It could also claim a spiritual ancestry, although a disconnected and interrupted one. Equally, Jean hoped to perpetuate his shrine by passing it on to one of his sons and, more importantly, by establishing a shrine for initiation of devotees. Achieving a cure for possession through the involvement of vodhun would ensure such perpetuation.

Jean relied on another major factor that contributed to the long-term legitimacy of shrines: the presence of secret societies enabling the direct embodiment of deities by women during possession, and activating the women's *hunka*, their cord of blood. This inherited membership through women ensured the spiritual continuity of the deity while simultaneously securing its location on earth for future generations. However, the presence of such secret societies for initiation was not easily established. As we have seen, the primary means for legitimating such a feature was through the spontaneous manifestation of a vodhun, and this was hardly the case for Jean's purchased vodhun. Yet his shrine already boasted two initiates, placed under the supervision of his wife as instructress. Herself an accomplished *vodhunsi*, she and Jean both hoped that their joint involvement would enhance the power of the deity while allowing them each a greater authority in matters of healing. I was to discover several such shrines over the course of my stays.[11]

The process of acquisition and inheritance of knowledge of healing and medicine legitimates the position of a healer in the present through a possible affiliation with the past. In the process, allegiance to the local kinship group and ancestors is emphasised. However, such affiliation is not always predictable. There is a high level of flexibility and mobility relating to the means of acquiring knowledge of medicine and of the esoteric world of spirits. Healers were keen to point out that certain paths were more legitimate than others, and that the inheritance of knowledge of medicine from a deceased relative provided more powerful paths to success than mere acquisition through purchase within one's own life-span. Most sig-

nificantly, the boundaries between various categories of healers were not hermetic, creating a continuous flow between them. Those dealing with witchcraft and charms, in particular, were constantly involved in attempts to legitimate their position by strengthening their links with the past, the dead and vodhun.

As we have seen, women are the primary members of secret societies, and their initiation marks the beginning of a link with a deity that extends, through the inheritance of her spiritual allegiance and through her cord of blood, beyond death. Women thus come to control a type of esoteric knowledge which is directly associated with initiation and which, to some extent, predetermines their possible continued involvement as spirit mediums in divination and medicine. However, the positions of 'control' and management of most shrines are in the hands of men, who come to command a different type of knowledge and authority. As leaders of shrines, men can overtly use their position for the public good by acquiring knowledge of medicine and spiritual healing. Women, by contrast, are often bound to secrecy and silence due to their vows as members of secret societies.

Thus women are not excluded from acquiring esoteric knowledge (as suggested by Leslie 1983). On the contrary, their access to initiation and to secret societies is almost exclusive. As a consequence, the path of female spiritual leaders differs from that of men, both in regard to acquiring knowledge as such, and in its use and dissemination. Initiation seems to be a prerequisite for women, opening the way for further involvement in spiritual healing. Many of these women are also heavily involved in divination, and become spirit mediums, communicating with departed members of the community, and thus bridging the worlds of the dead and living.

Not all individual vodhun disappear with their guardians. An individual deity may become a deity of the *fomé* through a complex web of relationships involving its future perpetuation. It could be inherited as an individual shrine, to be slowly converted over time into a shrine of the descent group, or it may seek legitimation through association with a shrine for initiation where the notion of *hunka* would become central. Normally, the prerogative of this association of a vodhun with a *fomé* affirms bonds with the past, but individual vodhun may undergo a transformation and become associated with residential groups in an exercise that will depend almost exclusively on the skills of their cult leaders.

Young healers in particular appear to use such strategies to gain continued legitimacy in an attempt to convert the short-term power connected with knowledge of *ebo* to long-term credibility associated with the *fomé*. Their marital unions with devotees of long-

established shrines unrelated to witchcraft practices open the door for the conversion of these new shrines to more viable and legitimate activities in the long term. Over time, these young cult leaders shifted their allegiance away from Kadabi and Adani as vodhun of witchcraft on to the new vodhun linked to their wives. The wife's *hunka* was thus perpetuated, and the cult leader provided with a means of converting and strengthening his knowledge to a more continuous and socially acceptable form. Thus although legitimacy can be found in the treatment of morally ambiguous witchcraft,[12] ultimate acknowledgement is provided only through continuity and the link with the dead.

GENDERING MODERNITY

The project of modernity – and its impact on gender – has been an ambiguous one and has exercised the anthropological imagination for some time. Certainly, theorising the issue of gender in modernity has often oscillated between viewing women as catalysts for change or as repositories and bearers of tradition.

The historical ascent of modernity in Europe has increasingly come to be theorised in terms of its redefinition of gender identities (Jervis 1998, Jordanova 1999), and its confining effect on the expression of womanhood through increasingly narrow associations of women with 'natural' processes. As much of this scholarly work has taken place in disciplines other than anthropology, areas outside Europe have most often been left unexamined. Yet it may appear surprising that the endorsement of theories of modernity, as they have been applied to ethnographic contexts by anthropologists, have either ignored, to a large extent, the issue of gender or replicated seemingly deeply entrenched perceptions of gender.

In her introduction to 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?', Okin (1999) posits that modernity and multiculturalism stand in opposition to one another in their approach to, and treatment of, the predicament of women across the world. Modernity is perceived, and endorsed unequivocally, as the bearer of a greater good, as the embodiment of greater democratic and egalitarian ideals. The project of modernity is therefore necessarily seen as desirable, although fraught with difficulty as a balance has to be struck between its contingent 'civilising' intentions and a desire to preserve democratic ideals and cultural diversity. Modernity's stance towards multiculturalism puts these democratic ideals to test, as many culturally specific practices are said to challenge basic human rights, and go against the fundamental ideals of equality stipulated by the modern state. The promotion of multiculturalism in a modern state is seen

as an inherently problematic political concept, and is treated by Okin as the key contributing factor to gender inequalities in general and the subordination of women in particular. Multiculturalism is most specifically at fault for its perceived tendency to encourage the subordination of women. Imported cultures (those of migrants) turn women into the bearers of tradition and static moral values, all antithetical to the fulfilment of greater autonomy, equity and rationality. In Okin's terms, the loss of ethnic identity and the abandonment of the ideal of multiculturalism as a viable universal political project are both necessary and unavoidable to the fulfilment of a rational and modern state, one that respects the basic human rights of its citizens. The undercurrent is clear: culture is treated as the repository for 'traditional' static values, and women are the victims of men's attempts to preserve and enforce such traditions. In other words, those who advocate the establishment of a multicultural society, where variations and differences between people can be taken into account in the legislature, blatantly ignore the underlying gender inequalities that masquerade as cultural practice. The respect for 'other' cultural ideals should be rejected in favour of a stronger push to establish modernity as universal principle: gender relations would benefit and improve.[13] The loss of cultural identity is, on the whole, but a small price to pay when the benefits of such a civilising enterprise are considered.

