

"Liberation is Necessarily an Act of Culture": A Review of *Spirit Desire*

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Spirit Desire: Resistance, Imagination and Sacred Memories in Haitian Vodoun
by Sokari Ekine. San Francisco: Blurb Books, 2018



In the middle of *Spirit Desire*, a photo book on Haitian Vodoun, you see Sokari Ekine, the photographer, for the first time. Standing in the waters of Sodo, Haiti, she is metaphysically encountering Haitian ancestors in the liminal space between Africa and Haiti, where Haiti is Africa and Africa is Haiti. In what is, arguably, the most captivating and visually compelling photograph of the collection, the collision between composition, ritual, histories of enslavement, and intimacy is knowingly loud and silent. As you take in the photograph, the sound of the water crashing on the rocks crescendos out of the page and surrounds you; the silence of the water as it engulfs Ekine can be felt in your held breath.

But a review of *Spirit Desire* cannot be reduced to an analysis of the technical merits of the images you see throughout the photo book. To do that would be to miss the contribution that Ekine is making as a cultural producer. The draw of this photo book lies in the way it presents images that act as portals through which Ekine invites you, even if only for a few moments, to establish a link with Black people in Haiti who practise Vodoun, a Haitian spiritual practice with links to western Africa – to witness their survival, joy, and continued resistance.

In a talk given at the Eduardo Mondlane Memorial Lecture Series at Syracuse University in 1970, Amilcar Cabral, one of the founders of the *Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde*, spoke on how cultural production is central to African peoples' struggle against domination. He argues that foreign domination relies on two aspects – murder and the erasure of the people's culture. As long as people produce their own histories and cultures, "foreign domination cannot be sure of its perpetuation" (Cabral, 1970). So, for Cabral, "national liberation is necessarily an act of culture" (Cabral, 1970). Though his comments concern national liberation, which makes sense given that he was immersed in the liberation of Portuguese-occupied Cabo Verde and Guinea Bissau, we can transpose the point he is making outside of the confines of the nation-state. Liberation is necessarily an act of culture. It is from this lineage that Ekine's work in *Spirit Desire* flows. Through this photo book, Ekine is not only a photographer but also a learner and an archivist when she urges you to see

Vodoun as a site of resistance, decolonization and community. The series which includes images of everyday living, ritual and ceremony, aims to shift the gaze from representations that depict Vodoun as negative and present a decolonizing narrative: one in which Vodouisants engage with a consciousness and spirituality that celebrates our humanity rather than focusing on a set of prescribed normative identities (Ekine, 2018: 5)

Looking



In the photos of *Spirit Desire*, you are pulled to sit between the nodes of time. Ekine asks you to abandon the day-to-day linearity which governs your life so that you can immerse yourself in the interlocking and fluid movement of the past, present, and future. In these nodes, the past, the future, and the present are distinct and one.

The photo book opens with photographs of the markings of death. You see a grave and mounds which are, perhaps, burial mounds. Death is the first, but not the only, element that is present. Life is also present here because the viewer and the photographer are also there. Through these images, Ekine performs the duality that she calls on in the introduction to the photo book. *Looking* at these sites of transition, of death, make them also sites of life. As she asserts,

What we witness, if we look closely is, the duality and fluidity, all that takes place, is taking place, has passed from and between ancestor to ancestor, from the once visible to the invisible, and eventually returning to what we discern as the body in flesh (Ekine, 2018: 8).

Metamorphoses

From this interaction between life and death, Ekine travels to Lakou Badjo. It is the start of a nine-day celebration at the Lakou, a communal compound of people related by ancestry and Vodoun. On January 3, the birthday of the founder of the Lakou, Badjo Pady, is celebrated. Badjo was born to enslaved parents who escaped to fight in the Haitian Revolution. In 1792, Badjo founded what is now Lakou Badjo.

In the photographs of the Lakou Badjo celebrations, Ekine explores the metamorphoses of time. The images that Ekine captures of people dancing are simultaneous snapshots of the Haitian people's revolutionary victory, the destruction of African peoples and their communities by enslavement, the struggles against neo-colonialism, and of people gathering in the present to celebrate and build what will come. In each image, you see what was, what is, and what will be. Every moment is different but also retains something of the moment before it.

Movement



Bound by both the weight and the lightness of centuries past, Ekine's focus on the ritual of dancing at the Lakou Badjo celebration surfaces the constant movement in Vodoun between remembering and forgetting and building and deconstructing—of the practice of embracing and releasing. “Ritual dance, like possession, is transformational,” Ekine explains. “Both enable you to free yourself by providing you with the opportunity to ‘[lose] your life’, providing you ‘Pédi laviou’, even if only for a few moments.” (Ekine, 2018: 19)

This meditation on the relationality present in movement is picked up again by Ekine in her photographic encounter with Tire Machèt. During the Haitian Revolution, individuals improvised fighting materials. Even though people were able to obtain guns from time to time, these were often unavailable for the fighters to use in combat – hence the necessary emergence of Tire Machèt. Derived from African traditions of dance, acrobatics, and martial arts, Tire Machèt, like Capoeira in Brazil, is a set of movements that are used in combat. Ekine remarks that Tire Machèt “is the language of bodies in motion, speaking at the same time as opposition and as mirrors of self” (Ekine, 2018: 62). Like the dancing in Lakou Badjo, the movement of Tire Machèt is an art of losing and finding yourself, of understanding when which is necessary for life.

Relationality



The photographs throughout *Spirit Desire* are buoyed by the idea and practice of interdependence between people and nature, descendants, and ancestors, and between the photographer, the looker, and the subject being photographed. As Ekine comments,

[t]he Lakou forms the foundation on which Vodoun philosophy and way of being is sustained. The integration of the spiritual with nature and community each interdependent on the other, both the living and the dead, the present and the past, the human and the spiritual are present in the lakou (Ekine, 2018: 48).

This emphasis on interdependence is not a haphazard artistic choice. In an artistic genre inundated by detachment and voyeurism, this emphasis is a marked political gesture by Ekine. Each person who is photographed, each of Ekine's collaborators, is inviting you into the Lakou, into the everyday of people who live, and struggle, and laugh, and thrive. In a dialogue across borders, across space, and across time, *Spirit Desire* urges a disordering of the linear way individuals encounter information. It invites you to embody the experience of interdependence as the looker. What you will do with this encounter is a central question of this photographic project from Ekine and each of her collaborators. For the moments you are with *Spirit Desire*, you, too, are a subject of the work. You, too, are implicated.

References

- Cabral, Amilcar. 1970. *National Liberation and Culture*. Syracuse, N.Y., Syracuse University. Available at <https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/cabralnlac.html>.
- Ekine, Sokari. 2018. *Spirit Desire: Resistance, Imagination, and Sacred Memories in Haitian Vodoun*. San Francisco: Blurb Books.