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Zombi Narratives: Transatlantic Circulations

Is Egypt the origin of sorcery? Is it Africa? Does it matter? What matters is that the amulet allegedly comes from somewhere else, a mysterious arcane place – the place of sorcery.

(Luis Nicolau Parés and Rodger Sansi: *Sorcery in the Black Atlantic*, 2011, 8)

1 Circulation and Circularity

To think of zombies as travelers might be a curious thing to do. Since 1968, when George A. Romero published his trendsetting Hollywood horror film *Night of the Living Dead*, zombies have been represented as slow and sluggish undead creatures feeding on human brains. And although the living dead have by now developed what we could call a global visual language based on their recognizability, zombies are usually not taken as an example for cultural multiplicity. At best, their supposed ‘origins’ are identified with the Caribbean, especially Haiti. This identification of the zombie as a ‘Caribbean reality’ has been repeated insistently since the 1930s, when, during the US-occupation of Haiti, Hollywood films like *White Zombie* (1932) used supposedly ‘specific’ images of the living dead to underpin the stereotype of ‘barbarian’ Afro-Caribbean cultures and consequently justify the US-occupation (Sheller 2003; Dash 1997).

In this paper, I would like to go beyond the endlessly repeated cliché of the zombie as a threatening cannibal and reframe this supposedly well-known concept by taking it back to the historical space of the Atlantic. I would like to conceptualize the *zombi* as an utterly mobile example for the circulation of concepts and narratives within this transatlantic space.¹ Accordingly, I want to question simplistic scholarly explanations for the cultural background of *zombi(e)* narratives, which in my view tend to reinforce stereotypes.

1 The spelling ‘zombie’ has been chosen here to allude to current filmic representations, while the term ‘zombi’ is used to refer to the specific historical Caribbean variant. For a discussion on the terminological implications see Moreman (2011b: 3–4).

I am aware of the problematic fact that the term ‘circulation’ may sound far too neutral and evoke the image of a closed circuit that moves in some kind of ‘natural flow’ which obliterates human agency (cf. Pratt 2006). The circulation of *zombi* narratives does not present anything ‘natural’ nor does it have a single directionality. Still, I prefer this term to other recent suggestions describing the historical interrelatedness within the Transatlantic like J. Lorand Matory’s “Atlantic dialogue” which basically implies only two possible interlocutors (Matory 2014: 45). I think it is important to underline the connections between various spaces as well as the multidirectionality that connected and keeps connecting West and Central Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and the USA. Concepts that circulated within this transatlantic space were never fixed nor simply ‘survived’ the journey from West Africa to the Caribbean, as the anthropologist Melville Herskovits suggests (cf. Matory 2014: 36–39; Kummels/Rauhut/Rinke/Timm 2014: 13). Instead, and that holds true for the *zombi* as well as for other narratives and concepts of magic, they were multiple, bound to different local forms at the same time and – because of this multiplicity and simultaneity – highly ambiguous. With Roger Sansi and Luis Parés I would like to think of this *circulation* as a kind of *circularity*: “[...] the circle is, after all, a spin, whose dynamic energy generates a supplement” (Parés/Sansi 2011: 7).

Concepts, of course, never travel by themselves. They are carried away, translated and at times intentionally transformed by human actors whose practices and agency are a constitutive part within the dynamics of a spinning circulation². In the following, I will consider three different instances of this spin. I will especially focus on the circulations between Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean.

The latter, within this network, has a unique history as a space of convergence. I will firstly refer to the discussion of the ‘African past’ of Afro-Caribbean concepts. I will secondly discuss possible relationships with narratives of the living dead in early modern Europe. While these first two steps will methodologically make use of a comparative approach to concepts and etymologies I would like to begin by recalling some specifics of *zombi* history.

2 Zombification / Transformation

Most 20th century *zombi* narratives with a focus on Haiti center around one aspect: The *zombi* as an undead body or spirit subdued to the will of a sorcerer. According to these narratives, the sorcerer forces the enslaved undead to work

² Concepts get, furthermore, attached to objects, yet this materiality does not fix them, but open spaces for multiple usages, ritual performances and interpretations.

even beyond death. In scholarship that considers zombies beyond their horrifying careers in films, the figure is often used to refer to the long colonial and neo-colonial history of Haiti. After the Spanish colonization of the island Hispaniola, the Eastern part of the island, today's Haiti, officially came under French rule in 1697. Known as Saint-Domingue, it became the richest of the French colonies thanks to a profitable sugar industry driven by slave labour. Following the first successful slave revolt in 1791, Haiti became the world's first "black republic" in 1804, only to be occupied again between 1915 and 1934, this time by the United States (Buck-Morss 2011: 50; 58). The figure of the zombie has often been employed as an image for this long history of colonization, as Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert argues:

