

Who I Am Not

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I am not I.

I am this one
walking beside me whom I do not see,
whom at times I manage to visit,
and whom at other times I forget;
who remains calm and silent while I talk,
and forgives, gently, when I hate,
who walks where I am not,
who will remain standing when I die.

--Juan Ramón Jiménez¹

Here is the story of how I became, so-to-say, an avatar of Ogun, the God of Iron of West Africa and the African Diaspora², ruler of machines, typewriters, computers, cars, and metal tools and weapons. His nature is to cut through what needs to be to cut through. I was told all this by a *Mai de Dios*, a Mother of the Gods, high priestess of a Brazilian Candomble Terreiro (cult center).

I met the Priestess at a Candomble ritual that I visited as a tourist in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil. She overheard something I said to another tourist defending Candomble and seemed to recognize my sincere sympathy. Speaking excellent English, she invited me to her Terreiro in Petropolis. She turned out to be a famous French ethnologist who had taken initiation and eventually became a *Mai de Dios*, but also maintained her esteemed role within the primitive cult of her native tribe, French Ethnology. I drove onward to Petropolis in my rented VW Gol, which had also carried me from Rio to Salvador. I arrived without a scratch on me or the car. It had been a very long drive (over 2000 miles!) on famously treacherous roads, often at night, which is not recommended. It was an omen, she said, that I was under protection of Ogun.

There were earlier omens. Once when I was talking with a revered teacher he nodded off, as he sometimes did. He woke with a start and said, as if recalling a dream, "You were on a white horse!"

Then a few years later another revered teacher, passing me on stairs, seemed to have some sort of vision and said to me "You should have a sword." I took it as a kind of prophecy.

And when I went to a retreat center in Europe, the work I was given, unsought, was the forge—Ogun's craft, working red hot iron!

Did I actually believe I was Ogun, or that I was his avatar? No, no more than I believe in the one-in-three god of the Christian trinity. Since early childhood I had conducted an inner war, often reciting to myself a kind of mantram against belief, to repel the threat that I should fall under the constant pressure from other people and succumb to their false belief in god, heaven, hell, and so on. Yet theology, especially that of non-Christian gods, always fascinated me.

I found some illumination on this path from Coleridge³ whose idea of temporary suspension of disbelief struck me as exactly the right attitude, both for the reading of fiction and poetry as Coleridge proposed, and for the study of gods.

¹ I wish to acknowledge the warm help I have received over many years from Professor Jacob Needleman, on how to think, how to search, and how to write; and thank him for the epigraph poem. But all the faults herein are my own.

² *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*, a compendium of sources, Sandra Barnes ed.

³ Samuel Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817) <https://web.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/biographia.html>

I became initiated in the mystique and the music and dance rituals of West African gods, by my African drum/dance teacher and good friend CK Ladzekpo⁴, son of the Paramount of the Anlo-Ewe people of eastern coastal Ghana. I read extensively on religious ideas and practices derived from West Africa and Tibet and other places and spoke with many people who had varying degrees of knowledge in these matters. In this way I became familiar with, among others, the gods of Tibetan tantric teaching, and Ogun and his colleagues such as thunder god Yeve, aka Shango, trickster Legba, papa death Guede, and goddess of femaleness Ezili. I have written several articles about these explorations, some of them published in journals. They can be found on my website www.RichardHodges.com.

I was particularly fascinated by an unusual syncretistic god Blekete, one of whose songs I learned from CK⁵. He later took me to a Blekete cult center in Ghana. In the ritual service there, the dancer might be temporarily “possessed” by any one of hundreds of presences, not just African gods but also gods and even historical figures from other cultures of the world. I danced vigorously, imitating the other dancers; the cult leaders assumed that I was possessed, and did ritual acts intended to “cool down” the unexpected and possibly dangerous possession of a newbie—they sprayed me with water and fanned me.