Okin's recent constructivistic writings may not, in the long term, prove seminal, and are indeed themselves embedded within a vast array of contradictory and multi-faceted debates which approach these issues with greater uncertainty and polemic (see for instance the contributions to James 1995). Nevertheless, they reflect important ideals that are prevalent in some professional and popular discourses of gender relations. Beyond the proselytising packaging, they also bring into focus some disturbing and – for most anthropologists at least – classical oppositions. Ethnicity, tribalism and local identity are thus all condensed within the notion of culture in its narrowest, most confining sense; culture as encapsulating force is antithetical to the civilising mission of rationality as objective and universal fact, devoid of identity markers. Modernity is value-free, has no identifying imprints and is certainly not ethnic – highly arguable premises to say the least.

But let us forget for a moment the othering or imperialistic overtones, and return to the question of gender. What is perhaps most blatant and yet ultimately not surprising – is the remarkable lack of historicity applied to an understanding of gender and its construction in Western modernity in the past two centuries. The project of Western modernity, entangled as it is with the endeavours of the Enlightenment and its concomitant rationality was far from

ungendered, and was in fact premised on the establishment of inherent inequality of the genders. The portrayal of genders as opposites, as polarities in classificatory systems, is itself revealing of an emerging rearrangement of gender and sex attributes which appears to crystallise between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Jervis 1998, Moore 1994). What therefore rendered modernity possible in the first place was its ultimate other, its conquest of constructed ignorance, superstition and backwardness, as epitomised in (representations of) nature and sited, by extension, in women as implicit embodiments and repositories of the most 'natural' within the human species (Martin 1989). The scientific endeavour heralds the triumph of knowledge over superstition and ignorance, but also of male over female. The ultimate call for equality, epitomised in the great achievements of the French Revolution, was itself premised on the prior emergence of highly polarised and differentiated roles for men and women. Thus revolutionary ideals finally serve to reconcile these recently constructed polarities, while casting them in the realm of the natural order of things, thereby transcending their own historicity beyond the call of human memory (for particularly powerful and more detailed discussions, see Jordanova 1980, 1999, Warner 1985).

Admittedly, anthropologists have tended to treat modernity with greater circumspection, acknowledging that local identity and universal ideologism have rarely been entirely opposed, and have most often incorporated one another, conjoining to form syncretic patterns or colluded to create resistance and rejection, both processes which testify to the dynamic exchanges resulting from this very exposure (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, Werbner and Ranger 1996). Tradition, we need hardly remind ourselves, is evoked in contemporary contexts precisely through exposure and contact with that other, modernity (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983). As a consequence, modernity has seldom been swallowed wholesale, as it has been subjected to selective strategies which, in analysis at least, reattribute agency to those caught up in its midst. And, while modernity is indeed inevitably part of globalising processes, it has become embroiled in local discourses that serve to articulate acceptance of change and/or resistance to its impact. Thus modernity is continuously part of a process of translation, in which it is being tamed by local culture so as to turn it inside out and outside in.

What is most troublesome here is the difficulty of distinguishing the voices of the anthropologists as interpreters from those of informants as actors and bearers of experience. Modernity is tacitly portrayed as the local interpretation and rendering of global currents and processes. The assumption that local actions and discourses merely replicate global trends perpetuates othering tendencies, as

the local attempts to appropriate what is implicitly portrayed as floating outside itself. The global sphere is thereby tacitly represented as the repository of knowledge and rationality untainted by cultural values. Consequently, the term 'modernity' retains parochial undertones, and it is often applied to non-Western contexts where the endorsement of modernity contrasts with what is truly 'modern' and culture-free. The advent of modernity is therefore often reserved to those 'others' who are bound to continue replicating their own traditions while adopting modernity simply through mimesis. Tradition, as it has become constructed in the numerous accounts dealing with the assimilation of modernity, becomes a potent cultural agent as it can convert what is not fully understood into acceptable categories. And here we come to assimilate local responses to modernity with mimesis (see Kramer 1993, Taussig 1993) which, however imaginative and innovative a response, fails to gain full independence and remains, as a consequence, forever tied in with the subordinate, with a kind of false consciousness and misplaced realism.

Much of the anthropological discussion surrounding women in relation to modernity and globalisation processes has tended to position their involvement at the pole of tradition: far from being left out women have become, in representation and interpretation at least, key players as repositories for the past, for tradition, the embodiments of history, spirits, nature and the safeguarding of morality. Alternatively, women have been the witches mediating the miseries of society, vulnerable to the corruption of their bodies by processes of modernisation whose assault they could not withstand, leading to prostitution and the threat of unleashed and unbridled sexuality (Ogden 1996). In many ways women's relationship to modernity has often been perceived as one of anomie and alienation, shaped by loss, exclusion, and little sense of agency or participation, other than through coercion and instances of *force majeur*e.

The association of women with a perceived pre-existing tradition, with a state of permanent, essential and embodied morality, appears to emphasise the role of women as inherently enshrined in a 'natural' order, far away from the corrupting influences of modernity and 'change'. Men, by contrast, continue to be tacitly associated with the making of new, evolving culture through the encompassment of new technologies and the appropriation of novel economic ventures, thus endorsing modernity – sometimes at their peril. Women may then act as the saviours from alienation and anomie, providing the backdrop against which morality and tradition are acclaimed and reclaimed and used to provide a sense of (renewed) belonging and holistic meaning. Thus, if modernity is seen as the indigenisation (Appadurai 1998) of globalisation and its progress,

women in particular are seen as at one remove from such a process as they come to represent the indigenous and traditional in the face of local, and often mimetic, modernity. What is more, if processes of globalisation are associated with the homogenisation of culture, the encoding of women's bodies with the reproduction of core indigenous values inadvertently leads to their being enshrined within worlds that are, implicitly if not overtly, smaller and more localised than those of men. Thus women become locative agents of culture through their role as the preserving guardians of tradition; of men through marital practice and reproduction; and of territories through their perceived restricted mobility.

As Boddy (1989, 1994) has convincingly argued in the case of Hofriyati women, self-containment, chastity and enclosure may be seen as achieved cultural practice rather than female predicament; bodily containment encoded in experience rather than inherent in the female state. In this sense, there is little inherently female, or feminine, about immobility. Rather, narratives of suffering and religious practice, such as circumcision and possession, serve as physical reminders and experiential foci for notions of containment and closeness as markers of identity (a similar argument is made by Abu Lughod 1986). The mobility of men and immobility of women act as contrasting ideological tropes and representations of how Hofriyati society should be. After all, marriage and its concomitant virilocal settlement hardly make for the complete immobility of women, yet ideal representations of womanliness subsume such practices into discourses of passivity, containment and immobility, enshrined in the female body.

