

Slavery, Spirit Possession, and Mimesis amongst the Ewe of Ghana and Togo

Nature creates similarities. One need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man's. His gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else. Perhaps there is none of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role.

--- Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty" 1933

Introduction

The case examined here is the issue of African slavery and domestic servitude in modern times and specifically slavery's role in recent slave-spirit religions in West Africa such as 'Gorovodu' and 'Mama Tchamba.' When I use the term "slave-spirit" I am referring to spirits who were once a slave and/or married into Ewe patriline. There is some who believe the Gorovodu gods themselves are slave-spirits but this is quite debatable (see Friedson, 2010). The paper also seeks to address the intimate ties between rituals and memories of slavery in guiding the lives of many Ewe-Vodu worshippers in Togo, Ghana, and Benin. By slavery and memories of it I am referring to distant and not-so distant encounters by the Ewe with groups mostly from the northern savannah area of West Africa. My references to mimesis and mimicry are following up on the works of sub-altern theorists: Rosenthal (1998), Taussig, (1992) and Bhabba (2005). My proposal is that many people of tradition utilize their "mimetic faculty" as a sixth sense that allows them to interpret and understand the world in interesting ways.

Perhaps mimesis invoked as a way of seeing, a method of sorts, can help anthropologists and others better make sense of traditional cultures, in this case Ewe Gorovodu culture in Ghana, Togo, and Benin. The work of Bhabba and Taussig and their ideas about mimesis and hybridity explicitly, are integral to the forthcoming arguments and their ties to Ewe Gorovodu culture. Mimesis is a form of symbolic inversion, participants valorize certain cultural forms during rituals to not only remember history more acutely but to also prepare for a more stable future writes Brightman (1999, 272).

Mimesis and the Mimetic Faculty

The term mimesis is derived from the Greek mimesis, meaning to imitate. The OED defines mimesis as "a figure of speech, whereby the words or actions of another are imitated" and "the deliberate imitation of the behavior of one group of people by another as a factor in social change". Mimicry is defined as "the action, practice, or art of mimicking or closely imitating ... the manner, gesture, speech, or mode of actions and persons, or the superficial characteristics of a thing". Both terms are generally used to denote the imitation or representation of nature, especially in aesthetics (primarily literary and artistic media). I want to convert this word and use it in a way that Taussig, (1992) suggests, and utilize it as a concept/method for understanding how Ewe history and rituals are transmitted across generations along the Guinea coast. The tchambaga bracelets themselves possess a power that is as true as a real shackle from hundreds of years ago. The same is true of the fetishes in the Gorovodu shrine, they too possess a power that is on-par with the actual God/spirit they symbolize. This is true for some people who have tattoos representing their loved ones, or

those who carry rosary beads to protect themselves or to honor Christ. Because of mimesis, because ritual becomes myth in action, objects can become more real than that in which they seek to represent. This is the true nuts and bolts of mimesis, not just the way knowledge is transmitted via imitation, but the fact that “things” are empowered with spirituality all around us, if as Sofo Tete says, “[you].we just have to listen, look, and feel, our histories are all around us, in the rocks, the trees, the drums, in the very cores of ourselves” (2011). Several years in the field made me realize just how unnatural we have become, compartmentalizing and labeling everything, seeing lines and not circles, separating worlds, spaces, places, and times. The mimetic faculty allows us to see the inherent embeddedness of things.

Within Western traditions of aesthetic thought, the concepts of imitation and mimesis have been central to attempts to theorize the essence of artistic expression, they are also used in literary circles, but they are rarely used to understand other cultures or religions. Why? In most cases, mimesis is defined as having two primary meanings - that of imitation (more specifically, the imitation of nature as object, phenomena, or process) and that of artistic representation (University of Chicago, 2011). Mimesis is an extremely broad and theoretically elusive term that encompasses a range of possibilities for how the agency-laden and symbolically generated world created by people can relate to any given "real", fundamental, exemplary, or significant world (see keywords essays on simulation/simulacra, and reciprocity (University of Chicago, 2011). Michael Taussig describes the mimetic faculty as "the nature that culture uses to create

second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other. The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power." The Ewe put their own power into their fetishes, which they make with a myriad of ingredients; they put their own power into their: prayers, songs, drum rhythms, dances, divination sessions, rituals, and episodes of spirit possession and trance.

Interestingly, mimesis is not only of interest to social scientists but is also a well-articulated theory in biology and mathematics. A group of Japanese scholars actually tested the "mimetic faculty" on a robot. "Mimesis Theory" has been articulated by information mathematicians in Japan. They state that "Mimesis theory" in the cognitive sciences and "mirrored neurons" found in the field of biology show that the behavior generation process is not learned separately from the cognition process. During the behavior imitation period, the child doesn't just automatically learn how to speak or move their limbs, but they also acknowledge the parents behavior. After abstraction, they learn the behavior as symbols and alter their own personal behavior (see Inamura, Takamura, et al; 2010?). These researchers propose a new method that can account for cognitive and behavioral processes at the same time, they try their new method on a robot, I am arguing that we can observe this process firsthand with humans. The mind and body are not viewed as separate but integrated and Africans transmit knowledge and wisdom effectively through music and ritual. These techniques for cultural recognition are particularly interesting when applied to slave spirits. The Mama Tchmaba pantheon is born in a mimetic world that we can never fully understand with discursive methods.

My proposal here is, that mimesis is an explicit “acting out”, or act of agency, in which the actor either overtly or covertly conveys a message to others in a way that involves performances, non-verbals, and aspects of theater and music that are contrary to the way knowledge is transmitted in so-called “literate” societies. I can read Rosenthal (1998) and Rush’s (2010) work on Mama Tchama and it sheds enormous “academic” insight. However, when I had my own tchambaga bracelets blessed in the sacred forest in Togo, and had the opportunity to experience a Tchamba spirit come onto the head of an unexpected subject, only then could I begin to understand Tchamba spirituality on more sophisticated level. I was taught it mimetically, with participant observation and what Stoller calls embodiment, I was able to live the Tchamba rituals myself. I was able to see the herbs and medicines from roots, barks and trees that were used to cleanse and purify them. I witnessed them (the tchambaga) sleeping in Zogbe/Sacred forest with Abiba and Sadzifo. The spirits themselves spoke to me and everyone else around on dozens of occasions in tongues that were either: Hausa, Akan, Kabye or another unidentifiable and northern spoken language. Being there and participant-observation are a part of mimesis, but full-mimesis involves more than this, a certain empathy and educated embodiment that can only come by understanding things on the terms of the group you’re involved with and not on our own terms.

Mama Tchamba: Slave Spirit Worship

The initial goal of this article was supposed to explain Mama Tchamba in greater detail, however the recent work by Dana Rush does it better than I ever could:

The word "Tchamba" is an ethnonym, the name of a spirit complex, and refers to specific spirits within this spirit grouping. A Tchamba spirit is either male or female, the latter often called Maman Tchamba and usually regarded as either the wife or mother of a male Tchamba spirit. She is also known to guard the riches of the wealthy family who owned her. Although the spirits themselves represent slaves from generations past, they are venerated by both the descendants of those who were enslaved and those who owned slaves. The songs at the beginning of the article address both situations: The first song communicates the sentiments of slaves who find

themselves in a foreign land where their natal Tchamba language is not understood. The second song is from the perspective of descendants of wealthy slave-owning ancestors, who acknowledge the truth of their ancestry, but hope that Tchamba veneration will bring forgiveness. Due to generations of intermarriage between families of slave owners and those who were enslaved, there is a complex entanglement within lineages. Complicating this further is the contemporary shame associated with being descended from either side. Nonetheless, both positions of veneration call upon slave spirits to advise and help with contemporary problems. (3)(Rush, 2011)

They learn this history of colonial and regional encounters involving slaves mimetically. It is the casting of Afa, the voice of the spirit, the rhythm of the drummer, or the cadence of the song that teaches the Ewe about their personal and familial history as it relates to the issue of domestic slavery. Freidson insists that we have missed more than we could ever imagine just from not understanding song lyrics and rhythms in Ewe Gorovodu and other cultures of Africa as well (2010, 1995). Elders teach, and children are enculturated in a certain theatrical and intertwined matter that “embodiment” and “mimesis” may offer us a new and different way at getting at complex oral cultures such as the Ewe (see Stoller, 199, Taussig, 1992). Children learn in a rubric of sound, colors, and symbols that are always missed by the untrained eye, I still am only getting about ten percent of Tchamba and Gorovodu culture.

There are many stories of these other northern slave spirits possessing Muslim, Christian and Traditional school children alike. Meanwhile we in the U.S., who stock-piled enormous wealth from 400 years of free labor, can barely recognize our debt to Africa, and most of the time can't even paint an accurate picture of the Slave trades in our public text books. If we are introduced to slavery at all, then we learn about it in a fleeting and surface-oriented manner, as if to say, “that was a long time ago and isn't that important”. When I bring students to Ghana, Togo and Benin and we visit El Mina Castle or the Point of No Return they almost always break into tears. When they see the blood-stained walls, and here the stories of rape and murder, they are participating with history in a new way that teaches them in ways even a good text book could not. They are experiencing it in a new and participatory way, it is not mimesis, but it is on the same performative and empathetic path that I am referring to.

