

"You are only a ghost without blood."

Messanh Amedegnato in conversation with Mathilde Ter Heijne

At the age of twelve, Messanh Amedegnato was designated as the successor to his father, a Vodun priest in their village of Agouegan, near Aného, Togo. Following his father's death, Amedegnato was expected to assume his priestly duties, but he pursued his studies and moved abroad instead. He has lived in Berlin with his wife and children since 1997. In 2014, he was formally initiated as a priest of Hêbiesso. He is president of the Union des Cultes Traditionnels du Togo (UCTT).

This conversation took place in Berlin in 2013 and was published in Mathilde ter Heijne: Any Day Now (Kunsthalle Nürnberg, 2013).

Coins play a part in ritual, because the human soul and money belong together.

Mathilde ter Heijne: Is there a sacred language only spoken in the context of rituals or oracles?

Messanh Amedegnato: Yes, there is a secret language and only priests know it. Rituals are carried out in colloquial languages, in my case in Ewe, which is my mother tongue. But I can also perform rituals in other languages, always providing that I am acknowledged as a healer in the region in question. That applies to West Africa. Besides Ewe, for example, I can also perform rituals in Fon and Peda (for Benin) or in Yoruba (for Nigeria). There is another secret language for oracles.

Mathilde: Is there also a sacred script? What is it used for?

Messanh: There is no sacred script, but we do use symbols and signs.

Mathilde: What are the chains that you threw called? What can they tell us?

Messanh: The chains are called "Kpêlê"¹. They tell us what is going on. This is an oracle.

Mathilde: What is the difference between an oracle and a ritual?

Messanh: An oracle is performed by a boconon (diviner) to find out what someone needs or to find out which Deity is involved. Then, the ritual is the means to attain it.

Mathilde: Are there universal rituals? Is the special cleansing soap that you once conceived a universal ritual?

Messanh: Yes, there are universal rituals. The soap is not the ritual itself; it is only used for it. But it is not a normal soap, other things were used in its preparation so that special energy evolves.

Mathilde: Can you explain to me how the religion vodun deals with good and evil?

Messanh: In principle, the effect of the Vodun's is only positive. But that doesn't mean that in vodun people aren't capable of bringing about evil. Vodun reacts to evil occurrences; if someone has been given something positive through Vodun, for example, and this person then fails to give thanks for it. Or if someone is troubled by another person so that he cannot sleep; Vodun can give him back his sleep and punish the guilty party.

Mathilde: Is the snake an important symbol or perhaps even a means of healing?

Messanh: The snake is a symbol or aspect of vodun and also a Vodun. Not all types of snakes are Vodun, but the python is, for example. We also use it as a means of healing, e.g. the fat is used as an ointment during illness. The rainbow has the same significance as the snake.

Mathilde: Is there a hierarchy within the vodun religion or community?

Messanh: Yes, the vodun priest is at the head; he/she/they is/are followed by assistant priests, who share the same rank but have different tasks.

Mathilde: Are there female priests?

Messanh: Yes, it is possible for women to hold every office.

1. The "Kpêlê" were used as an oracle on the occasion of a meeting of the artist with Messanh Amedegnato.