Such representations of immobility are hardly applicable to Watchi femalehood, as women are constantly seen to cross the territories inhabited by humans and deities, as we have seen in previous chapters. Through marriage and trading activities, women are seldom confined to one locality, and come to embody, through their relationship with cosmos and vodhun, the highly mobile history of the larger Ewe compound group (see Rosenthal 1998 for a similar argument). Yet how are vodhun, and women, to be presented in discourses of modernity? Is their involvement to be seen simply in terms of 'recuperation', of actions of snatching away and removing the bodies of teachers, successful students, and devoted government officials from the domain of public society in order to reinsert them into the realm of 'tradition', the life of the countryside?[14] In other words, are dissatisfied vodhun simply attempting to challenge rapid modernisation processes when unexpectedly[15] calling upon highly educated disciples? As well as playing a fundamental role in the making of (gendered) Watchi identities and claims on territory, are

representations of vodhun in the modern world simply a means of taming modernity and stabilising dislocation?

We may find a partial answer in the enactment and experience of spirit possession. At one level, spirits may be seen to stabilise identities in demarcating some women (and a few men) as devotees, as chosen ones. The experience of spirit possession is often exegetically explained as a fundamental alteration in identities, as the merging between the divine and the human life-world, and deeply challenges the notion of division between body and mind.[16] I have so far focused almost exclusively on these aspects, and on the gendered interpretations given to possession. Unsurprisingly, other factors are also at play.

Spirits also bring into focus the highly unstable nature of identity as it applies to the plethora of possible experienced histories of the Watchi, as reflected in the multiple origins attributed to the spirits themselves. Thus women, in their particularly potent representation as crossers of territory and containers of vodhun legitimating settlement, also come to embody a sense of history during possession, by 'picking up' the identities of colonial administrators, strangers, and other permanent or transient presences in their wider locality (see Larsen 1998 for a discussion of spirits as indicators of historical events). Devotees of Agbui endorse male colonial clothing – the pith helmet, the green male military uniform, the rifle and, significantly, the ridiculously large wooden penis[17] – and come to be possessed by spirits of white colonial administrators. Recent literature on West African possession highlights similar features (see particularly Kramer 1993, Rosenthal 1998, Stoller 1995).

Spirit possession, in other words, is no longer seen as a static reflection of fixed male/female relationships, but rather as a continuous enactment and performance of history, memory and identity. However, there is also a disjunction in these analyses: while embodiment theory has provided a powerful framework for discussing spirit possession as a key player in the making of emerging identities rather than fixed and predetermined ones, the focus has either been laid on gender (how spirits help create gendered selves) or on historical identities (such as those of colonialism). The first have been relatively unconcerned with wider historical and political issues, while the second have tended to minimise the gendered element of historic re-enactment. In other words, if spirits serve to bring to a head an understanding of gender while also containing historical transcripts, why are women particularly potent agents in 'embodying memories'? Beyond the embodiment of gendered identities, why has mimesis come to be sited in women's bodies?

Although it has been noted that possession is often expressive of colonial memories and those of slavery, the contemporary (verbal) exegetic interpretations of possession by spirits in Momé Hounkpati rarely make explicit any overt references to either colonialism or slavery. As inherently 'embodied memories', to use Stoller's (1995) term, the enactment of possession itself serves as a coded expression of such events, the body implicitly encompassing a sense of history which remains mostly untold (see Zeitlyn 1994 for a discussion on lack of exegesis). However, if overt references to colonial historiographies are rarely included in everyday discourse, the continuities between the colonial experience and the contemporary politics of the post-independence state penetrate the experience and performance of vodhun in other pervasive ways.

Any answer can only be partial, and further exploration into this area would be a welcome addition to anthropological investigation. As for vodhun, they can hardly be seen as opposing modernity. Some, such as vodhun Hevieso, may temporarily prohibit, during initiation and ritual performances in particular, the use of 'modern' objects within the confines of the shrine, prohibiting, for instance, the wearing of manufactured clothes, the use of 'modern' modes of transportation such as cars or bicycles, or the use of manufactured agricultural tools and kitchen utensils, such as industrially made ropes, iron hoes and enamel basins, in favour of twined natural fibres, wooden instruments and scooped out gourds. Others are, by contrast, overtly associated with material wealth and prosperity, often derived from engaging in trading activities, highly 'modern' entreprises. Such vodhun, their leaders and devotees can hardly be said to remain outside of modernity and what it represents: cult leaders invariably rank among the wealthiest individuals in the community, and devotees are generally extremely successful traders, whose connection with vodhun ensures even greater prosperity. The flow of goods, money and favours in the direction of the shrines positions these at the centre of social interaction, and cult leaders may be deemed to be important focal points for the redistribution of significant economic resources. Yet such exchanges, and those in which devotees engage while trading, are generally subsumed within a discourse that positions them outside the realm of vodhun. As Sufhunde, a very prosperous trader, told me 'Vodhun cannot be bought. You cannot pretend to be possessed and join the shrine to boost your business. But of course, vodhun will help you if you treat them well.' The installation of a shrine to vodhun Toxosu is expected to cost between some 300,000 or 400,000 CFA (£500–£600),[18] a shrine to Mami Wata, female deity of wealth and prosperity possibly twice as much. These idioms of inclusion and exclusion of matters relating to money and currency appear to encompass the relation-

ship between vodhun as embodiment of 'tradition' and money-making as characteristic of modern life.

In that light, goods are also continuously converted into currencies which embody histories of slavery and are re-embedded in the moral economy of vodhun (for more detailed accounts on moral economies, see Apter 1993, Austen 1993, Moore 2001). Thus devotees will purchase cowrie shells,[19] shell armbands and necklaces in order to make less obvious the money derived from their entrepreneurial ventures, while acting as a conspicuous display of their religious credentials and spiritual powers. Wealth will also consequently be channelled towards the shrine, towards the purchase of 'religious' paraphernalia such as pots, towards decorating the shrines, both inside and out, in order to demonstrate its powers and prowess. Plants to boost the powers of the gods also feature prominently in this process of conversion of currency.

My postulation is that vodhun are not simply to do with recuperation and the revival of old values and morality, in opposition to modernity, nor with the taming of modernity while bending it to local understanding. The fact that seemingly successful and 'well-adapted' school girls, established traders, civil servants or car mechanics become, to their explicit surprise, caught up in vodhun[20] can only with difficulty be attributed to the vindictiveness of tradition; to its (re-)assertion when faced with its potential demise among young people who speak French and adopt a mode of life associated with the city, and modern occupations. The reviving of old vodhun can hardly be seen as their last spasm before final expiry. Equally, the importance of vodhun in marking changes in the life-course can hardly be considered a response enabling the adoption of modernity in locally acceptable forms. While avoiding the pitfalls of reifying tradition as integrative, a simple dichotomisation between these two poles may obscure, rather than inform, the relationships that emerge through what has to be acknowledged as a significant shift in the life-course and narratives of informants. Yet, in my view, what appears as a fundamental transformation in the process of integrating vodhun into one's life, either as female devotee or male cult leader, pivots around the issue of gender.