Rush (2011) also mentions three typical Tchamba stories of how Ewe learn their personal history and its relations to slavery. The first theme involves finding tchambaga in a field, and the finder must then have divination done to determine its significance. In a second story, someone comes upon a Vodou ceremony and they unexpectedly go into trance, they begin speaking a “northern slave tongue”, Or, they learn from their parents and forefathers the truth about their ties to slavery. The final means of obtaining tchamba, and the most vivid account I have heard or read comes again from Rush:

In Lome, Togo, the name Dogbe-Tomi was mentioned to me several times in relationship to a story--still in circulation--of a girl who had learned of her slave ancestry, and journeyed north to

find her roots. The following is based on a summary of my interview with Lome resident Cecile Akpaglo:

In the early 1800s, the father of a very wealthy Ewe family sent a slave buyer to the area in and around Upper Volta (contemporary Burkina Faso) to purchase a strong, male slave. The slave was known by his surname Tomi. He served the Ewe family well, and grew up. Through his hard work and honesty, he became a well-respected man. He married into the Dogbe family and had children ... time passed ...

In the 1950s, a young girl from the wealthy Catholic Dogbe family in Lome woke up one morning in trance. She took her school chalk and drew northern scarification patterns on her face and started speaking in an incomprehensible language. Her father was worried so he took his daughter to a very well-respected diviner for a consultation. The diviner asked questions and consulted with Fa. The diviner also recalled that there had always been talk of a male Dogbe ancestor being of Burkinabe origins. The diviner advised the girl to go to Burkina Faso to find her family.

She traveled with her father to Ouagadougou. They learned that everyone in the family was dead except for a very old man. They went to meet with the old man who remembered his own grandfather telling him of slavery and tearing up when he recalled the sale of one of his own brothers to an Ewe family in the south. The old man's surname was Tomi. From that point on the family adopted the name Dogbe-Tomi, and began Tchamba veneration. The girl grew up, and when she died in the 1990s, the family went back to Catholicism. (8)

The “veneration” that Rush is referring to are the rituals that must be carried out by particular individuals and families. It isn't only Gorovodu adepts who consult Afa, folks throughout West Africa from every belief system consult or know somebody else who has had Afa divination done to tackle some sort of problem. In Gorovodu culture they learn a “Romance of the North” to invoke Rosenthal and it ensures that many will respect northerners and the history of slavery in a more embedded and deep way. It isn't just Tchamba that is taught mimetically, so is Ewe migration and history (Gota ceremony), Ewe medicine and Tchamba ((rituals), job prospects (Afa divination), etc. Mimesis, and the mimetic faculty offers us a cleaner window to peek out of when it comes to slavery, history, and culture.

Mimesis in Ewe-land teaches a history of slavery via divination and spirit possession. One can consult an Afa diviner and find out whom in their family was enslaved, who did the enslaving, and from there they can participate in a life time of rituals to appease these spirits and make their present lives more tolerable. This meta-method seems especially promising in regards to powerless groups who utilize mimesis to remember their encounters with colonial governments from far away or neighboring

ethnic groups from nearby. Steven Friedson's marvelous book *Remains of Ritual* does not address mimesis directly but it does offer a glowing understanding of the ways that "others" are integrated into the Ewe collective conscience, of particular interest is his second chapter (Salah) where he details how Islam has been translated by Ewe Gorovodu/Brekete followers (2010). Islamic prayers are learned "mimetically" via Salah ceremonies that induce actual Gorovodu trance by the entire Brekete pantheon: Kunde, Ablewa, Senya Compo, Banguete, Sacra Bode and Nana Wango all come to dance after the *shahada* or call to prayer is complete. This same mimetic faculty is used to explain the Ewe roles in domestic and trans-Atlantic slavery. One priest told me that money, or cowries themselves, were born in the bodies of dead African slaves at the bottom of the ocean. Cowries, like Mami Wata, are tied to wealth, and wealth doesn't just come from know where, at some point it had to be made, and remembering from whence this wealth came is a crucial component to having a stable life.

Tackling the history of nations and colonies from the perspective of the "liminal spaces" between dominators and dominated, Homi Bhabha insists that all cultural identity is essentially and originally hybrid. In Ewe land these cultural identities are developed by mimesis, by teaching things in an acted out and almost rhythmic way. By "liminal space," Bhabha means the site of conflict, interaction, and mutual assimilation that every encounter between cultures involves. For the Ewe we are talking about encounters mostly with other African groups from the north and indigenous or nearby traders. For Bhabha cultures do not construct themselves out of their own essence; they do so through interactions with other cultures, this is something the Ewe seem quite aware of. Thus cultural identity is always and already a conglomeration of differences; traces and traits of the Other make up the identity of the self; and no cultural meaning is separable from its originally multi-cultural production. Drawing from Psychoanalysis and Deconstruction, (and in a way mimesis), Bhabha claims that theory and politics are

inseparable: theory is always ideologically motivated. Therefore Bhabha insists on inhabiting the "liminal" or "interstitial" space between disciplines; it is from this space that he both reveals and contributes to the intertwining of politics and theory, and in this case religion and history. For the Ewe liminality is more than between and betwixt, liminality is a time for shedding light on the mimetic faculty and allowing yourself to be acted upon. Going into trance is not the adept riding the slave, it is the slave riding the master, and overcoming of past conflict, a resolution that happens internally on the personal level and becomes external to those there to witness the possession episode. As stated in his Bhabha's biography, "this liminal space is not merely an idea: it is the material and ideological site from which one speaks, the site of an always complex encounter between at least two nations, cultures, or disciplines". Bhabha, Said, and Taussig all approach colonialism from this liminal position. Sub-altern theorists have long refused to accept the old adage of colonialist authority silencing and repressing native traditions. The oppressed culture is not simply rendered mute, but rather participates in the formation of an identity that is neither purely that of the colonists nor that of the colonized; it is a sort of imagined community or an ulterior world between different spaces and times. For Bhabha, all cultures involve hybridity, and are a constant struggle in a constantly shifting space that results in all kinds of domination. With Mimesis the Ewe are able to admit both their dominator and dominated history in regards to the domestic slave trade. Honovi, a priest from Kpalime, once told me that he leaves libations and offerings for his great grandmother who was a "bought person" and built a special shrine for his great-great paternal grandfather who owned many bought people so that his "slaves" do not haunt him in death or his family in the present. One of these slaves is a Hausa spirit who he prays to on a weekly basis. He told me the other bought person is a Mossi-mixed woman who prefers white goat to fowl or beef. Once or so a month, he offers this spirit goat and he is convinced that since he began rituals for these

spirits that his life has improved. His young daughters and son are also there to learn the prayers and rituals so that they too can cope with these spirits.

Mama-Tchamba is a religious order that is also a part of Gorovodu culture and both orders are very concerned with the issue of slavery and memories of north/south exchanges of many commodities that go back several hundreds of years.

Issues concerning “spirit possession” involve stories and ceremonies that serve as a discourse of the spirits of former slaves from the north who come to “mount” Ewe adepts during episodes of spirit possession. Colonialism and Neo-colonialism have long exercised their power through figures of farce. Everyone from Gnassingbe Eyadema to George Bush can be mimicked in trance and in social action writ large. I agree with Homi Bhabha who really sums up mimesis well:

For the epic intention of the civilizing mission, 'human and not wholly human' in the famous words of Lord Rosebery, 'writ by the finger of the Divine' often produces a text rich in the traditions of *trompe-l'oeil*, irony, mimicry and repetition. In this comic turn from the high ideals of the colonial imagination to its low mimetic literary effects mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge. (Homi Baba, 2005, 184)

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha uses concepts such as mimicry, hybridity, and liminality to argue that cultural production is always most productive where it is most ambivalent (200). I have found this to be the case during my fieldwork. Often rituals surrounding the spirits of slaves and gorovodu spirits are difficult to define and pin-down. Men become women, children become adults, and the powerless become powerful. During one trance episode a lady from Benin started mimicking a hunter with a spear and sword in hand, there was no doubt the *Banguelle* (the hunter/warrior) god had taken

over her body. She demanded fresh bush meat but wanted it cooked in the northern or *halal* way. My attention to mimesis is influenced by Michael Taussig's *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (1993) where the author calls the mimetic faculty the "nature culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other" (1993:xiii). The wonder and magic of using mimesis to understand history and culture comes in the ability of the "copy" to take on the character and personality of the original. The "copy" in my case is the episode of spirit possession; when the slaves of the past come back on the living to dance and "rule" their former master. Mimesis as a theoretical tool allows anthropologists to get at the "second nature" of other cultures by using their own tools of collective memory and learning, in the Ewe case, mimesis of the spirits of former slaves.