The various western horror genres may have made of the zombie a terrorizing, murdering creature, as evident by the number of horror films that have made the zombie the most recognizable Caribbean to the Gothic genre in film and literature. [...] [In Haiti, on the contrary, G.R.] Zombification conjures up the Haitian experience of slavery, of the dissociation of a man from his will, his reduction to a beast of burden at the will of his master. (Paravisini-Gebert 2002: 239)

The idea of zombification is linked to the concept of the multiple soul as encountered in Haitian *vodou*, where the *ti bon ange* (the 'little good angel') can be distinguished from the *gros bon ange* (the 'big good angel'). In the corresponding narratives, a *bokor* (sorcerer) steals the *ti bon ange* and keeps it stored away in a ritual container, leaving the person without will, consciousness, and personality. A *zombi* is thus a person who is missing an integral part of his or her soul, characterized by the continuous quest for wholeness (Ackermann/Gauthier 1991: 467). This well-known version of the figure, the *zombi corps cadavre* – the body without a soul nowadays represented in pop-cultural contexts – exists alongside another version, the invisible *zombi astral* – a soul without a body – which, surprisingly, has not made its way out of the Caribbean (Davis 1988: 8).

The *zombi* has largely been pinned on the Caribbean state and represented as "purely Haitian" (Ackermann/Gauthier 1991: 467). Yet the idea of zombification or enslaved spirits is not a distinguishing feature of Haitian cultures: similar concepts exist all along the Afro-Caribbean Atlantic, as for example in Brazilian *Candomblé* or Cuban *Palo Monte*, in both of which the work with the enslaved spirits of the undead is an important feature (cf. Matory 2008). Similar narratives can also be encountered in Surinam or Jamaica, as the anthropologists Hans Ackermann and Jeanine Gauthier have argued (Ackermann/Gauthier 1991: 479).

It was also Ackermann and Gauthier who directed attention to parallels between the Caribbean *zombi* and West and Central African terms and concepts. As for the term *zombi*, one (out of many) possible etymological explanations links the term *zombi* to the African *Nzambi*, which, amongst other things, designates the creator-god of many Bantu-speaking groups in the Congo area. Others put it in relation to terms like *ndzumbi* (a term referring to corpses in Gabon) or *zumbi* (a term referring to revenants in Angola) (Ackermann/Gauthier 1991: 467). Anthropological research has furthermore frequently drawn parallels to similar concepts of the soul found in present-day Benin, Cameroon, Togo, and Nigeria but also in Egypt (Ackermann/Gauthier 1991: 469–473). Today, most scholars agree that these parallels point to the *zombi* as both conceptually and etymologically reaching back to West or Central Africa, from where most researchers believe it to have crossed to the Caribbean as a result of the transatlantic slave trade. By the time it was appropriated by Western gothic narratives, it had continued to be transformed on a global level. The *zombi* can thus look back on a long history of inner-Caribbean ramifications as well as West African pre-stages.

In this linear perspective, researchers have shaped the *zombi* as a classical example of an Afro-Caribbean concept derived from a mythical and original ‘African past’:

To speak of the character of the Haitian *zombi*, therefore, is to speak of the evolution of African myth into Haitian myth, of a process by which the African, as he became Haitian, was able to retain the essential nature of his heritage and at the same time renew it. (Laroche 1976: 44)

Until today, researchers continue to emphasize linear connections between an African past and a Caribbean present when addressing the historicity of the *zombi* concept³.

But the first known written mention of the term is encountered in the 1697 novel *Le zombi de Grand Perou*, probably printed on Guadeloupe and attributed to the French galley-prisoner Pierre-Corneille Blessebois⁴. While this text makes it clear that the journey of the *zombi* most probably begins much earlier than in the seventeenth centuries’ Caribbean, the starting point of its voyage does not seem as clear as some researchers might think. Of course, African contributions to the concept cannot be doubted. But a close look at the usage of the concept in the above mentioned text (as well as similar West and Central African concepts and terms like *Nzambi*) question an over-simplifying

³ To mention just one recent example within this line cf. Rutherford (2013: 31).

⁴ Murphy argues that the text itself does not provide an explanation of the term for its readers, suggesting general knowledge of the same (Murohy 2011: 48).

linear perspective. Such a perspective imagines Africa as a unique point of origin and then proceeds to the Caribbean, leaving possible European contributions completely out of view.

