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Running head: Sent spirits in Haiti

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Abstract

In Haiti, a “sent spirit” is an experience of misfortune, such as an illness or accident, that is interpreted as intentionally sent by someone supernaturally. Sent spirits are fundamentally social narratives, reflecting links among social inequality, structural violence, and solidarity. This paper focuses on the ethnographic stories of two women who experienced the death of a daughter, with one attributing the death to her own inability to care for her daughter, and the other to a sent spirit. A key question is whether these different explanations of misfortune create different possibilities for recourse to action. I explore how, in the context of *gangan makout* (“shaman with a sack,” free Vodou services), a sent spirit attribution created a means of enacting agency following misfortune. However, as contemporary Vodou institutions have shifted to a *gangan ason* (“shaman with a rattle/bell,” fee-for-service) model, sent spirit attributions no longer constitute a feasible avenue for enacting agency. Instead, they leave individuals facing new manifestations of structural violence, in the form of marketization of rituals for healing and justice that have become out of reach for the poor. However, sent spirit narratives continue to perform the work of culture by displacing blame from suffering individuals.

Keywords: Vodou, agency, structural violence, supernatural, Haiti

Ekspedisyon, chèche konnen sans, ak kapasite pou aji an Ayiti

An Ayiti, yon ekspedisyon se yon eksperyans malè, tankou yon maladi oubyen yon aksidan, yo entèprete kòm yon malè yon moun deside ak tout volonte l voye sou yon lòt moun nan yon fason sinatirèl. Fondamantalman, istwa ekspedisyon yo rakonte fenomèn sosyal. Yo reflete koneksyon ki genyen ant inegalite sosyal, vyolans striktirèl, ak solidarite. Atik sa a chita sou istwa etnografik de fanm ki te pèdi pitit fi yo; youn nan yo panse lanmò a rive akòz enkapasite l pou l te pran swen pitit la; lòt la panse se akòz yon nanm yo voye sou pitit la. Yon kesyon kle se si diferan eksplikasyon malè sa yo kreye tou diferan posibilite pou moun ta ka aji fas ak malè yo. Mwen founi je gade kouman nan kontèks gangan makout la yo (sèvis vodou gratis), lè yo konsidere se yon ekspedisyon ki koze malè a, sa kreye yon mwayen pou viktim nan aji apre malè a. Sepandan, avèk enstitisyon vodou yo ki vin plis genyen gangan ason (sèvis vodou pou lajan) ladan yo, pou anpil moun, eksplikasyon ekspedisyon a pa kapab sèvi kòm yon mwayen ki pèmèt yo aji fas ak malè ankò. Olye sa, moun yo vin ap sibi lòt fòm vyolans striktirèl lè yo oblije peye sèvis vodou pou yo jwenn gerizon ak jistis; sa ki pa posib pou moun ki pòv yo. Kanmenm, istwa ekspedisyon yo kontinye ap fè “travay lakilti a” nan deplase blam nan soti sou moun k’ap soufri yo.

Jean

Jean (pseudonym, as are all names herein) was a middle-aged man running a small lottery business out of his home in rural Haiti when his house burned down. The house was not completely lost; he was able to save part of it. Nevertheless, he never went back to running his lottery. Jean knew that one of his enemies had caused the fire – most likely the same person who had caused him to fall ill the year before. Jean explained that these attacks were not carried out directly but via the spirit world, in the form of *ekspedisyon* or “sent spirits.” He knew why they had happened: his neighbors were jealous of his “advancing too much” – accumulating wealth due to the success of his lottery business. So when the second attack came, he decided to shut down his business for good, in order to avoid being a target again.

Jean’s story is not unusual in Haiti: though claims of sent spirits are not always made in such confident ways, they are understood to be a fundamental possibility of a life marked by severe disparity. As I will argue, sent spirit narratives reflect complicated dynamics among social relationships, inequality, and structural violence, in the context of shifting socio-economic realities. I explore the concept of sent spirits by examining the experiences of two women, Marie and Michelle. Both of them experienced the loss of an adult daughter, yet they interpreted the events in fundamentally different ways, Marie by blaming a sent spirit and Michelle by blaming herself. In interpreting their stories, I draw on several areas of psychological anthropology scholarship. I examine the “work of culture” through the use of sent spirit explanations to give meaning to misfortune (Hollan 1994; Jackson 1998; Obeyesekere 1990). I examine how sent spirit narratives and other narrative

framings contribute to construction of the self in positive and negative ways (Bruner 2002; Mattingly and Garro 2000; Waldram 2010). Finally, I critically examine notions of agency, particularly in the context of structural violence, and expand these considerations to include agency in relation to the supernatural world (Jackson 1998; Lewis 2018; Rainbird 2014).

In particular, I question whether Marie and Michelle's different explanations of profound misfortune relate to different potentialities for responding – in other words, does evoking the spirit world vs. one's material world open different avenues for agentive action? Sent spirits, as a deeply historically rooted explanatory model, at one point provided a means of enacting agency in the face of otherwise limited or non-existent alternatives (e.g., via the judicial system), by opening avenues for revenge or self-protection via a magico-religious system. In this way, they lent themselves to being redemptive narratives, allowing one to make sense of negative life events and move from victimhood to agency (Adler 2012; McAdams and Guo 2015). In other settings, such narratives are argued to promote wellbeing and mental health. However, as Vodou institutions have shifted toward a fee-for-service model (Richman 2007), this route for enacting agency has become closed off as a viable alternative for many. I consider whether sent spirit narratives therefore represent the latest “victim” of structural violence – their protective function eroding with commercialization of Vodou rites – or whether they might perform an enduring “work of culture” as an explanatory model that promotes wellbeing through a form of blame displacement.