My ethnographic studies in Ghana, Benin and especially Togo in 2000, 2001 and 2005 allowed me to see the multiplicity of meaning behind mimesis and Ewe collective memories of slavery and their encounters with other West African cultures. In the Ewe case they glorify many things northern and Muslim and accompany this with imitation and carnival that interests anthropologist of religion and political-economy alike. I argue that Mama Tchamba and Gorovodu rituals amongst the Ewe of West Africa employ mimesis as a way of maintaining relationships with past ancestors. The past is "acted out" in a Geertzian sense and it also serves as a pedagogical device. Ewe children learn about the realities and atrocities of their Ewe ancestors through stories and instances of possession trance, in each case, mimesis teaches. Also, mimesis is an alternative theory of the world of sorts and a mode of remembering that is seldom employed in Post-Industrial and Capitalistic societies. Neo-Colonialism is tackled head-on by awaiting vodu spirits who in many ways "convert the converter" (Montgomery, 2006). The paper began with descriptions of Ewe culture and explanations for how and why I believe they

thrive. A deep and thick analysis of how slaves continue to pervade the reality of these Vodun people along the Bight of Benin is a necessary endeavor that someone will soon take up. Colonialism, Christianity, Islam and Slavery are all major aspects of Ewe vodu ritual; by participating more and more in Ewe rituals one begins to see how the multiplicity of many cultures adds to the “hybridity” of the Ewe religious imagination. Religion, ritual and slavery all permeated Ewe cultural life, and I want to highlight the relationships between these external forces and liberatory acts inherent in Gorovodu and Tchamba religions, in this case performative ritual (see Kertzer, 1988).

Brief History of Slavery, Gorovodu, and Mama Tchamba Religion

Slavery between Ewe coastal peoples and many other African ethnic groups to the north has gone on in northern Ghana and Togo for at least several hundred years. Gorovodu religion means literally “spirits of the kola nut.” Mama Tchamba translates to “mother slave spirit” and attracts many devotees because through ritual and ceremony many Ewes get a chance to work out their solemn histories to make a better present. Mimesis and spirit possession are but two mechanisms by which the Ewe transmit knowledge of the past, integral to Ewe social learning is teaching via the drum, the voice, and the vibe. As one young *sofo* (priest) once told me “what you learn in books we learn from our senses all seventy of them” (Sofo Babu, 2005). Many coastal Ewes traded with and for slaves from the northern savannah of Ghana, Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso and beyond (Greene, 1996).

The Ewe participated in the Trans-Saharan Slave trade during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and they were also engaged the internal trades with the so-called “jihad-states” to the north until and into the early twentieth century (Lovejoy, 1983, 17).

At the heart of Gorovodu and Mama Tchamba religions were moral quandaries generated by these unique histories and memories of slaves. The Ewe case is very similar to the importance of ancestral worship in Melanesia only this case is infused with memory of slavery and not just colonialism explicitly (see Akin, 2009). This paper focuses on how these rituals and memories are acted out and codified by Ewe Vodou adepts and the prospects for mimesis as a method for understanding the “other”.

Gorovodu is mainly practiced by the Ewe of southern Ghana and Togo. It displays strong influences from Adja-Fon, Akan, Ewe, Hausa, and Yoruba. The Ewes seem to have a propensity to include exterior cultural elements and don't always distort them or claim them as their own. Unlike other nearby cultural groups who are proud of their role as “masters” in the African Diaspora, the Ewe seem to be ashamed of any injustice they may have performed on slaves from the northern hinterlands. Of the seven main Gorovodu gods, nearly all have ties to, or are, the spirits of northern slaves and their offspring. The Tchamba (slave) aspect of Gorovodu typically includes religious and cultural elements from several groups. Tchamba religion is not exactly pan-African but many of the elements adhere to an incredible receptivity, an openness that I argue is unique and important to the Ewe identity and personality. This ability to adopt and alter foreign cultural traits is something Blacks have done throughout many migrations throughout the world, it is indeed the residue of the mimetic faculty. I believe the Ewe have a special sort of ‘bricolage’, an amalgamation of ubiquity that is quite unique to even other peoples of African origin. Ewe elders speak today about Gorovodu as a defense and protest against colonial powers and the institutions that have exploited African peoples for centuries. This is not just some cute movement from the past, Gorovodu is vital to all aspects of life, all the time, and for all *voduviwo* (vodu-eating people).

The Ghanaian national archives tell stories about resistance to colonial oppression from *atikevodu* (medicine vodu) religions such as Gorovodu (Wastermann, 1914). As Faseyin suggests, Gorovodu was more than a defense, it emerged as a coming together of Africans on one common platform (2004). Even with Islam and Christianity exploding among the West African coast-- the Tchamba and Gorovodu pantheons continue to gain new adepts from such places as Congo, Gabon, Europe and even the United States (personal communication). One priest informed me that he alone has treated people from at least 40 different countries over the past 35 years. Sure the vast majority of followers are Ewe but those who inquire it in real space become mystified and many find going to Gorovodu events and functions not only contagious but obsessive as well. Mimesis is defined as the imitative representation of nature and human behavior in art and literature (see wordnet.princeton.edu), but it is taken to new heights by the Ewe. The Ewe use of mimesis is an exercise in “alterity” that would coincide with much of what Taussig has said on the topic (see Taussig, 1993). In the Ewe case the behavior is played out in the ecstatic realm of ritual, carnival, and festival. Ewes perform their history and collective narratives not only overtly in symbolic spheres, but also in everyday life.

It took the greatest injustice in human history (The African Slave Trade) to bring these groups together but Mama Tchamba and Gorovodu are living examples of what anthropologists of religion have dubbed “syncretic,” in this case meaning that they “borrow” from many cosmologies (Stewart and Shaw, 2001). They are not syncretic in the sense that they are mixed, but rather that their cosmology incorporates other notions of the sacred. Friedson has made clear that in his opinion they are not syncretic (2010). I am not saying the Ewe are confused; they consciously add and resist certain foreign elements depending on whether or not it fits their ways of translating and making sense of the world. At one point during the slave trade, Africans were bought from northern

Ghana and beyond in exchange for kola nuts or with money to appease wealthier southerners. At that time kola was highly prized for its ability to stimulate energy and cure boils, stomach pains, impotency, shingles and much more (personal conversation with Sofo Idi, 2004). *Gorovodu* translates literally from Hausa “spirit of the kola nut”. Because of the collective ancestral memories that formed Gorovodu around a hundred years ago, special rites have always been conducted on behalf of enslaved Africans collectively referred to as *Tchamba* (the Hausa word for slave). Gorovodu and Mama Tchamba are different strokes on the same mural, and for the purposes of this paper the vast majority of the time I perceive the two as more similar than different.

Tchamba ceremonies are extraordinary on several fronts. The first one I attended brought me to tears as a young Ewe male began speaking broken Hausa and Arabic in the summer of 1997. The *tchambasi* (wife of slave spirit) broke through palm thatch walls and out-muscled several large men during his trance episode. The adherents read from a Quran and offered bracelets to two wild-bush spirits in the sacred forest: Abiba and Sadzifo. Tchamba ceremonies make the outsider want to scream, cry and shout; they invoke humility and are liminal re-creations of a history which is acted out mimetically by Gorovodu adherents. Tchamba rites are solemn and they are mesmerizing. When spirits ‘mount’ the heads of adepts the Gorovodu devotee is capable of speaking in a number of languages that were exchanged during the exchanges and tragedies of slavery (Faseyin, 2004). Ewe patrilineal may have married a “slave” (*amefiflowo*: bought person) from literally dozens of different cultures to the north, most of them were already pierced with notions of the Quran and Muslim perceptions of the world. Tchamba rites express the importance Ewes place on reconciliation and continual atonement with those ancestors who were exploited by an often vicious trade. They are also predicated on an amalgamation of African cultures that have taken pieces from everywhere to

construct a whole, of sorts. My main purpose in what follows is to explore how these Ewe engage their mimetic faculty to keep this movement alive and well. I have since carried out symbolic rituals for many students of African religion and culture and most of them where their bracelets religiously (pun), they also take the time to cleanse them with baby powder and perfume and reflect upon the travesty of the Slave Trade.

The Case for Mimesis, The Place for Memories

The Ewes are the main ethnic group in the country of Togo and are mostly dispersed in the south of Ghana, Togo and Benin. Even though they are a majority they have long been oppressed and terrorized by a minority run government from the north (Kabye). However, many traditional Ewes consider themselves marked by a certain northerness and talk of their ancient migration out of Notsie, still some discuss an earlier migration from the northeast in modern day Benin and Nigeria before that. Many Ewe work hard on being northern, it is important to represent and portray their version of Muslim traders from the north. Islam is embraced by the Ewe as are other elements that come from the north. Although some rude comments about the hypocrisy of Muslim who drink exist, for the most part Muslims are highly respected (see Friedson for a different opinion). The Tchamba and Gorovodu spirits are said by some to all be former exotic slaves with cultural traits that are northern, although most dispute this claim to Gorovodu/Brekete. Everything from clothing to rhythm at a Tchamba rite is said to come from the north. Food and beverages offered to slave spirits are also northern, including a millet beer and cassava concoction. The study of slave caravan routes in the twentieth and twentieth centuries unveils the flow of kola, salt, gold, and slaves to and from the north. One of the primary cities on this trade route was the city of Tchamba and these people were often enslaved themselves. The intriguing point here is that Ewe consciousness is very in tune

with the past slave trades and also very receptive to cultural elements that were exchanged during slave times. The idea of a certain historic consciousness imprinted with reflections on slavery is an interesting one that I will return to throughout this paper. When attending a ceremony in 2005, one Kabye friend told me that “these Ewe are more northern than us, we don’t practice these rituals anymore.” The copy can indeed overtake the original as Taussig suggests.

