

Constructing the Haitian Zombie: An Anthropological Study Beyond Madness

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Zombies have become a hot topic in America in both the traditional press and the internet media. Several newspaper articles as well as “YouTube” postings have reported how pranksters hacked into the electronic messaging system of road signs in many places, including along Pacific Coast Highway in Orange County, California (Daines 2009). These signs, normally used to warn drivers about traffic conditions ahead, were altered to read: “WARNING: ZOMBIE ATTACK,” “CAUTION: ZOMBIES AHEAD,” and so on. While such incidents underscore mainstream America’s fascination with zombies, most Americans would likely be amazed to know that zombiism is a very real and documented condition worthy of examination by social scientists. Persons identified as zombies are to be found among the inhabitants of Haiti, an impoverished and politically unstable Caribbean country with unique cultural characteristics. Using the lens of the anthropologist, an investigation into Haitian zombiism reveals not only a basis for the bizarre phenomenon of zombiism itself, but also the underlying characteristics of Haitian society that have fostered and it. While zombiism may be fundamentally understood in terms of mental illness, particular theories related to madness are useful in further illuminating the subject, including Sigmund Freud’s signature theses on melancholia, Frantz Fanon’s views on the psychological effects of colonialism, and Emily Martin’s ideas about the performance of mental disorders. The resulting analysis will demonstrate that Haitian zombiism constitutes a cultural construct of madness that thoroughly fits within its post-colonial population, where a bereft people have transformed zombiism into a reality.

The first piece of this analysis is to demonstrate a link between zombies and madness. In the lexicon of Western pop culture, the zombie is an animated corpse which rises up to terrorize and eat the brains of the living, as depicted in many horror movies. Characterizing the genuine Haitian zombie is more complicated, being steeped in both fact and folklore which are frequently difficult to differentiate. For instance, zombies are described in literature as both “soulless

bodies and bodiless souls,” referring to the corporeal zombies that occasionally wander into a village and the mischievous spirit zombies which are often implicated as perpetrators of ill happenings (Ackermann and Gauthier 1991: 473). In addition, individual accounts of zombie encounters are often quite dramatic, from the famed American author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston’s description of zombie Felicia Feliz-Mentor in her book *Tell My Horse*, to the following excerpt from Harvard anthropologist Wade Davis’s recounting of the case of the zombie Francina Illeus:

An emaciated Francina [was] found squatting in the market with her hands crossed like kindling before her face. Three years before, she had been pronounced dead after a short illness [...] Passed over to [a doctor] Douyon for psychiatric care [...] she was malnourished, mute, and negativistic. For three years Douyon had attempted through hypnosis and narcosis to speed her recovery [...] Still, her mental faculties were marginal. Her eyes remained blank, and every gesture was swollen with effort [...] There was little spontaneous emotion, and when she left the room she walked as if on the bottom of the sea, her body bearing the weight of all the oceans” (Davis 1985: 63).

Zombie sightings across Haiti appear to be quite genuine and number in the thousands over the last two centuries. Significantly, a survey of scholarly works on this subject reveals some commonalities among documented descriptions of zombies. Medical professionals Hans W. Ackermann and Jeanine Gauthier conducted a systematic review of clinical data available on individual Haitian zombies, tabulating the “Properties of the Zombi.” The salient characteristics recorded with greater frequency include: “no will; no consciousness; no recognition of relatives and friends; eyes dull, glazed, vacant; air absent, stupid, dazed, sleepy; nasal voice; speaks little or not at all; emotionally and mentally dead; no memory” (Ackermann 1991: 480-481).