But I was not possessed, I was acting. As in theater work, where I discovered a talent for allowing myself to be possessed by the character I was playing, this was half-possession: the conscious attention withdraws temporarily to an observer role while movement and feeling take on the character. In works on theater I found much argument about whether this was a good approach to acting, or bad. But I knew it to be a real possibility. I found Gurdjieff’s discussion very interesting about ancient theater as a vehicle for spiritual work, and the importance, for rounded inner development, of the property of human nature to be able to take on temporarily both the outer and inner manifestations of others.⁶

Full trance is different: I have witnessed it in possession rituals, and have induced it in others by hypnotic technique, and in myself by drugs. Consciousness is no longer awake, movement and feeling are passively receptive to orders from a higher presence, or from the hypnotist. One has the impression that the subject has become a blank—his constant projection of self-identity ceases, what he wants others to feel about him. He may remember nothing, or he may remember what the hypnotist tells him to remember, or he may confabulate—make up something to explain what has happened, perhaps why he is obeying some absurd hypnotic suggestion. The state can leave an exquisite aftertaste.

People seek “truth” in Western tradition, in the Orient, in Africa, in possession, in esoteric cults. But the deep truth is that there is no truth. “The play’s the thing” (Hamlet)—we make “truth” in the moment of acting (in both meanings of the word). What is “the Orient,” what is “Africa,” what is “here”? They are myths which one can inhabit only by an act of imagination, even if one is “actually” in, say, Africa. Like all the contents of our sleepy so-called “consciousness”—only myths. The truest play is one that can “catch the conscience of the king” (more Hamlet). The [false] “king” is the I that IS NOT, which one believes one is, but only truly IS in the moment when conscience is awakened.

In African Diaspora iconography Ogun is often syncretized with Saint Jacques⁷. Here is an image of a Vodou banner which I ordered from a collector sight unseen, not knowing what it would depict:

⁴ See CK’s website www.ladzekpo.com which has seminal information on African music and dance.

⁵ For original material on African music and its relation to possession, and my translation of this song, see “Drum is the Ear of God” <https://richardhodges.com/Ear.html>.

⁶ The property called “Ikrlitazkakra”: *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson*, chapter XXX “Art” p. 484 ff

⁷ Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, one of the best spiritual ethnographies of the 20th century.



In Haitian Vodou ceremonial a pair of sequined banners is carried on poles by two twirling virgins in white dress who lead the procession into the ritual space⁸.

When I unfurled it I was stunned: there was the horse, the sword, and a warrior saint looking rather like me!

Among the trinity of psychospiritual impulses Affirming-Denying-Reconciling⁹ I came to realize that the one least understood was Denying. Yet it is the most important to transubstantiate in oneself, because only by consciously stopping the constant unconscious flow of pre-existing creation is there hope of the necessary pilgrimage of return home (like the symbolic pilgrimage that constitutes the overall narrative arc of *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*), back to inner emptiness, which is the only source from which fresh creation can come. To return from who I am not to who I am, I need to realize my "nothingness," my original non-being, what I am prior to being.

⁸ See Deren's documentary video "Divine Horsemen" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Tla44ZDyZs>

⁹ G. I Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, Chapter XXXIX "Purgatory," p. 752, a prayer:

Holy-Affirming,
Holy-Denying,
Holy-Reconciling,
Transubstantiate in me
For my Being

One symbolism of warrior saints such as Saint Jacques is that they protect holy innocence and emptiness from disturbance by worldly forces. This is a transubstantiation of the Holy Denying principle. A similar symbolism can be recognized in the pairs of wrathful demon sculptures that guard the gateways to Buddhist temples throughout Asia:



Second Gateway, with Guardians brandishing weapons of iron, Taiyu-in Shrine, Nikko Japan¹⁰

I came to appreciate the apophatic style of religious and philosophical thought, in which it is systematically denied that we know, or can know, or can say, anything for sure, especially about “higher” matters such as god, and being. Starting from this position it turns out that one can actually say quite a lot and lie less. In all traditions, apophatic dialectic often occupies the highest rung of truth-telling.

Buddhism has a strong apophatic impulse. Zen is an example. The strikingly apophatic Heart Sutra¹¹ is often recited in Zen ritual practice. Here is an extract:

All things are empty:
Nothing is born, nothing dies,
nothing is pure, nothing is stained,
nothing increases, nothing decreases.

There is no feeling, no thought,
no will, no consciousness.
no eyes, no ears,

¹⁰ For my account of a mystical visit to this temple, see “The Way of a Tourist,” <https://richardhodges.com/TheWayOfATourist.pdf>

¹¹ A version in English is at <https://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/heartsutra.html>. See also *My Heart Sutra: A World in 260 Characters* by Frederick Schodt, a serious lay student of this short scripture of worldwide importance.

no nose, no tongue,
no body, no mind.

no attainment of enlightenment,
no enlightenment to attain.