Vodou and supernatural causal models

In this paper, I explore how sent spirits, as supernatural explanations of misfortune, relate to and reflect realities in the social and material worlds. Haiti provides an ideal context for exploring such questions, as interactions with the supernatural world are seen as commonplace yet diverse. It is common for individuals to describe misfortune occurring via the supernatural world as being initiated by other people, therefore implicating one's social world in such misfortune. The cosmo-centric worldview endorsed by most Haitians places individuals in the universe of the natural, social, ancestral, and spiritual (James 2008). Any of these realms might present threats to health and moral personhood as understood within Haitian ethnopsychology. In Haiti, interactions with the supernatural world can take a number of forms. Most commonly discussed are the *lwa*-s, ancestral spirits that constitute the Vodou pantheon and are seen as intimately involved in everyday human affairs (Brown 1991; Métraux 1972). Vodou "does not assume the existence of a two-storey universe" (Brown 1991, 347); instead, God and *lwa*-s (spirits) actively engage in ordinary human life. In particular, *lwa*-s are seen as guardians and are actively involved in relationships, employment, sustenance, and other everyday human concerns (Brown 1991). Interactions with the *lwa* can result in either fortune or misfortune, as individuals can both seek help from and be harmed by spirits. An extensive literature details Haitian concepts of the supernatural world and the multiple ways that benefits can be bestowed and harm can be wrought (e.g., Brodwin 1996; Brown 1991; Métraux 1972).

That such supernatural interactions are understood to be commonplace is not unique to Haiti. Witchcraft is taken as a "given" in many African societies, rather than being something to be "believed" or not (Moore and Sanders 2003). So too are Vodou supernatural concepts widely taken for granted in Haiti, regardless of the

extent to which one engages in Vodou practices (Brodwin 1996; Deren 1953; Métraux 1972). Rather than pursuing mystical questions, most individuals are concerned with the *pragmatics* of how interactions with the supernatural world play out in their daily lives, including producing fortune and misfortune. In this way, Alfred Métraux (1972) and Maya Deren (1953) have described Vodou as a practical and utilitarian religion.

Illness and misfortune can be explained through a variety of supernatural causal models, such as punishment for neglecting to serve familial *lwa*-s (Deren 1953; Lowenthal 1978); the process of zombification – or revivifying someone thought to be dead and ultimately enslaving them (Brodwin 1996; Brown 1987); and the actions of *lougawou* – female “werewolves” or shape-shifters² who eat children and are seen as analogous to witches in other settings (Métraux 1972). **However, within the broad landscape of Haitian supernatural causal models, I will focus specifically on the ways that harm can be sent from one person to another, a phenomenon often referred to as *ekspedisyon* (“sent spirits”).** This phenomenon is understood to be performed by a *bòkò* (sorcerer), an individual who is often also an *houngan* or *gangan* (Vodou priest/shaman³) (Brown 1991; Métraux 1972). When the harm that results takes the form of illness, it is often referred to as *maladi Satan* (illness of Satan), in contrast to *maladi Bondye* (illness of God; Brodwin 1996). These illnesses are not actually attributed to the supernatural agents after which they are named but simply denote human-caused versus natural illness. Although some scholars refer to these collectively as “sent sickness” (Brodwin 1996; Farmer 1990), I use the term “sent spirit” to denote that such forms of harm are not limited to illness but can also include business failure, accidents, and other misfortunes.

An important precept that underlies susceptibility to sent spirits is that in Haitian ethnopsychology, the person is considered vulnerable to outside forces, which can take up residence in an organism and cause harm (Brodwin 1996). Vodou concepts of illness are complex and are not mutually exclusive with biomedical explanations (Brodwin 1996; Métraux 1972). Often, biomedical explanations are accepted as the “how” of disorder, whereas Vodou is drawn upon to answer “why” questions (Farmer 1992). Sent spirit attributions historically opened avenues to pursue justice or “secondary prevention” in the face of historically embedded structural violence, in the form of a corrupt judiciary and an inadequate healthcare system. Individuals could instead draw upon the free or low-cost services of a local *houngan* or *manbo* (female priestess/shaman) for the sake of seeking revenge – potentially by “sending back” the harmful spirit – or being granted protective charms and prayers to prevent similar attacks in future (Murray 1985).

Life in precarity: Marie and Michelle

Marie and Michelle, whose stories are the focus of this paper, both live in the area of Mirebalais and its rural surrounds, where I lived and conducted research in 2013 (Author 2015). Mirebalais lies at the base of the Central Plateau, one of Haiti’s ten political departments. The Mirebalais arrondissement, consisting of three communes approximately equivalent to a county, has a population of 192,000 (IHSI 2015). Just under two hours from Port-au-Prince by car, Mirebalais was the subject of one of the earliest ethnographies penned about Haiti, *Life in a Haitian Valley* (Herskovits 1937). Today, the town is experiencing rapid growth, particularly with the recent opening of a Partners in Health/Zanmi Lasante teaching hospital during my fieldwork in 2013.

I met Marie and Michelle under very different circumstances. I was referred to Marie by another interviewee, a journalist. During his recounting of cases he has covered, including kidnappings, accidents, and curses, he told me one story that stood out: a complex account of sent spirits, betrayal by neighbors, and injustice. I met Michelle during data collection for a survey that I was conducting, in which I sought to examine how daily stressors, traumatic events, social support, and explanatory models of distress interact to shape experiences of mental health and illness. Michelle had experienced a high number of traumatic events and scored high on local measures of depression and anxiety. Both Marie and Michelle lost adult daughters within the same nine-month period, a devastating experience that, like sent spirits, is not uncommon in Haiti. Adult mortality rates (probability of dying between ages 15-60) are 270 per 1,000 for men and 210 per 1,000 for women (UNDP 2017).

Like all of rural Haiti, Mirebalais is marked by vast disparities in wealth, education, language, and health that define Haiti's urban/rural class hierarchy as a result of historically-rooted forms of exclusion. Once the most prosperous piece of land in the world, as well as one of the most violent slave colonies, a successful slave uprising established Haiti as the world's first Black Republic in 1804. Thereafter, Haiti continued to endure a long history of international military and political intervention, political and economic instability, and numerous natural disasters.

