

Queer Acceptance Within Haitian Vodou

Slide 1 - Introduction

Today I will be talking about sexual and gender minorities within the sociocultural context of Haiti. The queer identifying community in Haiti are subject to considerable hostility and adversity. This presentation aims to explore how the African derived religion of Haitian Vodou can offer the community a space for inclusion and acceptance that they are ordinarily not granted. I'll start by defining gender, sex, and sexuality as well as looking at other relevant terms such as heteronormativity. I'll explore some relevant scholars within queer and gender theory such as Judith Butler and Gayle Rubin. Next, I'll examine how sexual and gender minorities are treated in Haiti to provide social context, before going on to explore how and why Haitian Vodou can offer the community a space for acceptance and inclusion.

Slide 2 - Gender, sex, and sexuality

When discussing sexual and gender minorities, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by terms such as "gender", "sex", and "sexuality". "Gender" and "sex" are two terms often used interchangeably to describe whether someone is a man or a woman, or male or female. Within this presentation, "sex" will be used to refer to the anatomy or physiology of a body. Gender, on the other hand, is perhaps more complex. Gender identity refers to one's subjective sense of self that may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth (Rahill *et al.*, 2020, p.691). "Sexuality" refers to one's sexual orientation, indicating one's emotional and physical attraction to others (2020, p.691). Gayle Rubin (1984, p.171) describes gender and sexuality as political, in that it is

organised into systems of power. Within Haitian society, those practising heteronormative ideals are rewarded with social inclusion and acceptance, whilst those deviating from the norms are punished with social exclusion and acts of violence. Within the context of this presentation, the term “sexual and gender minorities” is used to describe individuals who are non-conforming to Haitian societal norms of gender and sexuality. In other words, anyone who is not heterosexual and whose gender identity does not correlate with that assigned to them at birth, including transgender and non-binary individuals.

Slide 3 - Heteronormativity

Another relevant term to discuss is that of heteronormativity. This refers to a hegemonic system of institutions, norms, ideals, and practices that assert heterosexuality as normal and natural (Robinson, 2016, p.1). This consequently classifies other sexualities as abnormal and unnatural. Not only does heteronormativity maintain a sexual binary, but it also subsequently maintains sex and gender binarism, as it is a prerequisite for the man/woman binary to be maintained in order for heterosexuality to exist. Gayle Rubin (1984, p.153) illustrates heteronormative ideals with the “charmed circle”, which you can see on this slide. It demonstrates the sexual value system upheld by heteronormative societies which maintains that good, normal, and natural sex should be heterosexual and monogamous, ideally married, and exclude pornography and non-vanilla sex. Conversely, the outer limits of the circle describe sex deemed bad, abnormal, and unnatural in society, which includes homosexuality, promiscuity, polygamy, public sex, and pornography. The “charmed circle” effectively illustrates heteronormative norms and

ideals and the binary system it maintains of “good” versus “bad” sex. It also highlights how restrictive and confining these ideals are, which is problematic when one considers how severe sanctions for deviating from these ideals can be.

Slide 4 - Subverting sexual and gender norms

Judith Butler is an influential thinker on the topic of gender and queer theory. One of their most notable claims is that gender is not something that exists intrinsically in the essence of our being. Whilst discussing gender, they state that “identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1999, p.33). In other words, the ways in which an individual expresses their gender, such as with the clothes they wear, is not a manifestation of one’s gender identity, but rather one’s gender identity is a manifestation of the various expressions that create and shape it. According to Butler, without the expressions that form one’s gender, gender wouldn’t exist by itself. It is for this reason that gender is often considered to be a social construct, and one that perpetuates heteronormative norms and ideals, as gender is so often conflated with biological sex, of which there are thought to be two kinds. Butler suggests that behaviours and expressions that fall outside of sexual and gender norms result in highlighting their constructed nature; this is one way to subvert such norms and expectations. They go on to contend that homosexuality subverts the heteronormative binary (1999, p.183). If being a woman does not necessarily include desire towards men, and vice versa, then this brings into question the heteronormative assertion that gender identity and sexuality are mutually exclusive.