There is in a sense what Ali A. Mazrui has termed a “boomerang effect,” the incredible ability of Africans to acculturate and assimilate external forces and somehow make them their own (2008:11). There is an enormous amount of receptivity on behalf of the Ewe to “borrow” from Islamic, Christian, and other Traditional African religions. The Gorovodus themselves are said to be “given” to KodjoKuma in the 1920’s from foreigners from the KetaKrachi region and northwards. These fetishes and “cults” don’t exist in the northern bush and savannahs anymore but they were born and began there. An Ewe inclusive lens on the world blows away many of the so-called ideas of assimilation or what is often termed syncretism or hybridization (Stewart and Shaw, 1992). An enormous amount of commodities have been “fetishized” quite literally by Ewe Vodun adepts. Objects from the savannah and beyond have become sacred fetishes that are worshipped and offered sacrifices and libations of all sorts. Some of the commodities possessed by the Ewe that are said to have magical powers include: clothing, shoes, chalices, jewelry, fabrics, foods, beverages and the fetishes themselves. The great works of June Nash (1979) and Michael Taussig in (1980) explore the concept of commodity fetishism in truly interesting ways that shed light on the power of objects both local and global. Although I am aware of the contrived semantics surrounding the term “fetish,” I opt to use it here because it is the term the Gorovodu priests themselves use. I am also cognizant of the roots of the term “fetish” coming from the Portuguese, the first European colonials to dip their feet in West African soil in the fourteenth century.

Many historians have researched well issues tied to slavery and cultural interactions in the African past, but have devoted less attention to contemporary percolations of slavery into oral histories, rituals, and daily life (notable exceptions include Thornton 1998; Meillassoux 1991; Manning 1998). Likewise, anthropologists have written extensively on “African cults” such as Santeria, Obeah, Macumba, Condomble and Voodoo, but few have explored how these African pantheons deal with the issue of slavery. Some classic exceptions include the outstanding works of: de Heusch (1985), Bastide (1971), and McCarthy-Brown (1991). According to Haitian and American anthropologist Guerin Montilus, all of these African religions have “great reverence and sacred ceremonies” dedicated to the spirits of former slaves (personal communication 2008). Due to preoccupations with the “global” by some, and the “local” by others, past analyses have overlooked regional systems that integrate contemporary African conceptions of slavery, and ritual practices surrounding them. Anthropologists try hard to link the spiritual with the political and economic realms of analysis, and this is important. However, we often miss acute aspects of the regional realm and also highlight only the weaknesses associated with Africa’s readiness to welcome new cultures. We see how Africa has become culturally dependent on others but we miss how we have become culturally dependent on them. In the case of Gorovodu, Africa has conquered the conquerors. Many Ewe have in many ways, to quote Mazrui, “counter-penetrated the citadels of its own conquerors” (2008:13). In regards to Gorovodu and Tchamba, the Ewes are able to engage in a language of liberation that empowers them in the face of globalization and a monotheistic mandate. It also offers them an opportunity to escape their oppressed conditions, especially in Togo where they are subjugated severely by both local corruption and global neglect. Many Gorovodu adepts are able to ritualize their past to bring abundance and vitality in the present and at the same time atone for their past, and they do it mimetically.

In a dynamic and complex religious pantheon called “Mama Tchamba,” African Vodun adepts throughout West Africa and beyond continue to mimesize slave spirits, making the spirits a crucial component of modern social relations. The Ewe are not putting anything on during Tchamba rites, rather, they are being put on. Tchamba gatherings can quickly delve into the past and what is acted out is not simple imitation, otherwise we could use the term mimicry and not mimesis. The mimetic faculty is a way of channeling the past and bringing it alive in the present. I am not sure this faculty is universally employed. There are some instances of mimesis in theatre circles but not in everyday American life. The Ewe, Mina, and some Adja ethnic groups with which I am most familiar have shrines, rhythms, and dances devoted entirely to honoring the memory of past slaves. The slave spirits come back during epiphany to enhance the lives of Vodun adepts. African ancestral religions have long been flexible and interpretive in their principles, so it is no surprise that slavery has infiltrated Ewe cosmology and religion (Fernandez 1982; Biedelman 1992). The memory of slavery and its existence in modernity needs ethnographic attention because slave spirits, when harnessed correctly, can have powerfully transformative and emancipatory effects (Driver, 2000, introduction). Slavery has inflected regional systems of internal relations amongst the Ewe of West Africa. The case I examine here is a contemporary one, but it also illuminates past systems of slavery and how they operated in the region.

The Past Comes to Life: Ewe Concepts of Slavery, Memory and the Mimetic Faculty

I have introduced an interesting example of adoration for slaves in the Mama Tchamba religion amongst the Ewe people of coastal Ghana and Togo. Here, former slaves come back to “possess” initiates who carry out elaborate ceremonies to appease these “hot”

spirits who haunt Ewe patrilineal lines and make their lives difficult (Rosenthal 1998). The National Archives in Accra demonstrate several colonial records on past cults, which often describe them as medicine cults (*atikevodu*). But little research has been dedicated to modern medicine cults like Gorovodu and slave-spirit cults such as Mama Tchamba. The exception is a small but growing literature on Gorovodu on the internet (see Brush 2003; Faseyin, 2004). It is difficult for outsiders to gain access to these ceremonies, especially Mama Tchamba, because they are sporadic and highly secretive. Therefore, it is not surprising that these modern religious movements are often “below the radar” of scholarly analyses. While domestic slavery was of course common in pre-colonial and colonial West African society, it is puzzling that so many historians have ignored its continuation into later periods (Davidson 1992). This even though, “decreased demand for slaves at the coast, freed slaves for use within local coastal communities” (Lovejoy 1981: 271). Many of these slaves or “bought people” (*amefleflowo*) came from the hinterlands of the African savannah to the north of Ewe territory.

Nearly all Ewe Vodun adepts trace their history at least as far north as Notsie, a city in central Togo, and many from beyond (Greene 1996; 2003). That is why when spirit possession comes during Tchamba ceremonies adherents will often begin speaking in northern tongues such as Hausa, Fulani, and even broken Arabic (Brush 2003). Slavery may be over, but in the Ewe cosmology, debt stays, and since much profit was made on the labor of these northern slaves, the objects and culture they brought with them have become sacred objects with power to both heal and afflict. With that profit is a “devil-contract” of sorts, a belief that making money on the fortunes of others is immoral and therefore “dirty” (see Taussig, 1980). *Tchambaga* are metal-woven bracelets that are said to bring good fortune and prevent mishaps. I have worn one particular “blessed” bracelet for fifteen years and have circulated many to local Santeria priests in southwest Detroit. These bracelets are said to be of northern slaves, and are found along the entire

West African coast, from Sierra Leone to Gabon. They are also recognized as sacred to Ogun (god of iron and war) worshippers from Cuba and Puerto Rico.

After and during the African Diaspora, so-called “slaves” in African contexts were never slaves in the system of closed or chattel slavery. Ewe attitudes of slavery would fit Manning’s typology of an “open” system of slavery as opposed to the “closed” systems of the America’s where slaves were property without basic human rights. The Ewe are known to have been very kind to their slaves compared to neighboring Akan, Adja, Fon and Yoruba peoples (Montgomery, 2001). Nonetheless, there was a shift in Ewe consciousness in the late 19th century when the African Diaspora ended and the internal African slave trade gained momentum (Greene, 1996, 2003). Somewhere during this time and into the 20th century it seems that the perception by Ewe of these northern slaves moved from one of respect to one of adoration and love. Thus the medicine cult of Gorovodu, coupled with Mama Tchamba, became mechanisms for remembering and interacting with history in a very real and unique way. In a way the symbol becomes more real than the god itself, again this is an astute observation made by Taussig in Latin America (Taussig, 1993). According to Marx, commodity fetishism leads to alienation. In the Tchamba example there is a theoretical twist; the commodities are themselves fetishized and serve the ends of personal and community atonement and not a solemn state of alienation. Objects related to northern ethnic groups are not simply commodities to the Ewe but empowered and magical objects that surpass any monetary value even though they are often purchased for cash. In fact, a political economic analysis of commodities related to Ewe-Vodu religion would find that most transactions take place in an informal economy where they are intertwined with an ethic of reciprocity and not notions of value and profit that characterize the free market. Tchamba shrines

are places where people weep and are also tied to violent deaths of other sorts, including: murder, car accidents and deaths in the bush.

So where do we turn for historically accurate information about the millions of slaves that were dispersed on a north/south axis throughout most of West Africa? One of the best places to start is by studying the rituals and ceremonies tied to the memories of slavery. Two of the more interesting orders are the Gorovodu and Mama Tchamba families of spirits. It is said that the Gorovodu spirits are northern and perhaps “slave spirits”; in the Mama Tchamba pantheon the entire liturgy is ensconced in the nostalgia of slavery. Anthropologist Michael Taussig in his book *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993) looks at the way people from one culture adopt another’s nature and culture (mimesis), at the same time as they distance themselves from it (alterity). He describes how a legendary tribe, the “white Indians,” or *Cuna*, have adopted in various representations figures and images reminiscent of the white people they encountered in the past (without acknowledging doing so). I think Taussig would have benefitted immensely from field work among the Cuna in Panama because many of his assertions have certainly rung true for me in the field.