What emerges from an examination of scholarly research by Ackermann and others is not a description of a flesh-eating monster, but of individuals who may be viewed as mentally ill—their unresponsive, emotionally-deadened, and dazed characteristics are remarkably similar to those ascribed to the mad. One way social scientists have analyzed zombiism, then, is to take these descriptions and correlate them to traits of known mental disorders. For instance,

Ackerman and Gauthier conclude that zombies may be “imbeciles or certain mentally ill people, especially catatonic schizophrenes [sic], demented or amnesic, who wandered off and were sighted later” (Ackermann 1991: 490). Similarly, medical psychiatrists Roland Littlewood and Chavannes Douyon successfully diagnosed three purported zombies: one with catatonic schizophrenia, the second with “organic brain syndrome and epilepsy consistent with a period of anoxia,” and the third with a learning disability—likely fetal alcohol syndrome (Littlewood and Douyon 1997: 1095). These data indicate that zombies are not a bizarre class of Haitians but in actuality mentally ill people. Moreover, this seems plausible for an impoverished country like Haiti, which offers little institutionalized care, especially in the rural areas (Farmer 1996: 262). With little aid available from a toiling population, for whom every day is a struggle for survival, the mentally ill may wander about and become—in the eyes of their countrymen—zombies.

The second point important to understanding this phenomenon relates not to the zombies’ mental incapacities, which seem clear from the evidence, but to the belief that these persons are thought to be the reanimated dead—and not just anybody, but a recognizable relative or close friend. Testimonies recorded by Hurston include families who believe “everything had seemed irregular” in their loved ones “sudden illness and quick death,” from a young man who “went to a dance and fell dead on the floor” to the “beautiful young daughter of a prominent family” who died “in the very bloom of her youth” and was spotted as a zombie five years later (Hurston 1938: 201, 203-204). Once again, a systematic review of documented cases reveals key commonalities: The zombies are relatively young—usually in the prime years of their lives; they die unexpectedly or mysteriously (either by some unknown illness or freakish accident); and they are recognized by grieving family members long after their pronounced death and burial.

How these elements fit into the belief of zombiism becomes clear when set in the context of bereavement and its psychological impact on a population. From this perspective, the

zombies themselves are not the focus, but the family members who claim with certainty that a particular person identified as a zombie is their deceased loved one. The role of bereavement in the construction of Haitian zombies can be explored in terms of Sigmund Freud's trademark theories on melancholia. Essentially, Freud describes melancholia as the inability to cope properly with an irretrievable loss by failing to complete the usual, natural process of mourning. Difficulties with severed relationships and loss have a profound impact on an individual's psychological wellbeing and can lead to irrational and even pathological behaviors. The loss leaves a gap within the self that must be healed through comfort, gratification, or the formation of new attachments to replace what has been lost or severed (Freud 1917: 241-244). While many of the details of Freud's theory—such as the pathological melancholia and its effects on the *ego*, etc—may be debated, virtually all social scientists would agree that the impact of bereavement may be profound and manifest itself in unusually nonsensical behavior. Indeed, insisting that a long-dead relative is a zombie is a definite sign that many Haitians suffer from the after-effects of abnormal bereavement. Social anthropologist Isak Niehaus makes this connection, writing of “the emotionally overwhelming experiences of bereavement, loss, and mourning” as “powerful psychological motivations” for the belief in zombies (Niehaus 2005: 191).

In addition, this view certainly warrants further investigation, given the fact that in Haiti, the tragedy of premature death is not uncommon. The infant mortality rate is so high that survival into adolescence is a grand occasion, celebrated with relief that the individual has made it past the hazardous uncertainties of infancy and youth. At adolescence, Haitians attain full-fledged, productive personhood, and are not easily replaced, unlike infants that may be borne again within a year. Moreover, due to the poor quality of health care and the prevalence of malnutrition, the life expectancy in Haiti is quite low, with the people frequently expiring or becoming disabled or infirm before age 50 (Farmer 1996: 262). The significant point, then, is