At the core of vodhun practice lies its association with gender identities and the knowledge this connection imparts. Primarily, intimate relationships with, and knowledge of, deities appears to shift the emphasis from a male (secular) discourse to a predominantly female religious one, and one where men are accountable if not to women, at least to a largely female construction and representation of the world.[21] What is contested in relation to modernity is its perceived lack of female assertiveness, and joining a vodhun shrine offers not a contestation of, or withdrawal from, modernity

as such, but a means of reconditioning one's insertion into the modern world. The original packaging of education, the workplace and government discourses in essentially male idioms is thus contested in the sphere of vodhun, with its heavy emphasis on matrifiliation, female blood and cosmogonic power. Yet if these deities serve as a means of contesting modernity, their challenge is far from predictable.

The question of gender has undergone a noticeable shift in emphasis in theoretical discourse: the original preoccupation of feminist writers with the condition of women has led the way to a more general concern for how gender identities are expressed in relationships where male/female are treated as constructed categories. This has been coupled with the necessary questioning of the hegemonic nature and status of what constitutes masculinity or femininity as independent classificatory devices. If gender is viewed as the imposition of cultural meaning on what is assumed to be the biological division of sex, such an imposition relies heavily on an understanding of the gendered body as a construction. Such a construction in turn relies on the continuous performance and enactment of a gendered identity to make distinctions stand out and stick. Yet ultimately, the predominant and 'rational' distinction between gender and sex appears only to replicate categories which reify and confirm a Western classification of the world, and an ethnocentric one at that: gender may be culturally defined, but the accuracy of biologically defined sexes remains on the whole unthreatened. Such universalistic concepts have only recently begun to be challenged (see for instance Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994, Herdt 1994, Moore 1994, Nanda 1990), not least by ethnographic data which point to the encompassment of male and female principles in the identity of the person in general, and particularly those who are spiritually connected (see also Chapter 4, this volume).

However welcome, such a shift in focus has remained relatively entrenched within the traditional domains for the study of gender, namely its ritual construction and representation at metaphoric and symbolic levels (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994, Herdt 1994, Lutkehaus and Roscoe 1995, Ramet 1996). It is significant that the issue of gender in anthropology has been so singularly theorised in contexts that emphasise the 'traditional' position of women in society when tackling modernity. It can only be surmised that this orientation is linked to the perception that modernity has little to contribute to the construction and representation of gender identities, which are often perceived as being already there, as having been constituted in other ways than through modernity. Female identities are often described as being threatened, rather than con-

solidated, through encounters with modernity. Ditto the notion of return to tradition where women are concerned.

The experience of misfortune, possession or illness may express disjunctions in an individual's life-course, but can hardly be seen simply as the social embodiment of strife and discomfort in the face of modernity and the risk of anomie and estrangement. Treating instances of change in terms of anomie denies the importance of the dynamic processes at play in cultural exchanges, and recreates idioms of 'othering'. The adherence to and performance of vodhun may be viewed as an arena of both confirmation and contestation, acting as a trope for resistance to modernity, the state, colonial religious institutions, while also affirming the possibility of conjoining several identities. Initiation and possession allow members to re-enter modernity in a new modified guise, one that incorporates tradition rather than leaving it behind. There are thus no inherent or essential conflicts between tradition and modernity, but rather issues of organisation and positioning. Modern paraphernalia are, after all, important to the functioning of shrines, and modernity provides the means for their appropriation.

Joining the realm of vodhun deities may thus provide a means of achieving new ways of 'being in the world', where modernity is remodelled to incorporate a gendered vision of the world contingent upon the insertion of female world views as expressed through possession, cords of blood, initiation and the installation of shrines. Most crucially, perhaps, the ultimate emphasis within vodhun remains inherently ungendered, focusing on the naked human body as neither male nor female. Adherence to vodhun in this sense does not reify tradition, nor does it simply act as an integrative discourse in the face of the purported alienating forces of modernity. Rather, vodhun acts as an instrumental device enabling its adepts to join anew in the process of modernity with a different emphasis on their own gendered selves, allowing for the possibility of embedding modernity within this religious complex and acting as a mode of renewal. Whereas, elsewhere, independent churches have acted as foci for the appropriation of modernity and the renewal of tradition, so far as the south-east of Togo is concerned this role seems to have remained embedded within the realm of vodhun.

NOTES

1 INTRODUCTION

1. I am grateful to the Central Research Fund of the University of London, to the SOAS Additional Award Fund for Postgraduate Research and to the Percy Sladen Memorial Fund for making this research possible. I am also indebted to the Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale for granting research permission, to the Institut d'Études Démographiques for making their facilities available to me during fieldwork, and to the Radcliffe-Brown Memorial Fund's contribution towards the writing up process. Subsequent visits, supported by the Faculty of Social Sciences and by the Department of Anthropology at the University of Kent, have enabled the consolidation of data included here. Additional and comparative material among other Ewe groups has also taken place in Ghana.
2. The term 'cult' is problematic, as it often denotes some lesser form of religious involvement. It is hardly ever used to denominate world religions, other than in sectarian and separatist contexts. Where used in my text, it is intended on a par with religion.
3. Verger's spelling.
4. A full etymology of the term 'vodhun' is provided in Lovell (1993). The pronunciation of the term varies greatly between the Ewe groups in this geographical area. For instance groups of Anlo-Ewe in south-east Ghana do not nasalise the last syllable, nor do they insert an 'h' into the pronunciation of this term. Deities are identified by the Anlo as vodu, and are said to have come from Togo in the east. These variations in pronunciation and etymology are, I believe, linked to variations in the position of these deities in relation to other deities in local cosmologies. These shifts result from regional migrations, the transformation of the identities of gods through relocation, and the shift in emphasis in kinship ties between various Ewe subgroups.

   The term vodhun will not hereafter be italicised in the text, as it lies at the core of most discussions. All other exegetic Watchi words will be indicated in italics.
5. Or whatever term we might use to intellectualise its reality in the field.
6. Did the natural barriers provided by the Mono River to the east and the Volta River to the west in any way influence this pattern of settlement? It is, of course, impossible to answer this question directly, but the apparent movements across these natural features appears to have been quite exceptional (see contributions in de Medeiros 1984; see also Amenumey 1986, van Dantzig 1984, Gayibor 1984, 1986).
7. Decalo (1996) comments that most of the south-east of Togo has remained relatively impervious to the penetration of Christianity, no doubt as the result of resistance.

8. ORSTOM is the Organisation de Recherche Scientifique dans les Territoires d'Outre Mer. This institute has now been renamed the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD).
9. The coastal area of Togo has been subjected to early missionary activity since the penetration of the territory initially by German Presbyterian missionaries, followed by French Catholic clergy. However, it is to be noted that the primary areas targeted by Christian religious activity were located in the western parts of what is now Togo. The mountainous region around Kpalime is today considered to be Christianised to the extent where 'indigenous' religion is believed to have been more or less eradicated. In my early attempts to establish a site for fieldwork, I travelled in several parts of the southern belt of Togo, from west to east. In the western part, I came across several religious leaders and herbalists who were keen to see me settle with them because, they said, 'our own youth are not interested in our knowledge. They are Christian, they work for the state, and they forget about us.' Although this statement may obviously be contextualised in several ways, and leaves open many avenues of interpretation, it is significant that no such 'shortage' of interest in indigenous religion was obviously manifest in the south-east. In conversations with three local Christian preachers near Momé Hounkpati, all three expressed concern that their work was made difficult there by the tenacious nature of vodhun 'tradition' ('les traditions et pratiques vodhun'). One of the three openly expressed the wish to leave this region as quickly as was practicable, subject to him finding another position elsewhere. He also voiced complaints about parents not attending the Sunday service: 'They send their children instead, so that they can learn Ewe more quickly. But they are not interested in God.' The impact of this early Christian Catholic education on children has yet to be assessed. During fieldwork in 1989–90 and again in 1996, the impact of Christianity in the south-east remained relatively insignificant compared to, for instance, the areas around Lomé or Anloga in Ghana, where its interaction with vodhun was often fraught with conflict.