Another classic Buddhist apophatic work is the 17th century text published in English as *Mahamudra: The Moonlight - Quintessence of Mind and Meditation* (transl. Lobsang Lhalungpa). The word “Mahamudra” can be translated as: "Great Gesture" (cognizing the emptiness of all concepts, perceptions, feelings, identities); "Great Seal" (the indelible seal of direct knowledge of emptiness imprinted on the mind by a lifetime of inner work). The word "Moonlight" in the Tibetan title of the book refers to the Buddhist allegory that what we see, think, feel, sense, is like a reflection of the moon on water which we take as real but does not really exist as such.

But, wearying of Western orientalism, I became an acolyte of a different Saint Jacques: Jacques Derrida, arguably the most important philosopher of the last century. His approach has been called “apophatic,” but he refused to allow it to be called that. His “deconstruction” project, inaugurated in a talk¹² that stunned 20th century philosophy, cuts through the Gordian knot of all the un-self-aware things people say and think on philosophical and spiritual subjects. Though widely attacked deconstruction has become deeply influential in almost every sphere of artistic and cultural practice and thought. Derrida’s sword of irony cuts deeper than any of iron.

Perhaps here is the prophesied sword—the Sword of Mind.

Here is something iconic that Derrida wrote about God: “the constancy of God in my life is called by other names, so that I quite rightly pass for an atheist, the omnipresence to me of what I call God in my absolved, absolutely private language being neither that of an eyewitness nor that of voice doing anything other than talking to me without saying anything.”¹³

A good plan, “talking without saying anything.” But now we cannot avoid any longer talking about a card that Derrida plays from many sides: jealousy. Derrida scholar Peggy Kamuf writes¹⁴, as if to him, “Are you suggesting that the history of philosophy is a history of jealousy between philosophers?” Indeed. And much more: jealousy seems to jealously guard the secret that jealousy itself lies at the very root of what is proper, private, to human nature. Isn’t the scene with the forbidden fruit¹⁵ about jealousy, in several ways? The Lord who forbids knowledge of good and evil is a jealous god.¹⁶ Yet Eve, tempted by the serpent, who is jealous of God, becomes jealous to possess this knowledge. The “nakedness” which marks its shabby shameful indelibly on the human soul is shameful because it incites sexual possession and jealousy.

This allegory can be read deeper. Jealousy is wanting to have someone else’s property. The original sin is property. Man is possessed by “his” property. The striving for power, which people sometimes call “freedom,” which has led to so much slavery, is engendered by jealousy of the power or freedom of others—a freedom more imagined than real. So also with esoteric striving for enlightenment, or presence, or truth—all abstract things that become known only through an act of imagination, having been apprised of someone else having them. And so with thinking—the striving to know, exactly that which is forbidden. And so with all of the things

¹² “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” presented in 1966 at Johns-Hopkins, Baltimore. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structure,_Sign,_and_Play_in_the_Discourse_of_the_Human_Sciences)

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Circumfession* pp. 154-155

¹⁴ Peggy Kamuf *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* Introduction p. xxxvii

¹⁵ Genesis 2:15-3:24

¹⁶ Exodus 20:2-6, the first Commandment: “I, your Lord, am a jealous God”

for which people strive, which strivings constitute the motor engine of human communal life. Man is possessed by desire, and by its resultant striving.

Striving cannot just be done away with. Buddhism correctly diagnoses the disease¹⁷, but its prescribed cure is often misunderstood to be a self-willed exorcism of desire; but this is impossible, desire is inextricably bound up with human nature. Yet there is a kind of liberation in acceptance of the whole process—etymologically a journey (from Latin /procesus/). “Process” also means a trial at law. Life is a trial, and we, all too human¹⁸, are guilty. The sentence is already death, but with possibility of parole, of talking. For when we talk (and this includes writing; and reading, because the reader is always a co-conspirator with the writer) we bear witness that we are not dead yet. As talkers, *homo loquens*, we are confessing about life, not fully living it, not quite suffering it. A little bit free.

¹⁷ Pratīyasamutpāda, the doctrine of “dependent arising,” describes how one thing leads to another (desire->striving->becoming->(re)birth->death and so on) in a vicious circle that keeps man from being free.
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prat%C4%ABtyasamutp%C4%81da>

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche *Human, all Too Human*