3 Jesus, Mary, and Nzambi

As for a possible African history of the concept, it might not come as a complete surprise that it was precisely the anthropologist who coined the term of the ‘survival’ of arcane African knowledge for the Caribbean who also underlined connections between the *zombi* concept and similar African pre-stages. In his study *Dahomey. An Ancient West African Kingdom*, Herskovits refers to beliefs in ghosts in Dahomey (present-day Benin):

It will be noted that though reference to ghosts has been made from time to time, the concept of the ghost has thus far not figured in the discussion of the souls of man. Ghosts are called [...] (‘dead-not-embarked’), which is to say that if the proper funeral ceremonies have not been performed for a man, he wanders between the world of the living and the world of the dead. [...] Thus it was recounted several times how one individual or another, who was thought to be dead, had been encountered in Togoland or on the Gold coast or in Nigeria. Such individuals, however, did not recognize their old friends, even though addressed by name. They were soulless beings, whose death was not real but resulted from the machinations of sorcerers who made them appear as dead, and then, when buried, removed them from their graves and sold them into servitude into some far-away land. Herskovits. (1938: 243–244)

Herskovits furthermore affirms: “The correspondence of this belief to that of the *zombi* in Haiti will be obvious to students of Haitian custom.” (Herskovits 1938: 244). Indeed, most enslaved people in Haiti had been deported from the coasts of present-day Congo and Angola (Heusch 1989: 306). Thus, Herskovits’ hypothesis had a great resonance throughout Caribbean studies, most prominently in Joan Dayan’s classic *Haiti, History and the Gods*. Dayan comments on Herskovits as follows: “Born out of the experience of slavery, the sea passage from Africa to the New World [...], the *zombi* tells the story of colonization.” (Dayan 1998: 36–37). This uncritical reliance on Herskovits is contradictory to previous arguments in Dayan’s prologue which question Herskovits’ perspective on the Caribbean as a space constituted by African imports (Dayan 1996: xviii).

Similar narratives about enslaved undead souls were also noted in other regions of Africa, such as the Congo, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo, or Cameroon. In the latter case, they have been explained by the capture of young people by Hausa groups (Ackermann/Gauthier 1991: 478). Wyatt

Mac Gaffey argues that in Zaire, the historical slave trade has shaped contemporary narratives about sorcery, “regarded as the illicit traffic for profit in the souls of persons killed and transported by occult means” (Mac Gaffey 1986: 82). As it remains unclear whether such narratives already circulated before the transatlantic slave trade, Mac Gaffey’s comment recalls the necessity of continuously taking into account the reshaping usages of the past made in the present, an argument that also and particularly holds true for *zombi* narratives.

The linear explication of the *zombi* concept passing from Africa to the Caribbean (as favored by Herskovits and apparently also by Dayan) privileges one kind of historical derivation while leaving aside a whole array of other possibilities. On the one hand, the quest-for-origins-perspective becomes much more complicated if one takes into account the fact that Portuguese conquerors and Christian missionaries had already been present in the region of the Congo River before the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade. On the other hand, most of the textual documents that refer to supposedly ‘original African beliefs’ have been authored by European missionaries or travelers with a clear political or religious agenda and can therefore hardly be viewed as ‘evidence’ of African cultures. Rather, they provide evidence about the European researchers and their way of constructing knowledge.

We encounter specific complications when we try to approach the historicity of the *zombi* concept via etymological comparison. In order to explain the derivations of the *zombi* through the African-origins-looking glass, the already mentioned term *Nzambi* has often been suggested. This term mainly designates the creator god of many Bantu cultures, who is only consulted if all other possibilities to achieve justice and revenge have been exhausted (Ackermann/Gauthier 1991: 467; Garraway 2005: 182). But the term has been present in missionary texts written along the coast of Central Africa since the year 1600; this region encompasses today’s Cameroon, Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Angola. As Bakongo groups, for example, often referred to Jesus and *Nzambi* in the same phrase, anthropological research mainly focused on the question if (and to what extent) the concept was a syncretistic one. In *Études Bakongo. Sociologie, religion et magie*, Joseph Van Wing – himself working as a missionary – states:

Desu, Maria, Nzambi ukumbona. Jésus, Maria, Nzambi me voit. Mais y a-t-il une relation entre Desu et Nzambi? Personne ne le sait. Les formules, qui expriment leurs idées concernant Nzambi, portent la marque authentique des Bakongo. Leur contenu a-t-il été modifié ou enrichi par la prédication chrétienne à San Salvador-Sundi-Mbata-Matari? Peut-être; mais il est impossible pour le moment de préciser davantage ces apports. (Van Wing 1959: 306–307)