   At the time of my first fieldwork in 1989–90, the impact of Christianity in the region of Anlogan remained relatively insignificant, while it had gained some ground in the bigger towns in the Préfecture de Vo. By the late 1990s, Christian and Islamic spirits were beginning to appear in the midst of vodhun spirits during possession ceremonies (I am grateful to Laura Lloyd, at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, for confirming this information).

   Although this lack of insertion of Christianity may appear surprising in light of its importance in other nearby areas of West Africa, not least in neighbouring Ghana and Benin, this state of affairs has been noted by other scholars (see for instance Decalo 1996: 134, 288). Decalo describes 'Animism' as the main contemporary religious complex of the Ewe.
10. I use the official orthography in this context. A large number of personal names, particularly associated with initiates to vodhun societies, use *hun* as a prefix. However, the official spelling of the name of the village has been retained here. See note 4 above for further details concerning the etymology of these names.
11. While on a walk through the marketplace in Momé Hounkpati, a (Togolese) academic friend visiting from Lomé could barely conceal her surprise as she expressed, with more than a hint of apprehension 'Mais elles sont toutes féticheuses ici!', 'But everyone here is a devotee!'

12. I use Anderson's (1983) influential terminology in this debate, but see also Amselle 1998, Miller 1998, Piot 1999, Werbner and Ranger 1996.
13. To use Kleinman's term (1988).
14. See de Medeiros (1984) and the mostly excellent contributions in his edited volume. Sadly, the notion of ethnic group is insufficiently problematised, and dealt with in a taken-for-granted fashion.
15. The president of Togo, Gnassigbe Éyadéma, himself a Kabre from the north, is said regularly to have recourse to vodhun priests for divination purposes and in order to boost his power. For a powerfully metaphoric account of these relationships, see Kourouma's novel *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, where Éyadéma features as the protagonist of the story in a barely concealed fashion.

2 BLOOD AND PLACE, PERSONS AND GODS

1. Togo's last population census was conducted in 1981 and published by the World Health Organisation. A new population census was expected to take place in 1991, but the turbulent political situation has made this exercise impracticable. It has now been indefinitely delayed.
2. The dispersion of a large number of people from Notsé, and the following diaspora, has been attributed to the dissatisfaction associated with the reign of terror of the King Agokoli. However, Gayibor (1984) casts doubts on the validity of this assumption, as he finds no evidence of war and unrest, and considers the existing descriptions of Agokoli as a tyrant as a myth-creating exercise. He attributes these migrations to the rapid expansion of Notsé, which eventually led to restricted availability of, and access to fertile land, resulting in poverty and famine for large portions of the population.
3. The stress in this context is on how narratives fuse with phenomenological experiences of the 'lived' world. Jackson saliently points out that:

   > Unlike theoretical explanations, narrative redescription is a crucial and constitutive part of the ongoing activity of the lifeworld, which is why narrative plays such a central role in phenomenological description. Moreover, narrative activity reveals the link between discourse and practice, since the very structure of narrative is pregiven in the structure of everyday life. (1996: 39)

   And, quoting MacIntyre, 'stories are lived before they are told' (MacIntyre in Jackson 1996: 39).

   I refer to these narratives as one aspect of how the Watchi perceive their world, temporarily, when prompted by ritual occasions or the enquiries of a curious anthropologist. It does not mean that all Watchi conceive of their existence as overly cosmological, nor is their cosmology homogeneous for that matter.
4. Witchcraft is said to be unable to perch on this tree, thus making the dwelling secure and protected for its inhabitants. The oil from its nuts is used in sacrifices to ward off evil.
5. The nuts used in divination always stem from this particular palm tree, and are referred to as the (generally male) diviner's wives. The many permutations of the Ewe divinatory system, known as Afa (and closely akin to Yoruba Fa divination), are subdivided into 255 possible combinations, the first 16 of which are considered female, and represent the origins of the world, and, it is said, the founding clans of the original settlement.

These 16 combinations are also considered the mothers of divination. All subsequent permutations are described as male, and are treated as the children of the first 16 mothers.

6. In most contemporary Christian or Christianised discourses, Mawu has acquired an unequivocally male character. The Ewe translation of the Bible equates the male part of Mawu with God in contemporary discourses (see Greene 1996a for a historical overview).
7. A myth recounted to me echoes the same notion of female continuity and male infertility. Originally, the moon, *xleti*, perceived of as being female, and the sun, *xe*, perceived of as being male, both had many children, *xletivi* and *xevi*. The sun challenged the moon, demanding that she invite him for dinner and cook all her children for him to eat. The moon, horrified, was convinced that she would have to give up all her children. She eventually devised a plan: she challenged the sun, announcing that she would only do what he had asked of her if he presented her with his children first, and showed her how to cook them. The sun complied. In the evening, he sent her a cooking pot full of his *xevi*. The moon, not wishing to give up her progeny, simply recooked the dish sent to her by the sun, and returned it. The sun ended up unwittingly eating his own children. This is why the moon still has many children (the stars) to shine with her at night, while the sun remains alone, his children having disappeared.
8. Cultivated fields are referred to as *agble*. Human action thus transforms the wild field, *bomé*, to a productive unit for consumption. Only the term *bomé* is used as a metaphor to symbolise life and human existence.
9. Indeed, they are said to scratch the ground like chickens do when searching for food, or diviners do when marking their divination board.
10. It is no coincidence that chickens are the primary sacrificial offering in vodhun rituals. Women often consume the blood of these birds before possession.
11. These same idioms of infertility are used to describe witches, who are said to feed on their own children in the womb, preventing their growth and well-being. A woman who cannot cook and is unable to nurture husband and children appropriately is thus associated with a broken pot, and therefore runs the risk of being accused of witchcraft, eating her children and possibly bewitching her husband instead of imbuing them with life.
12. This process of keeping the pots intact and in good condition has nothing to do with abstinence from premarital relationships. Watchi adolescents are relatively free to engage in amorous pursuits and experience sexual relationships prior to marriage, as long as these do not lead to unexpected or unwanted pregnancies. This would, indeed, make the ‘pot’ unsound.
13. Such is the power of deities that when a new market, intended by the Togolese government to be one of the largest in West Africa, was commissioned and built in Lomé in the late 1980s, it quickly fell into disuse and is now derelict due, people say, to insufficient sacrifices to the gods. A venue of that scale requires human sacrifice, and the government allegedly refused to be involved in such practices, since this would have attracted adverse international attention. It is said that the scale of the project nevertheless elicited persons with vested interests in this venture to abduct and kill several people in the area. As even this was insufficient to properly propitiate the gods and invest the territory with appropriate powers, the market never thrived.