Throughout Ghana, Togo, and Benin military dolls are bought and sold and said to possess strong powers. They are made of wood or metal and are quite similar to lawn ornaments we would see on any American suburban lawn. These objects however are to be remembered and respected, despite their obvious neglect for African humanity. During Ewe *Gota* ceremonies children mimic colonial officers and slave raiders as they brutalize their peers in a diligent and memorable manner. I have witnessed younger children with wooden replica muskets ordering other children to: “lay down, listen and shut-up.” One could argue that the textualized world could never convey the memories of slavery and exploitation in the way that Ewe Tchamba and Gorovodu ceremonies do.

Ewe ceremonies are like theatrical performances only they are taken quite literally. They are absolute social facts to each and every Ewe adherent. In many ways, mimesis offers a more transparent portal into history and identity construction than textual modes ever could.

What appears on the outside as merely idol worship at times is more deep than that, it is a conversion of power by the sub-altern, in this case the Ewe. Mimesis offers us a chance to become truly “embodied” in the culture of others. Taussig criticizes anthropology for reducing yet another culture, the Cuna, for having been so impressed by their exotic (and superior) technologies of the whites that they raised them to the status of Gods. To Taussig, this reductionism is suspect, and he argues thus from both sides—in his *Mimesis and Alterity*. He sees value in the anthropologists’ perspective, but at the same time defends the independence of a lived culture from anthropological reductionism (1993: 47, 48). Michael Taussig, Paul Stoler, and many other ethnographers of sub-altern groups like Gorovodu may very well find these Ewe to be nothing short of empowered, and the case an example of mimesis that would make Aristotle and Plato proud since they too were interested in mimesis.

Mimesis is more than simple imitation. If the Ewe were to merely imitate the lives of their slave owners and enslaved forebears then they would still fit these same categories of “slave” and “master” today. Yet, these words carry little contemporary relevance, at least not in the many villages of Togo and Ghana. In Mama Tchamba religion and elsewhere in West Africa, special pantheons have sprung up with unique rituals and stories dedicated to the memory of slaves. Paul Stoler once told me how Hauka adepts in nearby Niger hold solemn ceremonies with their bodies enveloped in the sand as a way to actively remember their efforts in the Slave Trade in the African Sahel (2000 personal communication). My colleague Guerin Montilus has also informed me of special

divination ceremonies in Haiti where people obtain magic with which to harm those who sold their lineages into slavery in the first place. It seems one side of the Atlantic sends the “curse,” which is heard loudly and clearly on the other, and then an exchange of ritualized energy ensues. The nearby Fon of the former Dahomey are so proud of their enslaving of others that a visit to Abomey seems somewhat boastful of their role in the Slave Trade. The Ewe and Mina seem to have played a much different role in regards to domestic slavery, and in fact several priests have explained to me that the Ewe were “always very good to their bought people” (2002).

Rosenthal discusses the ability of these spirits to do both harm and good when they are contended with along the proper Ewe ritual guidelines (1998). Slaves led an arduous and dangerous existence making them “hot,” and potentially dangerous, to the living. These religious orders return to African ideals of collectivity and reciprocity, two things that most Ewe believe are being destroyed by the ever-encroaching global capitalism along the coast of West Africa. Rosenthal has more recently discussed the idea of Gorovodu and Mama Tchamba as metonyms (signs) for dealing with modernity and the Neo-liberal economic climate, she refers to these religions as “motors of modernity” (2005). Performing rituals in northern dress and dancing to northern drum rhythms (*brekete*) is an embodiment on a performative level that is difficult for literate societies to translate. Classic anthropological work done on “orality and literacy” addresses different properties which distinguish these two realms from one another but it doesn’t recognize the importance of mimesis as a memory tool (Goody, 1977; Ong, 1982). The Gorovodu and Tchamba ceremonies go well beyond the imitation we see in Western theatre and the performing arts. Tchamba and Gorovodu possession and ceremony are liminal affairs when the borders of past, present and future merge as social relationships (Turner, 1978). These are maintained and carried out with former slaves, contemporary

adepts, and future children yet to be born. The entire construction of reality and their particular “way of seeing” is different for these complex oral societies (see Berger, 1972). When looking at classic concepts of kinship and personality we see an entirely different notion of personhood and family in the Ewe case.

Claude Meillassoux in his “Anthropology of Slavery” has also alluded to the respect many Africans hold in the collective memories for their predecessors who were slaves (1991). Nonetheless, the vast majority of the literature focuses on the top-down power discrimination of slaver and enslaved. Even Hegel’s infamous *master/slave* dialectic is guilty of similar myopia. In the Mama Tchamba context, amongst the Ewe, we find an entire religious cult of sorts, in which debts must be paid to slave spirits of mostly northern women who married into Ewe patrilineal within the past century or so. Many Ewes offer sacrifices, offerings, libations, and prayers of all sorts to the spirits of slavery. Such rituals transcend traditional definitions of ethnicity, religion, and commodity. Mama Tchamba is in many ways a new religious movement and new spirits are constantly popping up. Religion generally divided language and kin groups in colonial Africa, but Mama Tchamba and Gorovodu have in many ways transcended these divisions of the past by bringing together Christians, Muslims, and Animists alike (see Kramer 1993). It is not uncommon to see Christians, Muslims or others at certain Tchamba and Gorovodu rites; they too recognize the power of these “house” and “bush” slave spirits. Even many Christian and Muslim students from Nigeria and Ghana that I interviewed in 2005 were fully aware of the power of slavery and the role their particular ethnic and lineage group played in it. Without elaborate ritual, one cannot locate these often enraged slave spirits, and once located, they demand a lifetime of respect and memory. Then and only then can many Ewe begin to find good fortune and lead productive lives, especially those in the Gorovodu community. In this sense these spirits are transformative and also a

pierced portion of Ewe personality. They are also intimately tied to ones economic and political prowess. I was told of countless bad incidences that infested the lives of Ewe children until divination was performed and the ethnic and cultural identity of who their kin had enslaved was identified and appeased. Depending on exactly who was enslaved, ceremonies correlate to cultural and customary associations with those particular groups. So if, say, your grandfather had a Hausa slave, then you must feed this spirit traditional Hausa cuisine and drinks and appease numerous other specific demands.

Many Ewe and Mina village communities perform ceremonies for the slaves who helped make Ewe ancestors and lineages rich with their labor and northern trade items. Tchamba adepts are repaying an eternal debt, reparations of sorts, to the slaves who became a part of Ewe society along the coast. Ewe Gorovodu adepts seek to solidify a constant relationship of love, service, and respect between themselves and the spirits of mostly northern slaves. An astute Gorovodu diviner once told me in 2005 “service is the rent you pay to the vodu for your life and to forget is to die.” Rosenthal writes, “some of them [slaves] died violently, their spirits are powerful ... they can help, heal and protect you when you need them, if you honor them fully” (1998,171). Many diviners warned me that people who do not go through the proper ritual channels to identify their history in regards to slavery will be haunted with illnesses and bad luck and many may even die. This unique respect for proper history on behalf of the Ewe reminds me of John Berger’s notion of history as a mechanism for setting us free. I believe most Ewe adepts would agree with his assertion, “History is a well of conclusions from which we draw, in order to act” (1972, 9). This “well of conclusions” in the Ewe ethnographic sense involves a real understanding of the abuses slaves endured for the monetary benefit of many Ewe. It is believed that when the slave spirits are remembered and offered a chance to possess

Ewe adepts and borrow their bodies to dance and sing, then good things will happen for that person and their family. The foundation of Gorovodu ceremonies are drumming and dancing and the rhythm and dance are said to come from the north, and are said to have been brought by slaves. The “Ewe rhythm” is called *brekete*, and the dance that accompanies it is called *agbadza*. Both are foreign, both are northern, and both are played on a daily basis to remember the slaves from the north. Let us all not forget all that was brought from Africa to the New World and how much so many had to endure.

Becoming the Losso, Kabye, Mossi, or Hausa slave spirit in trance is beyond role-playing and acting. It is embodiment, a marriage between the natural and supernatural realms of the universe. Communication with the unseen world becomes primarily mimetic because it is acted out and performed. In a sense, these meetings of minds and spirits are more powerful than anything textual or discursive, and that they are acted out in real time gives them a certain quality that is indicative of an oral culture (see Feld 1998; Goody and Watt 1972). Words can collapse or expand in meaning to become what people want, words may be acted upon centrifugally or centripetally, to use Bakhtin’s terms (1980). Words, and especially written words, cannot offer us a living history of the world, but, performative rituals, such as Gorovodu and Mama Tchamba, make the past active in the present and slice the Ewe collective memory with a history that no books or stories could ever tell. Mama Tchamba and Gorovodu bring history to life. They serve as a social-strain gauge of sorts, and bring order to an otherwise chaotic world (Max Marwick, 1972).