Slide 5 - Criticism of Butler

Drousioti (2021, p.96) criticises Butler's theory that homosexuality is a means for subverting gender binarism, arguing that homosexuality maintains the sex binary just as heterosexuality does. She instead proposes that bisexuality subverts sexuality and gender binaries, as there is no criteria or limit placed on the sex of a body when choosing a sexual partner. Homosexuality and heterosexuality presents a binary in itself, which bisexuality falls outside of.

But what is the benefit of subverting sexual and gender binarism? Within the social context of Haiti, it is likely the institutional structures perpetuating heteronormative binarism that creates an unsafe and discriminatory environment for sexual and gender minorities. Therefore, it seems that subverting binarism would grant such individuals inclusion and acceptance.

Slide 6 - Homosexuality in Haiti

Homosexuality is largely not accepted in Haitian society. Queer individuals are often subjected to ostracism, humiliation, physical violence, and sexual assault. Although homosexuality has been legal in Haiti since 1986, a report from the U.S. Department of State (2022) states that discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity of expression, or sex characteristics is not prohibited by law. The impact of this lack of legal protection gravely affects queer individuals in Haiti. A study by Rahill et al (2020) conducted focus groups to gain qualitative insight into the lives and experiences of

sexual and gender minorities in Cité Soleil, a large and densely populated shantytown in the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince. Participants of the focus groups discussed their experiences of being raped and beaten by groups of men, which often put the victims at risk of contracting HIV. They described being subjected to violent assault, including stoning and being shot. There is no help or support for the community; when asked if they ever seek legal protection from the police, they assert that they are ignored or beaten for daring to complain. It is relevant to note that Cité Soleil is a particularly dangerous and poverty stricken neighbourhood in Port-au-Prince, but these experiences highlight the intensity of the discrimination faced by sexual and gender minorities and the anti-LGBTQ attitudes and actions that confront the community.

Slide 7 - Haitian Vodou

Haitian Vodou is an African Diaspora religion which emerged in the seventeenth century (Viddal, 2023, p.1). Practitioners of Haitian Vodou, hereafter referred to as vodouyizan, believe in one God, referred to as Bondye, a name which derives from the French *bon Dieu* meaning *good God* (Brown, 2010, p.6). However, vodouyizan also believe in a number of spirits, referred to as the lwa. In fact, the term “serving the spirits” is often used to describe one’s position in the religion (2023, p.3). The lwa are seen as liminal beings; they are seen as a bridge between human vodouyizan and Bondye, and between this earthly realm and the spiritual realm (2010, p.6). Rather than praying to God, as one does within the Catholic faith, vodouyizan serve the lwa; they see the lwa as guardians, protectors, and like family, with whom a respectful and responsible relationship must be maintained (2010, p.6). One significant component of Haitian

Vodou, is that vodouyizan practice what is commonly referred to as “spirit possession”, though it is more appropriately referred to as “spiritual mounting” within the context of Haitian Vodou, as the lwa “mount” their servers as an equestrian does with their horse (Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 2000, p.19). Spiritual mounting takes place during ceremonies, which is being depicted in this painting, and it is the way in which vodouyizan communicate with the lwa.

Despite widespread hostility towards homosexuality in Haiti, a different perspective is offered within the context of vodou. For example, many women practising vodou consider themselves to be lesbian, some of whom also practise polygamy (McAlister, 2000), consequently subverting two heteronormative ideals. This raises the question of why, in a society that rejects sexual and gender nonconforming identities and acts, would such a differing attitude be present within the context of vodou?