At the same time, a spirit of resistance culturally stretching back to Independence pervades this history. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, *mawon-s* (maroons), having escaped from slavery, established settlements in the mountains. Following independence, the Creole elite claimed ownership of the

economic plantation system they inherited and sought to perpetuate it. The economic, political, and judicial systems that they put in place systematically excluded the rural *bossal*, people born in Africa and later their descendants, who resisted the slave colony and the capitalist system that underlay it. Their marginalization was seen in that their language (Kreyòl) was eschewed for the official language French; their religion (Vodou) was prohibited multiple times by the State and Church; and they were denied access to land ownership, with local systems for recognizing land ownership (*lakou*) and common-law marriage (*plasaj*) neglected by the State. Gérard Barthélémy (1990) describes the *bossal* system as a society without the state, which developed mechanisms for harmonizing behavior of the group without requiring intervention from a specialized structure akin to the state. Sorcery became a social regulator, facilitating reconciliation and providing a means of addressing uncertainty. Outside the political and judicial purview of the slave colony and later the State, they relied on magic as a means of social control (Barthélémy 1990).

The legacy of these forms of exclusion, as well as ongoing international intervention, continue to be felt today. Haiti's per-capita GDP currently equates to only 2% of the global average, and inequality is only increasing (UNDP 2016). Although the official language of education and business is French, about 80% of the rural population cannot read French, and even fewer can speak it functionally. Health outcomes are among the worst in the world (UNDP 2016). Approximately 40% of the population lack reliable access to health services (USAID 2017), much of which is run by NGOs that operate almost entirely outside of government regulations and control the vast majority of humanitarian aid that flows into the nation (Schuller 2016). These forms of structural violence produce a lived

experience of extreme lack of agency for those living in Mirebalais (Bourdieu 1999; Farmer 2001). Individuals interpret and respond to negative life events in varied ways. Here, I examine two narratives that convey different ways that mothers interpreted and responded to the loss of their daughters.

Marie's story

Marie's daughter Jozèt was 20 and living in Port-au-Prince when she decided to return to Mirebalais and live with her parents. Jozèt struck up a friendship with another young woman from the neighborhood, Nikòl. Several months prior to our interview, Nikòl had been to an *houngan* for help getting a certain man to marry her. The *houngan* gave her a concoction, but Nikòl used it incorrectly, and according to Marie, the man died as a result.

The *bòkò* (sorcerer)⁴ then told Nikòl that because of her mistake, she must bring another person to him to exchange for her own life:

Marie: The *bòkò* told her if she didn't bring someone, she would die instead. The friend came and said to my daughter, "Come with me."

Int: Why did she choose to trade her if they were friends?

Marie: She's not going to give her sister or her brother. She's going to give her best friend.

The notion that someone must be traded in another's place was a common thread in sent spirit narratives, which were marked by a sense of the necessity for balance and closure. Choosing her friend as the one to "trade in" simply represents the need to find a trusting individual who will not suspect harm. Marie explains that Nikòl was careful leading up to Jozèt's death: "*She said not a word [to indicate] when there is going to be crying in my house.*" Marie explains that had she and her husband known, they could have prevented it, though she does not elaborate how.

Jozèt hadn't been sick, but after the visit to the *bòkò*, she developed a headache and fatigue. Marie explains, "*I said [to my husband], 'Pierre, what happened to our daughter? She lost her mind.' [Jòzet] said, 'Mom, you are going to graduate next year.' I said, 'No, it's you.'*" As Marie continues her story, she is almost in tears. Late that night, around midnight, Jozèt began crying; she couldn't talk. She began breathing quickly and eventually lost consciousness. Marie explains, "*After she died, her body was very warm (li chò). In Haiti, we say if the body is warm, we say it isn't a good death.*"

Marie: At midnight, I heard a big truck come to get my daughter.

Int: They took the body?

Marie: No, the ghost. If the *bòkò* lives far away, they send a truck to get the ghost.

In Haiti, a ghost [*zonbi*] is one type of supernatural being that is sent to cause harm to another. Marie is likely referring to a process of retrieving the being that was initially sent, rather than collecting Jòzet's ghost or soul.

As our interview came to a close, Marie described the suffering that she was experiencing, two months after her daughter's death: "I'm very *chagren* (sad). I lived in my house; I had love. She made jokes, made me laugh. But I don't have love now."

Michelle's story

When I first met Michelle while collecting survey data, I asked her whether I could follow-up with her for an interview and home visits so as to better understand her experiences, and she agreed. When I later returned to the community to visit her, I was greeted by a cousin and told that Michelle's 19-year-old daughter had died suddenly the day before. He led me to a neighbor's home, explaining that she

was receiving visitors at another house because her home was too small. As we arrived, there were many people gathered both inside and outside the house. Michelle lay on a woven mat, neighbors physically supporting her body. When we offered our condolences, she thanked us and smiled weakly, through what appeared to be a great effort. As her cousin escorted us back to the road, he explained that Michelle's daughter had been suffering from *maladi souf kout* (an illness marked by shortness of breath, perhaps asthma, heart failure, or anemia) for over two years. She had been sick for a long time, and Michelle had tried taking her to multiple hospitals and an *houngan*. She had been rushed to the hospital yesterday afternoon and died there.

Several weeks later, on another visit to Michelle, I was again greeted by her cousin, who told me Michelle had been in a motorcycle accident the day before. This time I found her at home, lying on her side on a blanket and pillow on the floor, one leg swollen and clearly in pain. She had a white bandage wrapped around her left knee, a gauze and bandage wrap on her left foot, and a dark red bruise beneath her left eye. She explained that she had hit her head and dislocated her knee; at the hospital they had put it back in place and bandaged it. She grimaced with each slight movement she had to make. During my visit, Michelle explained that the motorcycle driver, her friend, was severely injured in the accident and was still in the hospital. He would die in the coming days.