In addition, during recent fieldwork among a group of Anlo-Ewe in Ghana, a whole community was said to have abandoned its settlement some 15 years ago due to an unresolved dispute over the guardianship of a vodhun's shrine. The police had to intervene after violent clashes broke out between various factions of the community. The site is said to remain derelict but under constant police supervision.

In another such dispute, in the town of Anlogan, a prominent trader undertook the construction of a very large house in the centre of town in the 1940s. When I enquired about its unfinished state (in 1996), one of my informants simply pointed across the road, where a vodhun's shrine was located in a courtyard. I was told that, as the new two-storey house would have overlooked the shrine, 'exposing its genitals' for the new residents to see, the vodhun's dissatisfaction had inflicted countless misfortunes on the proprietor, who eventually dropped his project and let the house stand unfinished. Thus, if vodhun are essential in helping establish a locality, they can also restrain its expansion and act as powerful agents in human conflicts over land rights, particularly in contexts of 'modernity'.

14. I shared in the compound of four women, all maried to Kpaka, the father of the house (*aféto*). We developed a joking relationship, where we addressed each other as *atusi*, co-wife.
15. On average, girls marry at 18, while men do so at 26. Polygyny is frequent, but by no means a general practice, with the highest percentage of polygynous unions found among men aged between 40 and 50, 45 per cent of whom have more than one wife. Men in polygynous marriages have an average of 1.5 wives. However, women are highly mobile and, by the age of 45, half of them will have been married more than once (Locoh et al. 1984). At any one time, only 1 per cent of the female adult population is divorced, due to the fact that most women remarry or enter into new relationships within one year of separation (Locoh 1984). In Locoh's study, 60 per cent of women were in their first marriage, 22 per cent in their second and 5 per cent in their third.
16. Husbands have an obligation to provide each of their wives with a house upon marriage, which she will share with her future children. He should, equally, make a piece of land available in order for her to secure their livelihood, although this tends to occur mainly among the more fortunate and after several years of marriage and the birth of some children.
17. However, although adolescent boys were regularly seen preparing food for their fathers and other male relatives, and some heads of household occasionally became involved in household chores and did cook for themselves, neither of these two categories was seen preparing food for other women.
18. This may be the case from a purely structural point of view, yet the Ewe (who are all treated together in de Surgy's work) can hardly be described as matrilineal in the classical anthropological sense. Nukunya referred to Ewe kinship as being uterine at its origin, and subsequently dividing into cognatic bonds (Nukunya, personal communication), a view which I support. Ward (1955) provided one of the earliest accounts of what she termed double descent among the Ewe in Ghana.
19. For a discussion on the ancestralisation of elders and departed elders, see Kopytoff (1971), and on ancestors as 'living dead' Lawal (1977).

    Togbui (pl. *Togbuiganwo*) denotes an elder, still living or already dead, and indicates the status of an old person, someone who has had many

offspring and become a grandfather. Indeed, this term is used primarily to designate grandfathers and those who hold a position of authority, such as elders who are members of the village council. Hence the chief is normally addressed and referred to by this term (although he was only 32 years of age at the time of my first fieldwork), as are the elders. A notion of wisdom and knowledge is associated with the term *togbui*, as one normally reaches such office only after having acquired a certain maturity, implying attributes of wisdom and righteousness. It is also essential to have offspring.

Etymologically, *to* refers to father, and *gbui* or *gbi* can mean forever or eternally. Hence we can see a merging between the departed spirits, the male village elders and grandfathers in general. Considering this etymology, one could argue that *togbui* refers to those men who, while still alive, have achieved a certain status in political office or in terms of procreation, and who have thus secured eternal status. Their position as grandfathers and/or elders already imbues them with an eternal quality during their lifetime, and guarantees their continued existence in the afterlife. The living would thus maintain with the dead or departed social relationships that are a continuation of their relationships with living elders.

20. I use the term 'initiate' to describe those who undergo the process of initiation allowing them membership into a vodhun's secret society. The term 'devotee' is used to describe those who have successfully completed this process, and who have become fully fledged members of these societies.
21. Christian missionaries in the region, and also in Ghana, have often denounced vodhun shrines as religious sects where institutionalised 'slavery' is practised. Such use of labour is deemed unacceptable, and has occasionally been at the heart of heated debates in the media between various religious groups.
22. Boddy (1989) describes what she terms 'over-determined' female identity among Hofriyati women. Devotees of vodhun could be said to equally embody an over-determined female representation of their society.

3 MAKING GODS, KNOWING GODS

1. Although I had only just met her, she often would include me in her outbursts for failing to help her in her current predicament, or for representing a school system that she believed had failed her.
2. See for instance Parkin's explorations on the semantics of illness (1979, 1991a), and also Besnier (1996) and Sansom (1982).
3. Mami Wata, as patron of wealth, is among the most expensive vodhun to install and entertain. She is made of talcum powder mixed with perfume left to solidify. Both items are imported from either Nigeria or Ghana. Having to erect a shrine for Mami Wata as curative measure for misfortune reflects the complexity of the dialectic of power between humans and deities: the latter may inflict misfortune, yet, once established as deities in a human dwelling, will be expected to provide protection from the miseries which they themselves have caused.
4. Luc de Heusch (1986: 72–82, 92–3) describes the python as a mythological being, the spirit of water, which surrounds the earth. Its dwelling is also described as the origin of life, the place where ancestors reside. Among the Zulu, it is considered male. Jacobson-Widding (1979: 338–40),

dealing with various groups in the Lower Congo, depicts the python as bisexual, and a mediator between the earth and the sky. The Watchi consider it as mediator between earth, sky and water: it grazes on land while keeping its tail in the water. It is thus said to contain the universe.