The *tronsi* (vodu adept) in trance with a Kabye slave spirit upon her head is not imitating or acting, she is experiencing a state of epiphany with a spirit that at one time performed labor for someone in her family. Mama Tchamba becomes a cosmology in the making that involves much secrecy and imagination; many have never witnessed a

Tchamba ceremony, even elderly priests have often only attended a few. This reminds me of the shrouded nature of Bwiti religious experience in nearby Gabon, where beneath the surface one often finds the real “stuff” of religious movements (Fernandez 1980). Messages from these former slaves can be powerful, but also ambiguous, sometimes involving inversions—black can really mean red, food means water, and slave master (see Turner, 1979, 1981). Victor Turner in his groundbreaking work discusses explicitly the connection of power inversion to states of liminality where subjects are between and/or betwixt. The *tronsi* in trance is between and betwixt, part slave, part master, part we and part foreigner. Mama Tchamba worship offers many Ewes a chance to participate in an expressive culture with political weight. Diviners with the ability to perform Tchamba and Gorovodu ceremonies are held in high esteem in the hearts of Ewe adepts. Tchamba and Gorovodu priests are often referred to as counselors, doctors, psychologists and spiritual healers. They are multi-vocal and serve an array of purposes not unlike what Golomb has discussed in regards to healers in Thailand (Louis Golomb, 2005). The foreign and exotic nature of the northern slave spirit which is borrowed from the outside offers a comfort zone of fulfilling Ewe laws of spiritual and material reciprocity. Since the Ewe once ate and drank from the labor of the northern slave, they must give these same spirits the opportunity to eat, drink, dance and be merry.

Scholars have studied slavery in the New World and the effects on Caribbean religion and spirituality, but few have studied the same phenomena at its very source, Africa. Much has been made about the Central or West African roots of Blacks in the New World but few have studied how different African ethnic groups themselves have viewed the very issue that transported Africans abroad in the first place, slavery.

There are many foreign religious components that have become amalgamated or fragmented into the structure of Ewe Gorovodu society. There is a Muslim aspect to the northern culture that came with the northern slaves and has been reified and worshipped in Tchamba religion. Greetings and salutations tend to be in Arabic and I have seen many Korans in Gorovodu shrines, even though most Ewe cannot read them. That which is Muslim and/or northern, and many northern commodities, become fetishized and are also markers of status, prestige, and respect for north/south relations. The Mama Tchamba pantheon offers an intriguing metaphor for the interplay of economics and religion in Ewe society. Interestingly, nearly every major West African city has a place called *Zongo* which refers to a Muslim community of trade and commerce. Only here can one purchase the ceremonial jewelry and objects necessary to appease these “homegrown” spirits. The sacred bushes of Ewe villages referred to as “*Zogbe*” and the fetishes found there are northern wild spirits of war and metal who demand the honor of Gorovodu initiates. *Zogbe* is a vibrant portal into a history of the Ewe imagination and also the collective memory of a particular group, the Ewe (see Bastide, 1972, Beidelman, 1986).

Zogbe is a copy of all that is northern and foreign; it is a microcosm of the perception Ewe have of a distant and romanticized north. Remember the Ewe are namely southern and are the major ethnic group for all of Togo. In nearly every Gorovodu village there exists a small and tranquil setting by day and a setting for ecstatic ritual on any given evening. In this “Muslim Zone” are several medicinal plants, a sacred shower, slave jewelry and also two violent northern warrior gods (Abiba and Sadzifo). Abiba and Sadzifo exist as totemic fetishes and are often ensconced by *tchambaga* bracelets representing fictive and real kinship ties to past slaves who married into Ewe lineages. *Zogbe* is almost a perfect metaphor for Tchamba religion itself except there are no

perfect metaphors. Lakoff (1980) asserts that most of life is metaphorical. If perfect metaphors exist they are not typically seen as metaphors. What I am calling active mimesis is also metaphoric and metonymic as well. Sensing ethnography involves in this case letting the drums, cowries and ancestors speak. The interesting facet of this case is the manner in which discursive and literate norms are shattered by an act of mimesis that employs collective agency.

Mama Tchamba worship offers many Ewes a chance at expressive culture with some political weight. When the dictatorship attempts to perpetuate ethnic conflict between northern groups and so-called southern rebels it often fails. The foreign and exotic slave spirit is borrowed from the outside and offers a lens of respect by southern Ewe in regards to northern Togolese. Ewe sacred law demands spiritual and material reciprocity and much that is northern has become sacred. Since the Ewe once ate and drank from the labor of the northern slave, today these spirits demand sacrifices and libations of all sorts to bring balance to daily life. Historical studies of Muslim trade routes, including trade for slaves, salt, cowries, and palm oil—highlight well the sense of north/south exchange on most of West Africa. Islamic trade routes had several *Muhallah* components and the history and prehistory of West Africa often ignores the significance of this literature. Now that Africa is about to become a majority “Muslim” continent, it may be of interest to more of the world.

The obvious differences between Ewe Gorovodu rituals and the Vodun/Orisa ceremonies of Benin and Nigeria are found in: tempo, rhythm, dress, language and the gods themselves. The less obvious differences come in the way foreign elements are dealt with in the collective consciousness of each particular religious sect. The Yoruba and Fon are proud of their indigenous elements and seem less proud to celebrate “otherness” when compared to the Ewe. The Ewe seem more overtly proud of their

borrowing. The Ewe, are in some respects more inclusive, especially in regards to their memory of slavery. Lila Herskovits has asserted that Ewe and Mina “were among the kindest of all West Africans in regards to those they enslaved from the hinterlands” (2002:4). The historical record clearly indicates that the Ewe were not as brutal with their slaves as the nearby Asante, Fon, and Yoruba civilizations, however, they still no doubt bought and enslaved countless fellow Africans. According to Rosenthal more than eighty-percent of the slaves who married into Ewe patriline were women of northern decent (2005). With them they brought northern commodities of all sorts that would later and today become the fetishes (gods) of the Mama Tchamba and Gorovodu pantheons. I agree with Rosenthal (following Taussig) that the Ewe mimesize their gods and they do so via performative acts of divination. Young men and women who fall into trance will speak Hausa, Tchamba, Fulani, or Mossi languages that they otherwise do not know. The mimesis is more than a copy, it is a becoming, and to do so involves a certain multiplicity of personhood unthinkable in western circles (de Surgy, 1983; Rosenthal, 1998). These foreign spirits of the past can at times carry more weight than more macroscopic Vodun's such as: Legba, Shango, Ogun or Oshun.

Perhaps the most crucial component of Tchamba possession is the drums. It is said that the haunting and intense rhythms are of northern origin, and most claim they were brought by Hausa slaves. The drums bring what R.F. Thompson would call a “flash of the spirit” for they allow god to enter waking life with ferociousness (1977). *Brekete* is the name of the northern rhythms that are played passionately and frantically, coupled with the singing of hypnotic songs, which bring about trance. I have identified songs with pieces of Hausa, Arabic, Fon, Yoruba and Mina lyrics during Gorovodu ceremonies. Sometimes it is the northern Lasso or Mossi slave spirit that mounts the adepts. Other times it is a Gorovodu spirit, or it could be a spirit from outside the Gorovodu pantheon

who comes to the host: Heviesso, Sakpata, or Da. Only the northern *brekete* music with appropriate northern markers of influence can seduce the Gorovodu and Tchamba spirits into the bodies of southerners. It is often as much about “losing oneself” as of finding oneself, drumming and dancing is all about expenditure (Bataille, 1986). Deities possessing *tronsis* will beg to hear their own rhythms and songs. A *Kundes* (spirit host to Kunde) will direct the drummers to play his or her music; an adept of *Nana Wango* will do the same. It is unique that the Ewe worships northern Hausa spirits because the nearby Fon and Yoruba don't seem to have this same level of reverence. In fact, Bascom writes that Yoruba refer to the Hausa as “*talaka*” (poor man) or “*alagbe*” (beggar) (1984:41). In Togo both descendants of slaves and the descendants of slave owners must give time, prayer and offerings to the slave spirits. One of my informants literally sleeps with his spirits and also lavishes ceremony upon them. Each day before he eats, he shares food with a wooden doll that represents his lost twin; he also devotes attention to the spirits of the sea (*Mami Wata*) and the slave spirits (*tchamba*). Tchamba and Gorovodu adepts want to continue a relationship of mutual service; for those who fail to honor them lead unsatisfying lives of lawlessness and transgression.

Northern mimesis by southern Ewe takes many forms. When times are good the Ewe Gorovodu worshippers create *Sala* ceremonies where men and women adepts arrive, adorned head to toe in vivid white Muslim cloth complete with full burqa. During these ceremonies adepts pray to the east and chant “Allah...Akbar” (god is great). Other Muslim components include hand and feet washings, Koranic verses, and “Muslim” rhythm. After these elements are performed then the northern Gorovodu Gods will come on the heads of the adepts. Kunde, Ablewa, and Tchamba spirit hosts will speak in northern and other tongues; they will also request food, drink and other northern trade goods. In 2001 I visited a Tchamba ceremony outside of Ouidah, Benin and a

bokonosofo (priest) from Benin was asked to purchase a camel for a nearby family to appease “an old debt.” Apparently a Ghanaian diviner told him during an Afa session that his great-grandfather had accumulated substantial wealth by buying and selling slaves, even going as far north as Bolagatanga and Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso to conduct business. The man ended up coming up with the \$3,000 US dollars about nine months later and his camel found a home working the pepper and carrot fields of another family for some time. I have since been informed that he is doing quite well as a priest.