Community response

During my interview with Marie, I thought perhaps Nikòl and her family would have been reticent to accept Marie's explanation of Jozèt's death. Many people had told me that Haitians make an effort to conceal responsibility for harm done via the

spirit world so that the victim does not themselves seek a *bòkò*'s services to impart revenge. However, Marie explains that since Jozèt's death, Nikòl and her parents have broadcast to the neighbors what happened, unafraid to claim responsibility. Marie says that this happens precisely because they know her family is too poor to avenge their daughter's death: "*In Haiti, if I kill someone for you, there is going to be a funeral for me too. Usually there is payback. I slap you; you slap me. They know we don't have money. We can't pay back.*" Knowing this, Nikòl's family mocks her:

They just brag, they say they're strong. They have strength; they have money. You can't pay it back; you can't revenge [...] They say [mocking voice], "You don't have teeth; you don't have money. Those people who have no teeth can't eat. What about the ones who have gums?" That's the way they bother me [...] If you can't eat, how can you revenge?

The reality of supernatural avenues for revenge being closed off to Marie reflects a shift in ritual practices that Gerald Murray (1980) and Karen Richman (2007) have documented. Historically, *houngan* were understood to absorb their knowledge directly from the ancestral world of Ginen via dream or trance. As a reference to the Ginen ancestral shaman who carried magical objects in a sack, these are referred to as *houngan makout* (shaman with a sack). They provided healing and other services at low or no cost. Starting in the last century, these shamans have been steadily replaced by a role more resembling a professional shaman/priest, who undergoes an expensive initiation process and subsequently charges fees for services (Richman 2007), which can become significantly more expensive than, for example, biomedical services (Wagenaar, et al. 2012). These priests are called *houngan ason*, referring to the sacred rattle and bell used to summon spirits, which they acquire as part of their initiation (Richman 2007). It is no surprise, then, that Marie sees revenge via a *bòkò* or *houngan ason* as

inaccessible for her. Not having interviewed Marie's neighbors, I cannot confirm that another family was indeed readily accepting blame for Jozèt's death, mocking her openly, and pointing out that she cannot avenge her daughter's death. Regardless, the marked socio-economic inequality between the families seems to be a core part of Marie's interpretation of events.

In contrast, Michelle seemed to receive only support and encouragement from community members. When I first visited, neighbors had welcomed her into their home for visitation of the mourning family, and Michelle was surrounded by friends and neighbors supporting her both physically and emotionally. During my many visits to her home in subsequent months, there would rarely be an hour that would pass without a neighbor stopping in to offer condolences and check on her recovery. At the same time, I did not see neighbors providing instrumental support – money, food, or other physical help. While I cannot confirm that this never happened, it seems safe to say that most support Michelle received was emotional.

Interpretation and response

Anthropologists have long shown how narratives shape notions of self, give meaning to anxiety-provoking life experiences, and help mediate socially acceptable responses to misfortune. Sorcery narratives specifically provide a means of making sense of suffering and an avenue for socially acceptable processing of emotions, such as cathartic release of anger (Brison 1995; Hollan 1994). This is a manifestation of the work of culture, “whereby painful motives and affects... are transformed into publicly accepted sets of meanings and symbols” (Obeyesekere 1986: 147, qtd in Hollan 1994). Others have argued that narratives create means of agency, producing possibilities for individuals to control their future (Jackson 1998;

Rainbird 2014). Here, I examine how Marie and Michelle differentially assign meaning to their daughters' deaths, as well as how they respond and seek out avenues for agentive action. Drawing on both Laura Ahearn (2001) and Cameron Hay (2009), I define agency as the intentional, socio-culturally mediated capacity to act. At first glance, Marie's story of a sent spirit clearly differs from Michelle's, firmly rooted as the latter is in the material world. While Marie's narrative creates a distance from material reality and clearly places blame externally, we will see that Michelle's narrative expresses a form of victim blaming, as she attributes the outcomes of poverty to herself.

Marie explained to me that she cannot afford to pursue a case with the justice system – widely understood to be corrupt, with judgements going to the highest bidder – nor can she try to bring her daughter back. During the interview, it became difficult to gauge whether Marie in fact believed that her daughter could be brought back to life – perhaps she was referring to the expensive ceremony *rele mò* that occurs one year after death and is the last chance to talk with the deceased – or whether justice, to her, would take a different form. But the fact remains that, for Marie, what prevented her from seeking justice was her family's poverty: *“They know we don't have money to revenge and know we don't know the ways of the bòkò [i.e. we aren't practitioners of maji]. Her parents said, ‘My daughter is gold. Yours is nothing. I'm going to prepare mine to be a nurse, but yours is nothing.’”*

For Michelle, her daughter died due to an untreated chronic illness, ultimately due to her own inability to care for her daughter. The reason for her accident was also closely tied to the death. As she grieved, Michelle had taken a couple weeks off from her work in informal commerce (*fè komès*). When she decided she must finally return to work, she bought bread at the nearby bakery to sell at a local market.

However, feeling low and fatigued, she did not have the energy for the usual two-hour walk to the market. Instead, she called her friend with a motorcycle taxi and asked for a ride.

To me, Michelle's story is one of trauma begetting trauma. These events are not simply the result of natural disaster or happenstance; they flow directly from vulnerability to misfortune: her daughter's vulnerability due to illness and poverty, combined with Michelle's socio-economic vulnerability that drove her back into income-generating activities before she was ready, leading to yet more trauma, an accident and the death of a friend. Indeed, Michelle's telling of the story of the accident directly links it to her daughter's death, her bereavement, and the ongoing experience of being physically and mentally down, therefore unable to walk to the market. In her narrative, Michelle could have blamed poverty writ large, bilateral food policies that have driven inflation and malnutrition, or lack of access to healthcare. Yet Michelle's narrative does not forefront these external drivers of her material reality; instead, she places the blame on herself. When I asked Michelle months later whether she had ever experienced a sent spirit, she said that the accident might have been one, but she doubts it.