5. Legbavi was here treated as a vodhun in its own right, and not as a Legba, or messenger of the vodhun.
6. A shrine is initially established through affiliation and apprenticeship to an old cult leader possessing a vodhun of the same name. The two vodhun will originally be considered exactly the same, fulfilling identical functions, curing the same illnesses, and fulfilling identical requests from their keepers. Yet as the new leader's esoteric knowledge of plants, prayers and communication skills expands, the vodhun will come to acquire increasingly separate identities, ones which tightly depend on the practices of their respective custodians. Spiritual belief in the strength of a vodhun merges with the personal skills and power to cure attributed to its leader.
7. Verger (1957: 71–85) uses a similar idiom when he describes the religious systems of the Fon and Yoruba, with their vodhun and *orisa*, as polytheistic in ideology and cosmology but monotheistic in practice, in that individuals tend to develop an exclusive relationship with only one vodhun or *orisa*. Devotees, he says, venerate the vodhun which has possessed them, and their attention is subsequently focused only on this relationship. See also Barber (1990), who focuses on the *orisa* of Nigeria. She considers that the overlapping categories of *orisa* have received too little attention, and that discrepancies in the description of their characteristics and identities have either been dismissed or streamlined. By being intimately involved in the process of shaping the personality of the god, humans feel greater attachment to a product of their own construction (see also Barber 1981, McCarthy-Brown 1989).
8. In fact, each segmented residential group has to have two separate shrines to ensure its success, fertility and social reproduction. The first houses the stool of ancestors, *togbizikpui*, while the second shelters the vodhun. No household is said to survive without these two foundations to secure its existence.
9. Another such instance is that of twin births (on twins, see Southall 1972). Twins are said to be vodhun, and the performance, at birth, of special rituals is required to ensure their continued existence among their fellow humans.
10. The term *si* affixed in this way demarcates the notion of 'ownership'. In current speech, ownership is indicated by the use of the verb *li asi*. *Li* means 'to be' or 'exist' (meaning both physical location and existence), and *si* means 'hand'. Hence ownership is denoted through the expression 'to be in the hand of ...', and is a close equivalent of the English verb 'to have'. *Si* also denotes the status of spouse.

    While devotees and others may refer to themselves as being children of the vodhun, it is simultaneously acknowledged that the vodhun have no actual children as they do not procreate, nor are they referred to as parents of human beings.
11. A student taking an introductory course recently wrote in an exam paper: 'The study of gender is relevant to anthropologists because women, like animals, are marginal to human society.' Such appallingly muddled thinking sadly reflects current lay misconceptions, and also highlights the difficulty in conveying a nuanced critique.

12. The gender debate initiated in the 1970s was premised on the oversimplified assumption that women's biological and procreative functions brought them closer to nature than men (Lévi-Strauss 1968, Ortner 1974). The subordination of women came to be seen as a universal fact, a consequence of women's association with nature and men's unequivocal link to culture. The feminist critique of Ortner did not fail to point out that this association of women with nature may itself be a cultural act (MacCormack 1980, Moore 1988). While these postulations have largely been refuted, the question remains topical. As human beings, men and women alike are involved in the construction of culture and what comes to be defined as nature (Ardener 1977, MacCormack 1980, Moore 1988, 1994, Strathern 1987). It has to be acknowledged that women's and men's reproductive functions are vital to the perpetuation of society, and that the transformation of this association with nature is channelled through institutions (such as marriage, the socialisation of children) which derive from cultural constructs in which both genders are involved. If set categories are already established, where women are indeed natural while men are creating culture, then any data using this model would only be confirming it, and any debate would be doomed from the start. By acknowledging, for example, that the Watchi-Ewe are associating women with nature in certain circumstances, no value judgement has yet been attached as to the superiority or inferiority of one gender (see also Strathern 1987). Other details are needed. Words such as 'nature', for instance, are themselves polysemic, having many implicit meanings (Descola 1994, MacCormack 1980: 9, Rival 1998).

4 GROUNDING VODHUN, UNMAKING GENDER

1. The term '*dze*' denotes both the colour red and salt as a substance, and both are prominent in the foods used in ritual. A certain type of corn porridge, *dzekume*, is prepared either with salt or red oil, and offered to both witches and evil spirits roaming at crossroads. Significantly, witches and sorcerers are also *dzeto*, the 'owner' of salt and redness. I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers of this manuscript for pointing out that salt avoidance is, not surprisingly perhaps, also enforced in African-American religious practice.
2. Largely based either on attributing possession to biological or nutritional dysfunctions such as calcium deficiency (Kehoe and Giletti 1981), or social imbalances and inequalities, such as propounded by theories on the marginality and peripherality of those afflicted by possession.
3. Like my informants, I make no distinction between gods and spirits. For an opposite theoretical stance see Chandra shekar (1989) and Lévy et al. (1996).
4. As was examined in more detail in Chapter 3, a range of relationships can be established and maintained between humans and vodhun. Many of these involve no possession. Among others, healers, cult leaders, witches, twins, and children born in what the Watchi consider anomalous fashion are all associated with the spiritual agency of vodhun, and will be required to maintain what are deemed appropriate relationships with gods, without necessarily ever becoming possessed.
5. I witnessed one such occurrence of spontaneous, uncontrolled and unstructured possession during fieldwork in south-east Togo in 1989–90. This standard description also echoes the idiomatic and general narrative

provided by informants when asked to depict an initial episode of possession. Subsequent possession, following initiation, can sometimes reach the same level of violent convulsions, but it is nevertheless more contained as it tends to occur within a more confined and specifically designated space, such as the shrine of a vodhun or a dancing ground just outside, especially designated for this purpose. Possession in such a context also tends to be more controlled by a specific time constraint, as it becomes associated with annual rituals or other specific ceremonies performed for the vodhun, such as the initiation of new recruits, burials, sacrificial, healing and cleansing rites.

6. Initiation transforms uncontrolled possession into a more domesticated and less dangerous experience through institutionalised membership into secret societies. Possession is thus inherently linked with this kind of membership, and its occurrence is deemed impossible outside this structure. Initiation involves seclusion at the vodhun's shrine for a period normally ranging from three months to a year (depending on the wealth of initiates and their kin). It involves a complete overhaul of the person's identity, providing her with a new name (which will become hers for the remainder of her earthly life, and for subsequent existence in the realm of the dead), scarifications whose patterns and design are associated with one particular deity, the learning of dance steps and a new language, *vodhungbe*.
7. Humans were not supposed to roam around the village at night, when unscheduled encounters might occur. In addition, when discussing with me such a hypothetical meeting, one healer framed the relationship in highly moralistic terms: Sakpata, when appearing in human guise in the middle of the night, surrounded by darkness, often took the appearance of someone very poor, wearing ragged clothes and with a famished look about it. In other words, there were no outer signs visible to ordinary humans indicating the deified identity of this being. Neglecting to provide it with food or shelter would inevitably lead to severe forms of punishment, including violent trance. Subsequent initiation might follow, but more severe cases of neglect might be punished by death.
8. When a devotee is possessed, she is referred to as having been 'taken' or 'abducted' by the vodhun. The same terminology is used when a future bride is abducted by the relatives of her future husband. There are explicit sexual references to this expression. A wife will also refer to herself as having 'taken' her husband, albeit without the involvement of any force. An initiate does not refer to the vodhun in these terms. She does not 'take' or 'abduct' her god.
9. Trees are here used as a metaphor for men.
10. No such parallel exists for men who do the same. A sizeable proportion of married men are regularly engaged in extra-marital affairs, but no association is made between them and wild animals. Men who so desire can turn to polygyny. Nevertheless, married women frequently become involved with other men, thus confirming the latter's perception of them as unreliable partners, and divorces are frequent. Having already had children with a husband facilitates departure, and no formal divorce need be pronounced. One older female informant referred to herself as having several husbands, since she had never formally divorced any of her three husbands, regularly visited them, and had several intermittent live-in lovers, whom she also considered her husbands. What is treated by Western researchers as 'serial monogamy' was, in this context,

explicitly equated by my female informant with the polygynous status normally attributed to men.

