

"Are voduns non-binary deities?"

Nikoue DaPovi in conversation with Messanh Amedegnato and Mathilde ter Heijne

Mamissi Nikoue DaPovi has been a priestess of several Vodun deities, including Mama Wati, Dan, and Sakpaté, since 1960. She practices in Agouegan, near Aného, Togo, and is a member of the Union des Cultes Traditionnels du Togo (UCTT).

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When the people dream and sing in the ceremony, your Vodun can "visit" you.

Mathilde ter Heijne: Thank you for receiving Hounougbo Amedegnato and me.

Messanh Amedegnato: In our culture, when someone receives a visitor at the ceremony, everyone is prepared to share his or her knowledge and powers with that person. I am also happy that you are visiting our ceremony.

Mathilde: Mamissi, is there a difference between female and male Vodun?

Mamissi DaPovi: There are many gods. There are masculine deities and feminine deities. Each of these belongs to someone. A man can also have a female Vodun or a woman can have a male Vodun.

Mathilde: Mamissi, how did you discover that you were supposed to be a priestess?

DaPovi: Already as a small child I was appointed to be a priestess, but this was forgotten because the family couldn't afford the many necessary ceremonies. Until 1960, I had many problems; nothing was going well for me, and I was always sick. There were also many problems in my family. In 1960, my family finally had enough money to do a ceremony, and we asked a boconon and priest what was happening to me. When he made the oracle and performed the ceremony, we discovered that I was meant to be a female priestess myself. Back then, all of the deities for snakes, the rainbow, the earth and the sky appeared in my trance. This had to be taken care of before I could become a normal person again.

Messanh: Mathilde, Did you understand?

Mathilde: Yes, I think so. I understood Mamissi had to walk this path and become a priestess, because otherwise there would be an imbalance in the family.

Messanh: When someone is not following what he or she is meant to be, then this person will not

get old and be ill very often, until his or her destiny is followed.

Mathilde: So this is not a temple for one Vodun, but for several. Male and female.

Messanh: She is close to many gods. All snake, earth and sky gods. The spirits of the snake, Dan, pray for water and Toulabo, my god of thunder Hêbiêssô, cannot work without water, so he needs those spirits to work. That's why Mami DaPovi and I are working together.

Mathilde: That must have been difficult for her.

Messanh: She was born that way, with this fate. That means that when everything is as it should be, the gods give you the energy to manage it.

Mathilde: Was she able to lead a "normal life" after that? With a partner and children, for instance?

Messanh: Yes. Once she knew about all the Voduns, she had a normal life. It was a catastrophe before that. After the oracle in 1960, she got a husband; she had children.

Mathilde: And her main job is to be a priestess?

Messanh: Yes. She has been a priestess ever since.

Mathilde: And how is it for her husband? What does he think about her being a priestess?

Messanh: Her husband is okay with it. The man is part of the village and is okay with it. When they got married, she had to do one wedding for the husband and one for the Deities. And the Deities set out days of the week-Monday or Tuesday, for example-where she was not allowed to sleep in the same bed as her husband. As long as she respected these rules, it would not be a problem.

Mathilde: Is there a god that is both male and female? Are there gods that are neither?

Messanh: I work with the Vodun of thunder, Hêbiêssô and I am priest for Toulabo and Adanyro. The male side, Toulabo, stands outside my temple; the female part Adanyro is inside, in the room.

Mathilde: So Hêbiêssô consists of many gods. Some with a female side and the male side.

Messanh: Yes, it is like this: the powers on the male side (lightning) are "angry," because something is happening that is not good, and the female side (thunder) says, "Alright, calm down. We can do this."

Mathilde: Are there specific characteristics that are viewed as male or female? What are the characteristics of a female god, for example?

DaPovi: Here in the temple we have the rainbow god, for example [painted on the wall]. The rainbow is a god with two heads, for instance. The rainbow itself is female. Then there are water drops in the rainbow, and these are male.

Mathilde: So, deities are often non-binary. And this applies also for the people in the community? We attended a ceremony with you, Mami DaPovi, and there were a lot of women that sang together, danced together, fell into a trance. But there were also men who danced. It was somehow different from the other ceremonies. What was the difference?

DaPovi: Because it was a ceremony for Mami Wata and not of Hêbièssô. Mami Wata is connected to the water spirits. When you have a connection to one of my deities, you might for instance see a snake in a dream. Again and again. And then we can use an oracle to see what kind of snake it is. Then the Boconon (the diviner) find out which of the Voduns you belong to. The oracle can also tell you if you belong to the male or the female part of a god. For example, there was a man who thought his Vodun was the masculine part of the rainbow. He had problems in his life and went to see a priest who found out that he belonged to the female part of the rainbow god. When the ceremony ended, the man could face his problems, which disappeared over time. The boconon finds out which person belongs to what kind of Vodun. It is the same with Mathilde's Dazo Dji, that is part the earth Vudon pantheon. Women and men that belong to this can go into a trance, that means that when the people dream and sing in the ceremony, your god can "visit" you.

Mathilde: Could there also be a trance dance with just one priest, and only men attending?

DaPovi: When a man goes into trance, it is very difficult for him to go back into a normal state. They last longer. This is why men try not to go into trance. It costs them a lot of energy. For women it goes much faster.