Spirit world, social world

When I tell Marie's story, people often ask, "But how did the daughter *actually* die?" To me, some objective notion of "facts" regarding the daughter's death are of little consequence; rather, it is Marie's reading of the situation that has significance. At the same time, it is important to note that Marie's story is indeed full of ambiguity; there are several instances in which it is difficult to gauge to what degree various descriptions are intended to reflect material or supernatural reality

or whether they might be metaphorical or figurative. For example, the notion of sending a truck to collect the *zonbi* (ghost) raises several questions. The most likely interpretation is that the truck is re-collecting the *zonbi* sent to Jòzet, or it could be Jòzet's *zonbi*. Not to be confused with *zonbi* as an enslaved physical body, this refers to a spiritual part of the person that corresponds to the *ti bon anj* (little good angel), a component of the soul that is akin to personality (Littlewood and Douyon 1997; McAlister 2002). The *zonbi* would be collected for the *bòkò* to force into mystical work in future, in order to cause similar harm or to assist others in some tasks (McAlister 2002). In this case, Marie likely understands the truck as physically collecting a spiritual being to be returned to a faraway *bòkò*. Or this might be a figurative description, with the concrete reality of a truck passing by on the street soon after her daughter's death serving as a symbolic reminder – evidence for Marie that it was an unnatural death.

Additionally, it is unclear to what degree Marie's neighbors indeed responded in the way she described. I heard this story only from Marie and from the journalist, who described it as he had heard it from Marie. It might be that the neighbors indeed claimed full responsibility for Jòzet's death, though this would be highly unusual considering how adamantly almost everyone denies the notion of engaging in *maji*, including because this makes them vulnerable to vengeful attacks. At the same time, the notion of a neighbor causing harm or even death was not outside the range of what I heard from others. Indeed, it was not unusual for me to hear Haitians speak of their enemies – those who have done them harm, whose homes they refuse to set foot in, despite being just next door. Alternatively, it might be that Marie approached Nikòl's family and accused them of causing Jòzet's death, and that their response instead blamed her, pointing out how – unlike them – Marie

could not care for her daughter, could not prepare her for a career like nursing. In this case, perhaps Marie extended such descriptions to the conclusion that Nikòl did indeed cause Jòzet's death and that Nikòl's family knew this was a safe choice due to the relative poverty of Jòzet's family.

Ultimately, determining some objective "truth" regarding Jòzet's matters little; it is Marie's interpretation of events, her narrative framework, that is our focus. In the story of Jozèt and Nikòl's families, there are two parallel narratives we could tell: Marie's narrative occurs in the spirit world, involving ghosts, brokered deals, and secret concoctions. One could easily tell a narrative rooted in the material world, a story of structural violence and social inequality. This latter narrative would likely pin Jozèt's death on malnutrition, an infection gone untreated due to lack of medical care, and ultimately abject poverty. But it is the family's relative poverty - of which their neighbors constantly remind them - that exacerbates their suffering and makes them particularly vulnerable. Regardless of how the story is told, the lack of control Marie felt was apparent.

Earlier I outlined how sent spirit narratives provide a means of enacting agency, by creating possibilities to act in the name of either revenge or self-protection, in the face of limited to no alternative choices. How then to make sense of the lack of agency described by Marie in the face of a sent spirit, as the typical magico-religious recourse for justice is equally inaccessible as the corrupt court system? Below, I turn to other sent spirit narratives that I collected during my research in order to provide an alternate interpretation that argues that sent spirits narratives, though no longer enabling agency in the historical way, nevertheless serves a protective function.

Sent spirit narratives

During my year of fieldwork, I collected 22 sent spirit narratives. Nine of the stories were about deaths or attempts to kill someone, eight about illness, three about accidents, and the remaining two about other misfortunes. I collected these narratives during formal and informal interviews and participant observation. I visited churches and *hounfò-s* (Vodou temples) and asked priests and *houngan-s* (Vodou priests) to participate in an interview, allow me to observe their practices, and/or refer me to community members who would be appropriate to interview based on their experiences. Additionally, I purposively recruited individuals attending Vodou ceremonies at *hounfò-s*, as well as individuals referred by their neighbors as having undergone experiences considered salient to my research, such as a sent spirit. Before and after ceremonies that I attended, I conducted unstructured interviews with *houngan-s*, ceremony participants, and locally recognized victims of sent spirits. In these interviews, I explored narratives about sent spirits and healing, threats to elements of the person, the role of other people in sent spirits, and fears and concerns associated with relationships between the social and spirit worlds. In particular, I focused on the extent to which they believe that they and other people have control in the spirit world, both for causing and preventing sent spirits.

In order to be considered a sent spirit narrative, a story had to involve some form of misfortune, such as illness or death, and this misfortune had to be interpreted by the narrator as harm sent intentionally by another person via supernatural means. Within each narrative, I identified what form of harm was described, why participants thought it was sent, how it was sent, who initiated it, what evidence they provided, the level of certainty they conveyed, what treatment

was sought and/or received, the outcome, any protection sought, and any comments regarding seeking retribution. Below, I explore these themes as they were raised throughout the 22 sent spirit narratives, as well as highlighting how they provide further insight for understanding Marie and Michelle's stories.

(Un)certainty

One of the primary ways that Marie's story differs from the other sent spirit narratives is that she was very certain in her telling of events, whereas many of the narratives are full of uncertainty. Statements like "maybe" it was a spirit or "maybe" this person sent it, were common elements of narratives. During early interviews, such statements would frustrate me, as I struggled to understand how it was that people seem unconcerned not to have, themselves, received more of an explanation regarding their situation. For example, the following statements from an interview with a young woman indicate how little information she was privy to, despite it seeming to be the case that others could have provided further explanation: "[The *lwa*] won't explain it to the sick person; he will just explain it to a member of the family, a brother, sister [...] The *houngan* or *lwa* knows and said it to my parents [...] My parents didn't explain it to me [...] You won't ever have the answers about treatment; only the *houngan* knows." Considering the pattern seen in other sent spirit narratives, I somewhat doubt whether her family in fact would claim to have all of these answers. What is significant, though, is the woman's seemingly easy acceptance of uncertainty regarding her situation.