that zombiism is associated with healthy individuals in the prime of their life, not the very young or the elderly, whose deaths are much easier to grasp and accept. Furthermore, while other populations have an array of resources and substitutes to fill the gaps left by the loss of loved ones, such wounds cannot be so easily mended in Haiti. Indeed, it is not simply grieving individuals but the nation as a whole that is bereft, with very little to compensate for loss and suffering. Haitian melancholia is evident everywhere, including its depressed economy, where positive forms of capital, such as its forests, have been severely depleted (Davis 1985: 45). It is also evident in the case of zombiism, whereby, in essence, a destitute family creates a bond with a mentally ill person. This bond defies common sense; the relatives ignore the fact that the zombie does not recognize them or that the zombie's age and appearance do not match well given the intervening years since their deaths. In Littlewood and Douyon's clinical work, DNA evidence was used to debunk claims of familial relationships with zombies (Littlewood 1997: 1094-5), yet Haitians persist in creating these relationships, and they do so, in part, because of the deep psychological effects of bereavement. Even more interesting is the observation that the zombies themselves exhibit traits of Freud's melancholia, including "cessation of interest in the outside world" and "inhibition of all activity" (Freud 1917: 248). With such a prevalence of destitution and death pervading the Haitians' lives, it is a likely consequence that both the zombies and those who bond to them manifest aspects of chronic melancholia.

Having established that zombies are the mentally ill, and that they are identified by bereaving relatives, the third component needed to shed light on Haitian zombiism is their characterization as servile manual laborers. According to much of the folklore, zombies are created so that they may be put to work—plowing the fields or cleaning house—as directed by the person who resurrected them. Although there are various versions as to how a zombie is created, it is generally believed to involve robbing the victim's body of a vital component of the

soul, the *tibon ange*, thought to control “personality, character, and willpower” (Ackermann 1991: 469, Niehaus 2005: 192). After the removal of the *tibon ange*, all that remains is the non-descript life-force that animates the body and allows it to perform basic duties. In this way, zombification parallels enslavement—a person is stripped of their soul and individuality, and is utilized strictly for manual labor; they have no independent life of their own. This correspondence with enslavement is one of the essential features of the Haitian zombie, as described by many anthropologists, including the renowned ethnologist Alfred Metraux: “The zombie is a beast of burden which his master exploits without mercy, making him work in the fields, weighing him down with labor, whipping him freely and feeding him on meager, tasteless food” (Metraux 1959: 282). The travails of the Haitian people have been well chronicled by many, including Metraux, who talks about “how hard is the life of the average peasant and worker. Isolation, economic stagnation, administrative fecklessness, ignorance—all help to explain the misery which is to be found among the masses” (Metraux 1959: 60). These conditions help to explain, too, the zombies that are found among the Haitian people.

The relationship between zombies and servitude is ever more revealing when placed within the context of Haiti’s history as a European colony, thereby allowing the application of Frantz Fanon’s ideas about the dramatic impact of colonization on a population’s behavior. Haiti is located on the island of Hispaniola, which was initially occupied by the Spanish as part of their landmark expeditions to the West Indies and the Americas in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. When the French began to settle on this same island, it was divided between them, with the French obtaining the western part and naming it Saint-Dominique—today’s Haiti. The indigenous people of Hispaniola were virtually wiped out due to maltreatment and disease, making way for large French plantations. Haiti became an economically profitable colony, especially in the production of sugar. However, since the production of sugar requires a large capital investment,

the French turned to slavery for cheap labor. Hundreds of thousands of slaves were imported from West Africa and subjugated to extremely harsh treatment in Saint-Dominique. As Davis puts it, the French descended “like a plague of locusts” on Haiti, devastating the country and exploiting its people (Davis 1985: 40-45, 65-68). Also, the slaves were bound by rules outlined in the oppressive *Code Noir*, a set of guidelines for slave owners. One item of interest from the *Code Noir* was the enforcement of Roman Catholicism, forbidding the practice of all other religions. Yet, the slaves successfully clung to some of their traditional religious practices and beliefs, eventually leading to the rise of voodoo, a blend of Western African religions and Catholicism. Although prohibited by the *Code Noir*, the practice of voodoo was empowering: “For the slave, the cult of spirits and gods, and of magic too, amounted to an escape; more, it was an aspect of the resistance which he sustained against his oppressive lot” (Metraux 1959: 30-33). In this light, then, zombiism may be seen as a vestige of the atmosphere of the French colonial era, fueled by the traumas of enslavement. Given this historical foundation and the stressful effects of colonialism as outlined by Davis and Metraux, even the mentally ill, of seemingly no use to society, acquire acceptance and a degree of value as long as they may be labeled as servile laborers, a tag with which the once-enslaved Haitians are quite familiar. The emergence of Haitian zombiism, then, is rooted in similar scenarios to those which induced the stress disorders described by Fanon among the dehumanized Algerians under their colonial rule. These stress disorders, described by Fanon as “a regular and important pathology which is the direct product of oppression” (Fanon 1963: 251) are analogous to the victimization of the Haitians reflected by zombiism, also due to their dehumanizing colonial subjugation.