11. The original binary opposition between nature and culture, and its theoretical correspondence with the gender categories of male and female, was always considered problematic (Ardener 1977, MacCormack 1980), and has undergone substantial transformations in more current developments. See for instance Caplan (1987), Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994), Moore (1988, 1994), Ramet (1996).
12. This goes some way to resolving the contentions that arise (not least among scholars, but also among my informants) when discussing the occurrence of possession, the depth of the experience and whether it is genuine. In other words, my informants seemed to agree that there could be variations in the experience of trance, and that the depth of this altered state of consciousness could vary considerably between devotees, but also be experienced differently by the same devotee depending on time and space. If taken as collusion and as a form of communication between observer and observed, the experience of possession, and the depth of trance, can both be seen as a direct result of the relationship between those who experience and those who observe. This may also explain why trance can be contagious: Watchi devotees readily acknowledge that once one of them has become possessed, others can enter into trance simply by contact, speech or observation. Non-initiates can also be affected, leading the way to future initiation.
13. Devotees have overriding responsibilities towards their deities, and such obligations often take precedence over their duties towards male kin. Significantly, when working in Ghana in a town far more permeated by Christianity than the Togolese community described in this book, such relationships were described by a few educated male informants as 'bondage' or 'slavery', a terminology which echoes the description of vodhun practice by European Christian priests who regularly denounce vodhun as a religion of 'enslavement'.

5 HEALING MODERNITIES, ENGENDERING DIFFERENCE

1. Or, in Comaroff's words 'systematic values and predispositions were impressed upon consciousness in large part through the symbolic management of the body in everyday practice' (Comaroff 1985: 171).
2. Yet, ironically, the irrepeatable nature of ethnographic data also testifies to continuous alterations, the opposite of the static warp it is supposed to encapsulate.
3. Vodhun Sakpata and Anyigbato are one and the same, and these two names are used interchangeably.
4. Those who die unexpectedly and prematurely are considered victims of such death. The category includes victims of accidents, drowning, and those struck by lightning or having committed suicide.
5. *Luvho* is the 'soul' or 'shadow' of a person. It is believed to go to *tsifé* after death. *Tsifé* is said to be close to Mawu, the supreme god. As Rivière states, *tsifé* is a place whose location in the cosmos remains vague:

   à l'instant de la mort, *luvho* ... est sensé rester dans le voisinage du corps, au dessus du cercueil par exemple avec lequel il ne se laissera pas ensevelir. Après avoir rodé un moment dans les endroits familiers, entre le décès et les cérémonies de funérailles, *luvho* au terme d'un long voyage rejoint les ancêtres qui l'accueillent dans un lieu imprécis nommé

Tsiefwe. [at the moment of death, *luvho* ... is supposed to remain in the vicinity of the corpse, above the coffin for instance, with which it will not be buried. Having wandered for a while in familiar places, between the time of death and the holding of funerals *luvho* will, after a long journey, join the realm of ancestors in an unspecified location called *tsiefwe*.] (1981: 74)

There seems to be a merging between the notion of *luvho*, the soul, and that of ancestors. The soul is thus said to wander to the 'house of water' in order to join ancestors. This overlap between soul and ancestors appears in Rivière's text, and also in my data.

6. This translates as *dzo*: fire, and *gbeme*: the bush, the wild.
7. MacGaffey (1970) defines the difference between the two as being that the one fulfils private interest, while the other is intended for the public good. Both healer and sorcerer thus share similar knowledge, and use the same paraphernalia, but their ends differ (see also MacGaffey 1978).
8. The notion of mimesis, as discussed for instance by Kramer (1993), Stoller (1995) and Taussig (1993), presents a serious interpretive challenge, as mimesis implies a false consciousness about the proper working of economic and political mechanisms. Similarly, Sartre, in his introduction to Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre*, likens immigrants' madness in the colonial context to shamanic experience, both in effect testifying to displaced reaction in the face of powerlessness. In other words madness, shamanism, possession, and ritual behaviour share between them a false consciousness, in true Marxist fashion, alleviating distress temporarily and at individual level without threatening the social (and often colonial) order. Religion, as manifested in ritual, or madness, as internalised individual reaction, can only ever replicate and reproduce already existing meanings, without threatening the status quo. As expressions of false consciousness, true political impetus is lacking (cf. Lucy Mair 1970 and cargo cults). As anthropologists dealing with issues of meaning and exegesis which coexist with and express political realities, the distinction between imagination, false consciousness and 'real' political awareness is hardly tenable.
9. October 2001, Reuters.
10. Although gender is, admittedly, only one of many factors at play.
11. Several other narratives echo these themes, such as that of Thomas, a man in his 30s, educated as a teacher in Lomé, and employed by the Ministry of Education in northern Togo. He was summoned back to reside in Momé Hounkpati several months after his father's death: he had been designated by the vodhun as rightful successor as leader of the family shrine. His older brother, who had all the while remained a resident of Momé Hounkpati, had been trained by their late father to succeed him. Divination had revealed a different path, and Thomas was now regularly travelling back to the village in order to be instructed by his more knowledgeable elder brother. Although many more such narratives might be included, they shall remain untold for lack of space.
12. This seems partly to answer the questions raised in relation to inherited as opposed to acquired knowledge. *Ebo* set aside, and regardless of the type of cure provided, each healer seems to find a place in the web of healing processes.
13. How such improvements are to be measured remains untold.
14. The 'terroir' to use the idiom of French-educated Togolese. 'Terroir' refers to the soil or territory of one's birthplace.

15. Although this situation is repeated time and time again, families most often express surprise when an educated member of the household is chosen before one who has remained close to the shrine.
16. As the abundant literature on the subject testifies. See Boddy's (1994) excellent review of the topic, but also Chandra shekar (1989), Lambek (1988), Stoller (1995).
17. The Agbuisi, devotees of Agbui, appear as particularly potent symbols for the representation of 'other' identities. Many Agbuisi without colonial dress were seen hiding wooden penises under their aprons, attempting to force mock sexual intercourse on other devotees and lay persons alike. I have also been told that in the nearby town of Vogan, Islamic spirits have recently appeared and been incorporated into some spirit possession orders (Laura Lloyd, personal communication), yet are designated as vodhun spirits coming from the north.
18. £1 = 650 CFA, approximately.
19. Previously a currency in its own right.
20. Men tend to become involved as cult leaders or caretakers of shrines, women as initiates and devotees.
21. I vividly recall asking, on a return visit to the field in 1996, whether the world, as viewed by devotees, was a predominantly female one. The male cult leader was quiet for a long time, looking at me with insistence, and finally only uttered a prolonged 'aaaah'. I was left to ponder the significance of this indeterminate answer until, a few days later, he came to visit me and said: 'How do you know so much?'

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