An interesting component of this uncertainty came from the *houngan*-s I interviewed, who would sometimes state that they do not know the details of any individuals' case, including why they came for services or what treatment was

given. Rather, it is the spirit who knows. One *houngan* explained, “When I call the spirit, it is like I fall asleep. I don’t have my good sense on.” Such ambiguity regarding sources of information is reflected in the young woman’s statements quoted above, which alternate between saying “the *houngan*” and “the *lwa*” when describing who knows what happened. Participants also explained that individuals can only *suspect* spiritual harm; it is *houngan* who can confirm it. A lottery seller stated, “You can suspect that it was someone, but you can’t confirm if you don’t do research at an *houngan*’s house.” *Houngan*-s I interviewed confirmed these statements, saying that individuals might have dreams or suspicions leading them to believe that they are experiencing a sent spirit, but it is “research” at an *houngan*’s house that can confirm their suspicions.

Even when individuals felt more certain that their misfortune was from a sent spirit, it was very common for participants to state that they do not know who sent it; nor *can* they know. Many pointed out that only an *houngan* could divine who is responsible, and they refuse to tell you so that you will not avenge the misfortune. For example, one man who described his visit to an *houngan* following a sent spirit stated, “He told me it’s a person, but he didn’t tell me who because he doesn’t know my intentions.” He further explained that the *houngan* likely suspects that he would try to kill the responsible person, an outcome that would implicate the *houngan* for revealing that person’s identity. Marie’s story also supports this finding, as she explained that revenge is expected yet impossible in her case because she cannot afford it. Other studies, including in Haiti, have found similar reports that only a diviner can confirm supernatural causation for misfortune (Beattie 1964; Brodwin 1996). Anthropologists have argued that uncertainty can be socially productive (see Berthomé, et al. 2012). Indeed, the intentional promotion of

uncertainty and suppression of truth have been documented in other settings as strategies to avoid destructive behavior by the bereaved (Brison 1995).

While uncertainty appears to be the norm in sent spirit narratives, it is not the case for everyone. Several participants seemed, like Marie, to adopt sent spirit explanations immediately and with greater certainty. These participants often described the logic and evidence that led them to such conclusions. For example, I spoke with a man who sought treatment and protection from an *houngan* after a motorcycle accident:

I wasn't riding fast, but I was injured greatly. I shouldn't have gotten injured like that. As soon as I finished to be injured, I knew I was not injured naturally [...] I was running the moto on 2nd gear, so it was not too fast. I didn't fall in a hole; nothing passed in front of me. I just fell down and was injured like you see today [indicating extensive scarring]. It's like I'm just sitting in a chair and just fall.

Marie, too, provided detailed evidence linking her daughter's death to sent spirits, including the truck that was parked in front of her house until the time of her daughter's death, the fact that the body was warm ("In Haiti we say if the body is warm, we say it isn't a good death"), and of course her description that the neighbors explicitly claimed the supernatural death. It is important to note that "accusations" are not typically verbalized. In fact, people will hide their suspicions regarding the sender of a spirit in order to avoid further harm (Brodwin 1996).

What explains these differences in level of certainty? It might reflect different levels of evidence or apparent veracity of alternate explanations, or it could be that some people are more willing to make supernatural claims, including to an outsider. Another possibility relates to people's tendency to describe illnesses as spirit-related only after they found that a doctor could not treat it. Participants described having sought medical care, usually multiple times, and determining based on the lack of success that it must be a spirit-related illness. Such explanations – based

largely on *lack* of evidence rather than presence of it – help to clarify why many participants seemed so comfortable with the uncertainty surrounding their possible experience of a sent spirit. Paul Brodwin (1996) likewise reports a tendency among Haitians to link failed biomedical treatment attempts and claims of supernatural causation. Regardless of what might explain participants' differing levels of certainty in claiming supernatural harm, what is significant for understanding these narratives is that sent spirit claims can be made despite great uncertainty and lack of clear evidence.

Motivations for sent spirits

Even when participants were not totally certain whether they were the victim of a sent spirit or who might have sent it, they could often describe why they *might* have been the intended victim of a sent spirit. Such explanations often centered on jealousy, described below by one *houngan*:

Participant: In Haiti, if the other people know you are well-fed, they can send a *kout batri* (type of sent spirit) for that. That's our culture.

Interviewer: Why do people do that?

Participant: *Egri, egri* (jealousy) [...] Because they want you to be the same as them, not in front of them.

This *houngan* explained that his wife has been the intended victim of three *kout batri*, against which he protected her. The man I interviewed after his motorcycle accident explained his accident was caused by people who were jealous of his work as an agronomist, while two other men who ran lotteries were targeted for their successful businesses, which were either undermined or totally destroyed. After the sent spirits, one of these men was forced to sell his broken car piece-by-piece to pay off the resulting debt, while the other man, who experienced a house fire, never returned to running a lottery business. Claims that sent spirits were motivated by

jealousy or hatred are consistent with much anthropological scholarship regarding witchcraft and sorcery, including in Haiti (e.g., Brodwin 1996; Brown 1991; Evans-Pritchard 1937). It is worth noting that none of these stories referenced jealousy regarding love relationships – although I have heard other stories regarding sent spirits in such contexts. In this way, *envy* might be a more accurate term to describe these motivations, but I use the term jealousy to remain consistent with anthropological literature regarding witchcraft and sorcery.

Balance, resolution, and limited good

Sent spirit narratives also tended to reflect a sense of balance regarding notions of harm, wealth, and good and bad. One way in which this theme appears in narratives is the implication that if some harm is sent, it must befall someone, whether or not it is the initially intended recipient. This perception is reflected in statements by participants that if a sent spirit does not “arrive on” the intended recipient, a weaker family member will receive it. One participant used this reasoning to explain why she received a sent spirit: “Someone didn’t choose me in particular; they made an *ekspedisyon* [sent spirit] in the family, and the spirit saw I am weaker.” Such notions also contribute to ambiguity, in this case regarding both the initiator and intended recipient of a sent spirit. Marie’s story, too, reflects perceptions that there must be a victim, as her daughter’s friend was told that she must either die or exchange someone to die in her place.