Shedding light on the Haitian zombie in relation to colonialism extends beyond this country’s history under French rule. Even after Haiti achieved independence from the French, the country has remained a hotbed of political instability, with oppressive dictatorships, corrupt

elected officials, and a lack of sound social order. Hurston describes at great length the “difficult tasks” of post-colonial independence, particularly, “trying to make a government of the wreck of a colony” (Hurston 1938: 101). In Haiti, then, zombification appears not only as a parallel of the slavery ingrained in this country’s roots, but also as a reflection of the nation’s ongoing sociopolitical crises. For instance, in the many rural, isolated areas of Haiti where there is an absence of governmental authority, voodoo priests and sorcerers emerge as powerful figures. They are believed to have “second sight,” treat the sick with magic powders, and invoke or exorcise supernatural spirits (Metraux 1959: 62-64, 74-75). One of these extraordinary powers includes zombifying, a power with social ramifications. As Niehaus observes, “One can view zombies as constructs that shift the contexts of domination from the everyday world of common sense to the occult world of witchcraft, enabling villagers to view from without the power relations in which they are enmeshed” (Niehaus 2005: 196). What is significant, though, is that this power of zombification is wielded with a purpose. That is to say, there are reasons why a particular person is chosen to become a zombie, and that person is transformed involuntarily, against the individual’s wishes to remain peacefully buried. Hurston and other anthropologists document key criteria Haitians offer for the zombie selection process, which frequently includes acts of reprisal or vengeance for wrongdoings. Davis, for instance, chronicles a person zombified over a land dispute, while Hurston describes a case in where a “spoiled” young man had “some trouble about a girl” and “refused to accept responsibility” or provide “any sort of satisfaction” to the girls’ family; he then died suddenly and was later spotted as a zombie (Davis 1985: 28, Hurston 1938: 202). It appears, then, that zombification may be used as a form of “punishment for social misbehavior” (Ackermann 1991: 475). In this light, zombification may be viewed as a means of maintaining social order, by using the religious authority of the voodoo priests and sorcerers to dispense justice and retribution for personal disputes. Once transformed,

the individual-turned-zombie is no longer a threat or misfit in society. Such a system is plausible in a politically-disorganized nation such as Haiti, where justice utilizing governmental channels is either nonexistent or unresponsive to the needs of isolated, poverty-stricken villagers.

Another revealing aspect of zombiism as an indication of post-colonial stress is the fact that zombies themselves are not regarded as frightening or dangerous; rather, the people fear becoming one. As Littlewood and Doyoun observe, “They [zombies] are regarded with commiseration; fear is reserved for the possibility of being zombified oneself” (Littlewood 1997: 1094). This “rule by fear” complements much of Haiti’s unrest, from the terrorizing subjugation by the French to the reign of the dictator Duvalier to today’s governmental instabilities. Indeed, the violent action of zombification is recognized by Haiti’s penal system; in Article 246 it is designated as an offense along the same lines as murder (Littlewood 1997: 1094). Interestingly, the perpetuation of fear as a method of social control is not limited to zombiism but is also evident in the example of the *tonton macoute*. In Haitian folklore, the *tonton macoute* was the name of a bogeyman who walked the streets after dark, kidnapping children who stayed out too late and stowing them away in his gunnysack, never to be seen again (Cray 1965:121). Under the brutal reign of Duvalier, this dictator formed a private militia by the same name, the *tonton macoute*, who terrorized and killed tens of thousands during violent political unrest. Both zombies and the *tonton macoute* are chilling examples of fairytales with a strong component of fear that manifest into reality. They also reflect how a traumatized society might victimize what it regards as socially undesirable or troublesome individuals—in the case of zombiism, the undesirables are the mentally ill. This revelation of zombiism as victims of colonial oppression cannot be overlooked. Zombies do not arise randomly, or simply because someone has tragically died and is missed; rather, zombies are perceived as victims. The Fanon approach clarifies that the Haitian people are victims, too—victims of an oppressive colonial rule that has long-lasting