One may find several animals relaxing during the day in *le foret sacre* (sacred forest) of many Ewe Gorovodu villages. This is a place of wild and untamed spirits of the north, yet it is also a tranquil and medicinal site for revitalization and silent reflection. The sacred forest (*Zogbe*) is a replica of the way of life for the Ewe themselves before migrating south to the Atlantic coast. It carries a more intense meaning as a way of life for northerners, slaves no doubt included. Life on the savannah and in the bush can be dangerous and when death occurs it is said one has died a “hot” death. Hunters, warriors, and traders alike can attest to the “savage” nature of life on the savannah. Many Ewes ventured north to turn a profit when human beings were the only thing foreign slave merchants were interested in. Therefore, these hot bush spirits from the north who “did not see death coming” need to be appeased. They are appeased mimetically via special Tchamba ceremonies that refuse to forget a not-so distant past of subjugation and hegemony. To this day, there exist important components of funerals that are conducted in *Zogbe* when one dies a violent death. The deaths used to occur more frequently in the bush but today they happen on the roads and in the markets and streets.

In the sacred forest rests two very strong and no-nonsense Hausa spirits, Abiba, and Sadzifo. When you need swift and serious action or when they summon you, ritual activity happens in the northwest corner of the village that is *Zogbe*. Here, only the initiated may enter, and on any given day you can witness adepts placing three-toned copper bracelets around the fetishes and praying for all those who have or are being exploited. The three colors in these sacred bracelets are representative of different ethnic groups which were enslaved. Whereas the Burubu are said to be black, the Hausa are said to have a yellow hue to their epidermis. The devotees visit *Zogbe* to find a better fate and to honor the debt that they owe to a recent history that continues to be re-lived via mimesis today. The sacred bush may honor “hot” and violent slave spirits but it is also a cool place for taking a quiet nap during the day and also a place for a medicinal bath when one is going through rites of passage or sick. The Gorovodu person sees themselves, at least in part, as pierced with northern remnants that otherwise makes their individual selves somehow less whole. By tapping into the consciousness of yesterday both individual and collective memory is fulfilled (see Halbwachs, 1968; Bastide, 1971).

Judy Rosenthal writes eloquently about *Zogbe*, calling it a:

Stylized and wild place inside or on the border of the village, fenced off from outsiders eyes, a beautiful and calm place, graced with lovely plants and special trees with healing properties. It is a liminal space, a place of relative heat and danger, a place to run when there is a literal, emotional or imagined danger (2005: 154-55)

Zogbe is a copy (more real than imaginary) of a northern ecology that touched Ewe life via the Trans-Atlantic, Trans-Saharan and Domestic slave trades throughout the past

eight-hundred years. I noticed after several months that people would go to the sacred forest whenever they had serious matters on their mind. They also went there to communicate with ancestors, for ritual cleansing, and also to pray for good fortune. I once bathed for twenty-one days straight in *Zogbe* after an Afa divination session; it is also the place where my Vodou wedding ceremony commenced and ended. Once the community met my wife and found that she was both Indian and Hindu they accepted her that much more. One priest even staked claim that Indians are Africans and no doubt "from the same mother." Like the trickster god Legba, *Zogbe* is a crossroads, a place of hot/cool contradiction, of north/south ambivalence, and of home and foreign elements. The uninitiated may never enter *Zogbe*, for to disturb the purity with pollution is to upset the most unforgiving of spirits, the slave spirits (see Douglass, 1971). Although *Zogbe* is northern, Legba is not-- and the two may still intersect spiritual realms. At the door of *Zogbe* sits mighty Legba, and to enter without first saluting him can mean great conflict. So *Zogbe* and Legba are dangerous, powerful, and representative of the crossroads of life. The history of slavery is alive and well in *Zogbe* and only through intense ritual and study can one understand exactly where they fit in.

During Tchamba rites a particular mantra is often uttered, "Fire burns property but not metal." This proverb is often said during the cleansing of metal shackles, bracelets, necklaces, rings, and weapons. This cleansing takes place in *Zogbe* and all of these objects are related to the spirits of slaves. Fire and time together could not burn the memory of slavery any more than it could destroy the sacred objects related to Tchamba and Gorovodu religion. North-south exchange along the West African coast precedes even the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade, The Salt Trade, The Gold Trade, and of course the current era of globalization. With the introduction of Islam around 1850, one sees a wider variety of commodities entering the trade centers. Tchamba was the center for the

sale of “northern” slaves, especially after the Islamization under Kouko Amadja in the second half of the nineteenth century (Gayibor, 2000). The first Islamic name found in the colonial record is “Aboubakar,” and this same name is uttered during Afa divination when slave spirits are channeled. The subsequent progression of Islam was spectacular because it was accompanied by a booming trade in metal, cloth, and kola nut. The main route out of the city of Tchamba running east and west connected the city with the other main cities of the slave trade: Salaga, Bolagatanga, and Kara. A second route ran near Lome along the coast in the Mono valley. These two ancient trade routes met at Tchamba and kola was traded by both northern and southern traders. The city of Tchamba’s successes caused envy and they constantly fought with the Tem and Bariba (Wamba, 1999). This produced more potential slaves for the domestic trade, which continued *sous la terre* into the twentieth century. The caravan commerce of kola and slaves maintained a particular political economy that continues to this day in the consciousness of southern Ewe. It is through the vehicle of mimesis and ritual that it is passed on to current generations of Ewe Gorovodu worshippers.

Tchambaga (lost slave objects) are sacred commodities that are supposedly never fabricated or produced but are “received” or “found.” These objects carry a sacred weight that opposes western ideas of commerce, and in this sense they are a mirror opposite of what anthropologists sometimes call “bitter money” (Akin and Robbins, 1999; Shipton, 1989). They re-live a time when gift-giving and reciprocity were the dominant modes of exchange, rather than commodity exchange using state money. These objects include metal woven bracelets that have alternating tones of yellow, red, and black. They are worn by many Ewe, Mina, and other southern African groups and most everybody is aware of their northern mystique. I once attended a party in Toronto with many Togolese, and an old lady there was appalled that I, an “American,” was wearing these

bracelets. A friend put her at ease explaining that I had undergone initiation and was “fully aware of the power and pain” these objects can bring, only then was the madam at ease. Tchamba is also the name of an ethnic group, said to have yellowish skin. It is said the Kabye and Bobo are represented by the reddish metal for the reddish hue in their skin tone. The black in the *tchambaga* is said to represent the Mossi, Tem, Bobo, and Buruba. In these bracelets we find a memory of specific cultures and many distinctions are made between the northern divinized spirits from them. These objects are metonyms of a not-so-distant past, and by evoking them one is also signifying on the complexly connected mimetic relationships between persons and their materialized reifications in society (Leach, 1979). In this case the heart of material mystification happens at the spiritual level in objects from elsewhere.

According to Gayibor (2000) and Stevens (1999) there exist at least forty different ethnic groups that have lived in Togo alone for at least one hundred years. Of these forty ethnicities about half reside in northern Togo and beyond. Although I have seen Tchamba possession in which adepts speak Bobo, Hausa, Mossi and Arabic; there is no doubt countless other northern groups that come on the head of Tchamba devotees (see Rosenthal, 1998). Northern slaves were crucial to the wealth and prestige of Ewe slave owners from the 18th through the mid-20th century. There were instances where these foreign slaves were implemented into the plantation economy along the coast, although the vast majority were servants on a much more personal level (see Greene, 1996). For those more interested in the “origin myths” and kinship patterns of Anlo-Ewe they must see the remarkable work of Sandra Greene (1996, 2002, 2007).

Conclusions: The Case for Mimesis in understanding Ewe History, Culture, and Ritual

If we cannot get to the true grit of what people essentially believe then why pursue ethnography at all? Mimesis is a powerful lens for shooting cultural pictures of the world. Mimesis is a “weapon of the weak” that transforms individual lives in modern Eweland. The Mama Tchamba and Gorovodu religions offer a certain refreshing inclusivity in a time of hegemony and encroaching capitalism. We get to the guts of what is essentially important in Ewe culture when you understand the way they see the world.

The slave trade also carries blame to us in the United States where much of the economic infrastructure was built on the backs of African labor. Rosenthal has suggested that to be fully mimetic we too should build shrines for the memory of African slaves. I am aware of Tchamba shrines from Detroit to Nigeria that in some way commemorate the memory of these bought people. The processes of foreign religion, philosophy, technology, and economics have long affected the Ewe, so in a sense globalization is nothing new. Slaves and bought people (*amefiflowo*) were of a different sort during “slave times” but the constant flow of culture via commodity continues across the Bight of Benin. Traders from Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, and beyond still occupy many areas of every major coastal city, selling northern cloth, religious objects, animal products, and northern herbs. On any given day in *Zongo* (the Muslim section of the city) one can go and purchase northern and Muslim goods that carry complex and intriguing mimetic meanings for southerners, particularly Ewes.