Additionally, descriptions of preventing harm from sent spirits include a component of balance. Narratives give the impression that a sent spirit cannot simply be deflected, such that no one is harmed. Instead, a spirit can be sent back to target the initiator, via another *bòkò*. Even Marie implies that if they had known

their daughter was being exchanged to a *bòkò*, there was the possibility to intervene and that the neighbor's daughter is who should have died instead. Paul Brodwin (1996) explains that his participants initially described the process of removing sent spirits by referencing a Haitian proverb: "The block of wood cannot cut the saw; only a saw can cut another saw. Only by resorting to pathogenic magic can you cure an illness caused in the same way" (2).

Descriptions of balance in relation to spirits closely parallel those seen regarding wealth. Participants' explanations of (potential) motivations for sent spirits reflect a sense that there is a finite amount of good fortune and wealth. As seen above, participants would often tell stories about jealousy, in which one person's job promotion, new asset, or other good fortune is interpreted by others as "this should be mine." The man who experienced a motorcycle accident explained, "I guess the reason, in Haiti sometimes people have the conception if you've got money, you can move up (*avanse*). Others are jealous. If I get a nice car, they think, 'That's supposed to be mine.' You'll possess nice things, and they won't have them." Such descriptions are reminiscent of a zero-sum conception of reality, in which all profit is gained at someone else's loss (cf. Foster 1965).

In this way, participants often described that jealousy leads people not to want others to advance too much (*avanse twòp*) in society. In describing how *avanse* can be recognized, participants described home improvements, such as replacing a roof of woven leaves with tin; gaining new assets, such as a horse or motorcycle; or achieving success in one's business. There is often a suspicion that such success is itself gained through sorcery (Hurbon 1979; Métraux 1972). This is consistent with studies of witchcraft in Africa, which is often interpreted as selfish individuals appropriating limited goods, often via illicit means (Moore and Sanders

2003). In response to these “conspicuous” displays of wealth, people will send misfortune via a spirit as a means of pulling that person back down. Anthropologists have long argued that witchcraft and sorcery entail such a component of social control, whereby these magical systems function as a set of injunctions regarding social relations and moral behavior (e.g., Gluckman 1944; Marwick 1964). The uncertain, yet very real threat contained in the concept of sent spirits produces and perpetuates this system of social control (Barthelemy 1990), historically serving as an equalizing mechanism. Yet what happens to this system when the possibility for engagement in the fundamental magico-religious system becomes threatened? Below, I explore how the shifting political economy of Vodou affects possibilities for agency in the context of structural violence.

Sent spirits and structural violence

We have seen how narratives told about the spirit world can be thought of as illustrative of an individual’s social and material existence. Other scholars have likewise elucidated ways that interactions with the spirit world reflect realities of the social world, including arguing that threats of supernatural harm serve to outline moral injunctions regarding appropriate behavior (Lowenthal 1978; Simpson 1945; Vonarx 2007). Marie’s story provides a clear example of the parallel between material and supernatural realities. Marie’s telling of the story of her daughter’s death can be seen as one of two parallel narratives. Whether one makes sense of the death as due to malicious, intentional harm sent via spirits, these are both ultimately stories of vulnerability as a result of structural violence and socio-economic inequality. Other sent spirit narratives, too, marked social positions and possibilities, including socioeconomic status and restrictions on social mobility.

Throughout this analysis, I have focused largely on meaning-making in the face of misfortune. Yet we cannot ignore questions of *why* certain people experience misfortune in a particular way at a particular time (Farmer 1997; Farmer 2001). Asking such “why” questions is essential to avoid victim-blaming in regard to misfortune. In relation to Marie and Michelle’s stories, I have considered how a narrative reframing could focus on structural violence rather than blaming other individuals or oneself. Re-framing these stories in a way that highlights the interrelatedness of the supernatural world to the social and material worlds – the ways that one reflects the other – enables us to re-foreground the ultimate drivers of vulnerability to misfortune and trauma.

At the same time, we might consider whether sent spirit narratives themselves have become a manifestation of structural violence. As described earlier, in the historical context of *houngan makout*, a sent spirit attribution created a means of enacting agency following a misfortune. It opened avenues to pursue justice or “secondary prevention” in the face of historically embedded structural violence, in the form of a corrupt judiciary and an inadequate healthcare system. However, as contemporary Vodou institutions have shifted more toward commodification via *houngan ason*, sent spirit attributions no longer constitute a feasible avenue for enacting agency for the majority poor. Now, individuals like Marie come to experience existing socioeconomic inequalities in new ways, manifested in terms of disparate access to a historically equalizing magico-religious system. Ultimately, these shifts leave individuals facing new manifestations of structural violence, in the form of marketization of rituals for healing, justice, and recovery that have become out of reach for the poor.

Conclusion: Narrative, wellbeing, and the work of culture

It might seem that the closure of this avenue for agency means that sent spirit narratives can no longer perform the “work” intended of them. However, I argue that sent spirit narratives continue to perform the work of culture (Obeyesekere 1990) in another way, which Marie’s story demonstrates. Marie already must grieve the loss of her daughter; if she were also to frame her daughter’s death as due to her own lack of ability to properly feed and care for her, this would surely only exacerbate her experiences of grief with guilt. Therefore, I argue that it serves a purpose to be able to turn to a *feasible yet uncertain* explanation for misfortune. We can consider sent spirits to be a feasible explanation in that such narratives remain pervasive and familiar in Haiti. At the same time, they are often uncertain in their source, purpose, or evidence – at times, even their veracity. Rather than undermining the potential force of such narratives, I see the uncertainty inherent in them as lending them explanatory power, allowing them to seem true – or at least very possible – in the absence of strong evidence. The persistence of this uncertainty is supported by the fact that, rather than just any individual, only *houngan*-s can discern the veracity and source of sent spirits. Their reticence to share this information is widely considered acceptable, as a way of preventing vengeful acts.

In sent spirit narratives, forces outside of the individual provide a way of explaining why misfortune occurs, through no fault of one’s own and despite one’s best efforts. In this way, they function as a form of blame displacement. For Marie, one can see how blame displacement might ultimately be protective in terms of assuaging potential guilt. It has similarly been reported that sent spirits might serve the purpose of blame displacement in regards to suicide in rural Haiti, explaining it

as something outside of an individual's control (Hagaman, et al. 2013; Métraux 1972).