psychological repercussions.

After considering the relevance of mental illness, bereavement, and colonialism to zombiism, the fourth and final piece to this analysis is the interpretation of zombie behavior in terms of modern anthropologist Emily Martin's theory of performance. As described by a number of researchers, one peculiar commonality found among zombies which does not conform to the typical symptoms of mental illness is the nasal voice: "*Zombi* [sic] are recognized by their absent-minded manner, their extinguished, almost glassy eyes, and, above all by their nasal twang in their voices" (Metraux 1959: 283). While medical experts seem to find no explanation for this singular characteristic, the nasal voice of zombies can be explained away culturally: According to African lore, the foundations of voodoo, it is believed that the dead have nasal voices because their noses are broken (Ackermann 1991: 479). This "nasal twang" is also "a peculiarity which they [zombies] share with the Guédé, spirits of death" (Metraux 1959: 283). It is reasonable to assume, then, that a mentally ill person adopts the nasal twang because it is an accepted characteristic of a zombie, and not because the nasal twang is a biological symptom or side effect of zombiism. As described by Martin, these performances are "held without planning, they are unscripted, spontaneous, and ephemeral" (Martin 2007: 59), but they are nonetheless done at the individual's will. This choice to act in a certain manner denotes a certain "double awareness" (Martin 2007: 57), in which an individual classified as mentally ill knows—according to that society's culture—what behaviors are within the norm and what behaviors are abnormal. For example, during her observations of patients with manic depressive disorder, Martin described a particular person named Kevin who, due to his disorder and having a brain cyst, seemed predisposed to act particularly strange. When she spoke to him, Kevin's behavior was markedly odd, making the conversation awkward. However, when Kevin asked Martin "Am I your science project?" she realized the underlying truth: Kevin was actually aware of his

situation and acted out his role in a ridiculous and teasing manner (Martin 2007: 56-57).

Applying this train of thought to the case of the zombies, then, it may be postulated that because the mad are treated like zombies, then they act like them. Their performance works both ways, too, since the non-zombies treat the zombies like zombies, thereby reinforcing their behavior. In this way, then, the mad become zombified.

In this light, the zombies perform their behavior—complete with a nasal twang—because Haitian society has evolved to nurture this exhibition among its mentally ill. It is a society accustomed to the power of suggestion, as evidenced in its voodoo rituals of spiritual possession. It is also a society whose post-colonial traumas have left it more accepting of melancholy dispositions; manifesting mental illness with displays of mania, on the other hand, would be little understood and likely ostracized. By projecting zombie behaviors, the mentally-ill can assume a socioculturally acceptable role and find a niche within Haitian society. Their behaviors are reinforced by their countrymen, and zombiism emerges as a culturally-supported way for the mentally ill to thrive with their otherwise maladaptive condition. In essence, then, a Haitian is much better off being a zombie—and exhibiting zombie characteristics—than being mentally insane; it is simply a better fit within the Haitian culture.

In conclusion, then, an anthropological treatment of the Haitian zombie uncovers something quite different from movie portrayals and Western pop culture. What we have seen may be described as forms of madness—in the behavior of the zombies themselves, in the bereaved struggling with lives of misery, and in the Haitian people scarred by the colonial experiences of slavery and exploitation. Shaping this madness through performance constructs, as an end result, the Haitian zombie—a manifested reality of a destitute people.

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