Slide 8 - Ezili Dantò

One possible answer to this question pertains to the lwa. One particular lwa relevant to the discussion of the queer community in Haiti is Ezili Dantò. She is described as a “compassionate mother of the oppressed and abused” (Kingsbury and Chesnut, 2019, p.212). Though she has previously been described as a protector of women and children, her protection has been extended to the LGBTQ community in more recent times (2019, 225). Ezili Dantò is one of several Ezili lwa, all of whom encompass a feminine energy. Each of the Ezili lwa correspond with various manifestations of the Virgin Mary (Brown, 2010, p.221). Ezili Dantò corresponds with the Black Madonna of

Częstochowa; consequently the iconography representing this manifestation of the Virgin Mary is used to also represent Ezili Dantò. However, the Ezili Iwa differ significantly from the Virgin Mary's pure, submissive, and virginal Catholic reputation. The Ezili Iwa exhibit traits and characteristics that are much more multifaceted and human. Though they are seen as nurturing, protective, and compassionate mothers, they are also at times angry, fearful, sexual, sensual, passionate, and powerful (2010, p.221).

Slide 9 - Ezili Dantò Continued

Patriarchal paradigms assert an impossible standard for women that they be virginal yet motherly at the same time (Kingsbury and Chesnut, 2019, p.228). The Madonna Whore Complex is a phenomenon coined by Sigmund Freud which describes the psychological complex of categorising women as either a "Madonna", a woman who is virginal and pure, or as a "whore", a woman who is sexual and promiscuous (Brownlee, 2022). This dichotomous view is rooted in misogynistic beliefs and is often perpetuated by heterosexual, cisgender men. Vodouyizan do not see any contradiction in Ezili Dantò's seemingly contradictory characteristics of being both loving yet angry, powerful yet fearful, or virginal yet sexual (2019, p.228). It is for this reason that Ezili Dantò could be considered a powerful influence in subverting sexual and gender norms, and challenging the binary systems that permeate modern society.

Further to this point, Ezili Dantò is generally considered to be bisexual. Ogou, a masculine warrior Iwa, is her lover (Brown, 2010, p.235). Though she refuses to marry,

and likes to keep the company of women (2010, p.222). As theorised earlier by Drousioti, bisexual identities can play a politically powerful role in subverting sexual and gender norms. Overall, the multifaceted characteristics of Ezili Dantò may seem contradictory to some, and it is precisely for this reason that her spirit challenges certain norms and ideals that would otherwise constrain the vodouyizan who serve her.

Slide 10 - Gede

Another lwa relevant to this discussion is Gede, often affectionately referred to by vodouyizan as “Papa Gede”. He is considered to be the lwa of death, sex, and humour, and possesses a “licence to break social rules” (Brown, 2010, p.361). Through possession, Gede can say things ordinarily considered improper or impolite, and he can act out impulses ordinarily suppressed. He is known to be highly sexual and promiscuous. In this way, Gede subverts not only heteronormative norms, but the binary of social norms in general that indicate there is a “correct” and “incorrect” way of behaving. With his presence, Gede takes the vodouyizan through a journey that rouses their most out of control selves, before returning back to the normal world where control and order prevails. The experience bestows a sense of power to the vodouyizan (2010, 362). For this reason, Gede likely empowers his LGBTQ servers, and his laissez-faire, rebellious attitude likely helps to create an open-minded and accepting environment.

Slide 11 - Conclusion

As stated by Gayle Rubin, gender and sexuality is political. It is so because heteronormative norms and ideals make deviation from these norms a rebellious act,

which is often punished by society. Judith Butler suggests that homosexuality subverts the gender binary, as it deviates from heteronormative ideals, whilst Drousioti argues that bisexuality more so subverts the gender binary, as homosexuality still maintains a sex based binary. Subverting the sexual and gender binary is important, as the existence of such a binary places limits on individuals, and can result in individuals facing extreme adversity just for being themselves. Such is the case in Haiti, where sexual and gender minorities face severe hostility and discrimination. However, Haitian Vodou can offer a space of acceptance and inclusion for the LGBTQ community. This is because vodouyizan serve the lwa, and lwa such as Ezili Dantò and Papa Gede subvert societal norms, in particular sexual and gender norms. This creates an open-minded and accepting space that is outside of the heteronormative society the vodouyizan inhabit. Further to this, the lwa empower their servers, and permit them to be themselves.

Slide 12 - References

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