Considering this, we might ask why it is that Michelle did *not* draw upon a sent spirit narrative to explain her daughter's death. Douglas Hollan (1994) argues that individuals differentially draw on cultural resources – like sent spirit narratives – for several reasons, which might have to do with the particular experience of misfortune, their resulting affective states, and their ability to tap into cultural meanings to achieve “symbolic transformations of painful emotions.” (74) Any of these explanations might apply to Michelle; ultimately, we cannot explain precisely why she does not draw on sent spirit narratives as Marie does. However, we can ask whether differing propensities for drawing on sent spirit narratives have implications for outcomes, such as wellbeing and mental health.

Indeed, the anthropological literature suggests multiple potential answers to this question – namely, that sent spirit narratives might be either wellbeing-*promoting* or *inhibiting*. Anthropologists have shown how narratives, including those centered around sorcery, are wellbeing-promoting by allowing individuals to process emotions through catharsis and framing of events in socially meaningful and acceptable ways (Schieffelin 1985; Wellenkamp 1988). In contrast, Karen Brison's (1995) work among Kwanga villagers in Papua New Guinea argues that sorcery narratives are ultimately harmful to wellbeing. While they provide some initial relief to the bereaved, they ultimately produce no means for agentive action, leaving women experiencing deep resentment that lingers for years.

I argue that, when asking whether sent spirit narrative are wellbeing-promoting or inhibiting, a central consideration is that they not only enable emotion processing but also enable the avoidance of other, potentially more harmful

emotions, centrally guilt. Specifically, how does a narrative that forefronts material reality and structural inequality produce different notions of blame than that which tells a story in the spirit world? In the case of Marie and Michelle, I argue that attribution of the *death itself* to a malicious, outside act is indeed sufficient to displace blame, in the sense that such explanations could prove protective for wellbeing and mental health. In some ways, Michelle's narrative – in which she shoulders ultimate responsibility for her daughter's death – reflects a form of victim-blaming, as she is ultimately blaming herself for her own poverty, rather than attributing her daughter's death to broader systems of injustice that create and perpetuate poverty, food insecurity, and poor access to healthcare. The act of blaming oneself for misfortunes that result from systemic injustices is itself an outcome of structural violence, in this case manifesting as worse mental health outcomes. In contrast, Marie's narrative, which places blame beyond herself – on other people and supernatural causal mechanisms – is a way of explaining lack of agency in the face of such structural violence. By displacing blame that she might otherwise experience more directly, she might be preventing herself later suffering.

A helpful analogue is Sara Lewis's (2018) analysis of resilience among Tibetan Buddhists. She describes the practice of *lojong* (mind-training) in the face of stark physical and structural violence. She argues that this response, which turns attention away from one's own suffering and towards others, is an agentic form of resilience, "freeing oneself from the binds of negative emotion" (13). Might it be, then, that sent spirit narratives likewise represent a form of reclaiming agency, enacting resilience, and ultimately promoting wellbeing in the face of structural violence? Because sent spirit narratives do not constitute intentional practices like *lojong* (Lewis 2018), I argue that they cannot be thought of as a way to reclaim

agency per se. However, they do serve as a form of resilient protection of self in the face of enduring lack of agency on a broader scale.

Significantly, sent spirit narratives might offer a form of protection from negative emotions, yet they offer no direct challenge to the forms of structural violence that are at the root of the myriad misfortunes described by individuals like Marie and Michelle. Even in contexts where sent spirit narratives enable one to enact some agency, they do so despite not addressing the broader “lack of agency, choice, and unfettered access to self-determination” that denote structural violence (Lewis 2018: 14). In fact, attributing misfortune to the supernatural world not only displaces blame from those individuals telling the stories but also from those systems and individuals in power who are producing and perpetuating structural violence. These narratives might indirectly implicate structural violence but ultimately do little to actively resist it, allowing for “restructuring their disrupted identities [...] without needing to take the more radical epistemological step of defining the existing structure as oppressive, and resisting it” (Hunt 2000: 100-101).

Yet it is in part their relationship to structural violence that accounts for the cultural force of sent spirit narratives. In some settings, narrative frameworks foregrounding personal agency are considered wellbeing- and mental health-promoting (McAdams and Guo 2015). For example, Roy Schafer (1983) describes how North Americans resolve problematic situations by constructing a narrative that emphasizes their own role in authoring their destiny. Additionally, Johnathan Adler (2012) has demonstrated how, among psychotherapy patients, increased agency in recounting one’s personal narrative is associated with better mental health outcomes. In contrast, it might be the case that in settings marked by stark structural violence across multiple domains to the degree of Haiti, expectations of

agency are instead harmful, as they often do not match reality, in which individuals have little control over life circumstances and experiences of misfortune. Indeed, in my survey, I found that those who endorsed a greater sense of personal vulnerability to supernatural harm tended to have better mental health outcomes (Author 2015). Historically, sent spirit narratives – appearing as they did in a general context of lack of agency – nevertheless were a means to produce or reclaim agency, in the sense of providing accessible avenues to respond to misfortune via revenge or self-protection. Now, however, as sent spirit narratives have become a less accessible means of *enacting* agency, they instead provide a means to *make sense of* one's lack of agency in relation to preventing misfortune, in the face of structural violence and the shifting political economy of Vodou.

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¹ This article is written in first person to reflect the ethnographic perspective of the first author during data collection.

² A mistaken translation for *lougawou*, derived from the French "*Loups-garous*," is "werewolf." I prefer the term "shape-shifter," which more accurately captures Haitian descriptions of *lougawou*.

³ Karen Richman (2007) differentiates between *houngan* who inherit their gift or receive it through a dream and those who are ordained through expensive ceremonies linking them to a broader ritual system and religious bureaucracy. Although the translation 'priest' is more often used in the literature and reflects some elements of the latter category, shaman is a more accurate translation for *houngan*.

4