Mimesis entails representation but it is by no means homogenous. Every cultural copy—whether by trance, dress, or language—is never exactly the same as the first. There are characteristics of north/south exchange in the Gorovodu cosmology but there are no set rules; each person and lineage has a different history with northern slaves. When Kodjo Kuma brought the Gorovodu cult south from Ketakrachi in Northern Ghana to the southern coast, he felt that he could alleviate southern suffering by worshipping

the powerful northern fetishes (Idi, 2004, personal conversation). Kuma himself injected the fetishes he brought from the north with his own creativity and prescriptions.

Gorovodu and Tchamba have never been closed circles, and the priest is dependent on constant openness during interpretation. As Fo Obwe states, "Everybody is treated differently by the spirits, because every master treated their slave differently" (2004, personal communication). So although I have discussed the existence of Tchamba as collective memory it also works on the individual and lineage levels as well.

In the invisible ancestral world of Gorovodu the gods are northern slaves, and their power and authority are harnessed and recognized during episodes of spirit possession and divination. These northern "ancestors" are given constant attention, worship and praise. It is often uttered amongst village elders that "riches buy slaves, but they cannot buy life." Only by honoring your ancestors and the taboos and regulations tied to "your" god(s) can one lead a complete life. For as another Ewe proverb states, "Follow the customs of your father ... what he did not do, avoid doing, or you will harm yourself" (Ellis, 1890, 126). This propensity for admiring both the other and your own ancestors is indicative of the Ewe collective memory of slavery as this memory is maintained in ceremonies and rites performed for the spirits of slaves.

Throughout Ewe Gorovodu villages one can find Muslim names such as Asana, Mustafa, Akbar, and Seydou. Gorovodu adherents remember Northern slaves of at least eight or nine northern groups, on a collective level. Since the gorovodus are themselves slave spirits, the master/slave dialectic has been turned on its head. Those who were once slaves have become masters, and during trance they become "masters of the head." As Taussig states, "One can protect oneself from evil spirits by portraying them" (1993). I am not asserting that the Ewe view slave spirits as evil, but instead as dangerous; there is no doubt, that they demand to be "portrayed." Gorovodu and Mama

Tchamba adepts possess a deep admiration for these slave-gods and spend a lot of time praying and communicating with the other world. Tchamba spirits and rituals inform the core relationship of individual adepts and their doubles. Agency is fulfilled by allowing the foreign spirits of yesteryear to enter the bodies of these worshippers today. As a young *sofo* once told me, “to ignore the calling of the slave spirits is to ignore your own ancestors, you are sure to suffer immensely if you do not take the time to recall” (Kwasi,2004, personal communication). Ewe people invoke the agency of slaves to overcome the oppressive nature of modern structures and institutions.

Gorovodu and Mama Tchamba adepts seem quite conscious of their split in personality, their partial Muslim/Northern/Slave personality traits. They recognize they are “multiply authored,” that their self is doubled, or tripled, or even quadrupled (see Marcus, 1986). All Ewes consult Afa and are told of all the “personality traits” they each possess. There is no dualistic split between mind, body, and spirit in Ewe personality construction. Rather, each individual has certain ancestors, gods, colors, habits and ideas that make up each individual. Gorovodu mediums and spirit-hosts go to the unseen world of their ancestors in order to figure out their political, economic, and social role with groups from the outside—namely northern slaves.

Schieffelin and Feld (1982) writing of the Kaluli, in Papua New Guinea, portray the foundation of cultural order as resting on the rituals that journey into the unseen world of their ancestors. Kaluli long for the sounds of the past, in the same way Gorovodu adepts long to hear the northern *brekete* rhythms taken from their past encounters with West African northerners. Sound and voice in oral societies are often quite difficult to analyze through standard discursive methods because, as text-dependent ethnographers, we in many ways sense reality differently than do our subjects (see Ong 1993; Stoler 1996). For fuller comprehension, one has to shift from the reality of the “literate” to that of the

“oral,” from the world of the seen to the unseen. Ewes do not separate things in a dualistic way, yet their epistemology is no doubt rational, it is just an entirely different means for obtaining knowledge.

Communication and ongoing relationships with the unseen world, as found in Gorovodu, Kaluli, and many other cultures, are primarily mimetic rather than discursive (Marcus, 1985). As Stoler suggests for Hauka spirit possession in nearby Niger; the performative acts of a culture must be analyzed through the senses. He claims “sensing ethnography” is crucial to any viable anthropology of religion (1989). Stoler asks anthropologists to establish an “embodiment of the senses” rather than using only discursive methods. Copying what is seen in vision or in communication with the spirit world “makes the other world present and gives humans some element of control over their doubles in an otherwise inaccessible sphere” (Marcus 1995: 170). I agree with Taussig, following Walter Benjamin, that an alternative approach to ethnography of the uncanny is mimesis, a viable option to purely language-based approaches. The mimetic faculty, or working through obsessive habit makes Gorovodu adepts healthy, for they are “paying their debt” and making things right with the past by allowing the actors of the past to come alive, speak, and dance in the present. There is not a spirit possession episode that happens during Gorovodu festival that is not somehow chained to the memory of slavery.

An ambiguity in northern spirits possessing southern bodies lies in the fact that it is difficult to ascertain exactly who possesses whom. This is why discussing “spirit possession” as epiphany may be more accurate since devotees often claim a revival, or at the very least a sense of ecstasy (Guerin Montilus, personal communication 2009). Many scholars of epiphany have seen it in terms of identity, resistance, or ‘acting out’ (Boddy 1993; Kramer 1991; Ong 2002). This is the same problem we find with

mimesis, but Gorovodu adepts are not imitating or acting out anything, rather they are being acted upon (Rosenthal, 1998). Slaves who died violent deaths did “not see death coming,” and this type of death is referred to as a “hot” or “bush” death. These spirits continue to roam freely in Ewe land and must therefore be adored, cajoled and respected.

Mamadzonu (grandmother jewels) and *tchambaga* (lost or found objects) form a part of the material base of Gorovodu and Mama Tchamba religion. They are also the reason north/south relationships and communication continues along the coast where northern traders bring these commodities. Many ceremonial objects are still brought southward by northern Fulani, Hausa, and other northern traders. This indicates the extent to which religion and spirituality form the core of exchange in Ewe society, and it makes this of interest to political-economists as well. Mama Tchamba metal woven bracelets are found everywhere in homes along the coast of Ghana, Togo, and Benin. The bracelets are also found in nature, in urban, and rural vicinities. Rosenthal writes, “The finder of a Tchamba bracelet must hold ceremonies and have Afa divination performed” (1998: 112). One must remember the atrocities of the past and make them ritually right in the present so that the future for both may be promising. Often times market women will cleanse and pray to their *tchambaga* and *dzonu* before going out to the market. Even as harsh as life can be for these market women, they somehow are well aware that their lives are better than that of slaves. Reciprocity is constructed in ways that our received models of exchange would have difficulties assessing.

Honoring the slave spirits is not only a duty, but something to be desired. For some it is utterly blissful and beautiful, a sorting out of dispersed fragments. It is a complex desire to become the other, the Muslim, the trader, the northerner, the slave. Rosenthal sheds light on the complexity of Mama Tchamba:

Tchambaga are said to be artifacts or remains of Tchamba (and other) slaves and their Northern savanna culture, left in the south as little fetishes of Tchamba presence and identity. They are fragments that recall an entire image of charged contact with the exotic north and that cannot help but impress the finder who becomes alarmingly ill if she or he does not carry out ceremonies to honor the slave spirits. This image of contact with ultimate northern others is like a *passio*, a ravishment that cannot be fought against (1998: 112).

Being a child of Gorovodu involves a desire to wear a northern mask, to dance a northern rhythm, to become the slave, if only for a moment in time. There is a particular beauty to the reciprocity and sharing of objects tied to the savannah slave trade. Mama Tchamba embodies unique colonial and inter-African encounters. It offers us a clear window into African culture contacts.

Understanding the ways in which the Ewe re-live their pasts casts light on their notions of personhood, religion, philosophy, economics, and history. I think we are only beginning to scratch the surface of just how complex and meaningful are the ways in which non-literate peoples conduct their lives. One promising new way of seeing ritual is via *mimesis*. Aristotle suggested that *mimesis* entails a stylizing of reality in which ordinary features of our world are brought into focus by a certain exaggeration (Davis, 1999). In Tchamba and Gorovodu, ceremony gives boundaries to what is real and not, but it also blurs them. And who is to say that slave-spirit possession and ritual is exaggerated? I am more in agreement with Taussig that people adopt other cultures by remembering and distancing themselves from them (1993, 19). The Ewe case is exponential *mimesis* because it involves imitating the acts of so many distinct cultures. Spirit possession episodes can include gods from several African groups and some ceremonies are a history lesson in cultural contact with such diverse groups as the

Portuguese, German, French, Yoruba, or Hausa. In Taussig's work with the *Cuna* he claims they have adopted various representation and images of the past without acknowledging they are doing so. In the Ewe case they are fully cognizant of their ties to the images of slavery, and to ignore or not acknowledge them would most certainly end in demise. Rene Girard, Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Walter Kauffman all influenced my analysis of this unique case of subaltern mimesis and I hope I did their theories justice in this chapter here. The Ewe case suggests that they too maintain and experience a complex understanding of collective memory and mimesis in action. Perhaps mimesis is not just a tool for studying literature, theatre, art, or philosophy, but also a promising new way of seeing things anthropological.

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