Further anthropological research has confirmed Van Wing's suspicion and portrayed *Nzambi* as a highly syncretistic concept (Mac Gaffey 1986: 78; Hirschberg 1963; Thiel 1983). Interestingly enough (and this might constitute one of the most evident parallels to the Caribbean *zombi*), *Nzambi* is also a multiple concept, referring to a whole variety of meanings within different local versions. Amongst other functions, *Nzambi* is mentioned as an invisible being that has a special relation to the world of the dead. Within the hierarchy between the living and the dead, *Nzambi Mpungu* occupies the highest position (Thiel 1983; Hirschberg 1963). For the concept of the *zombi*, all etymological and conceptual parallels remain speculative. In the end, they contribute to a reaffirmation of Africa as 'the place of the occult'. Recent research has challenged this construction: In *Critique de la raison nègre* (2013), Achille Mbembe, for example, argues that the expression 'Africa' most often designates repressive stereotypes, regardless of any real relation between signifier and signified:

S'agissant du terme 'Afrique', tout part effectivement de l'extraordinaire difficulté de produire une image vraie associable à un mot lui aussi vrai. Car peu importe en vérité le sujet qui parle ou qui s'exprime. Chaque fois qu'il est question d'Afrique, la correspondance entre les mots, les images et la chose importe peu, et il n'est pas nécessaire que le nom ait un répondant ou une chose réponde à son nom. [...] Le nom 'Afrique' renvoie donc non seulement à ce dont nul n'est censé répondre, mais encore à une sorte arbitraire primordial – cet arbitraire des désignations auxquelles rien en particulier ne semble devoir répondre sinon le préjugé inaugural dans sa régression infinie. (Mbembe 2013: 83)

This critique of using the term 'Africa' based on preexisting expectations has to be taken seriously when it comes to Afro-Caribbean relations. In the field of Caribbean studies, researchers like Stephan Palmié have questioned the search for 'African origins' (Palmié 2002; 2008; 2013). For Palmié Africa is "less a foundational past than a possible future" (Palmié 2008: 13–14). He regards the terms 'Africa' and 'Africanity' as theoretical problems rather than ontological givens and points out that "Africa" is not just a place "but a trope that encodes and evokes complex, historically sedimented, and contextually variable bodies of knowledge" (Palmié 2008: 11).

The identification of the trope of 'Africa' with an "occult past of sorcery" has a long history indeed (Parés/Sansi 2011: 5). Yet as research on sorcery within a transatlantic frame has successfully shown, such identification tells us about the discursive quest to keep Africa and Europe conceptually apart rather than providing useful information about 'Africa.' As Luis Parés and Roger Sansi rightfully assert:

[...] discourses of sorcery, witchcraft and fetishism have been used historically to separate Africa from the Atlantic and ultimately to deny the existence of the Atlantic as a space of culture. By projecting Africa as the place of sorcery and the occult, as opposed to Europe and the Enlightenment [...], the discourse of the West has denied the possibility of intermediate spaces, which were European, African and American at the same time. (Parés/Sansi 2011: 5)

The history of the *zombi* concept has to be situated precisely in such an “intermediate space”. The, thus, is not only a figure with multiple origins; it is a multiple and transformative figure itself (Rath 2014a).

4 Magic and Necromancy in Early Modern Europe

The multiple origins of the *zombi* also become evident in its etymology. Studies have not only traced the term back to Bantu languages but also to the French word for shadows, *les ombres*. Indeed, the contribution of European cultures has to be considered not only etymologically but also on a conceptual level. Narratives of conjuring spirits and undead bodies within the context of ritual magic have been present in Europe at least since the 9th century and became highly popular in Western Europe in the 12th and 13th centuries through translations from Greek and Islamic sources into Latin. One of the most famous narratives about necromancy was published in the 7th century. Isidor of Seville states that

[t]here are magicians who are commonly called ‘evildoers’ (maleficus) by the crowd because of the magnitude of their crimes. They agitate the elements, disturb the minds of people, and slay without any drinking of poison, using the violence of spells alone. [...] With their summoning of demons, they dare to flaunt how one may slay his enemies with evil arts. They make use of blood and victims, and often handle the bodies of the dead. Necromancers (necromantius) are those by whose incantations the dead, brought back to life, seem to prophesy, and to answer what is asked [...]. (Isidor of Seville 2006: 182)

In these narratives, practitioners were male literates at court, often also clergymen. Their rituals comprised gaining control over spirits of the dead, who were banned into a bottle or a mirror and then commanded to comply with the wishes of the magician. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the focus of persecutors turned from the male magician to the female witch, and the traffic with spirits became one element of persecution. The discussion focused on the question whether the spirits could be mastered by men or if it was rather the magicians who were mastered by the spirits (Kieckhefer 2013: 19–20; Levack 1983: 23).

Beyond the conceptual level, there are other, more visible connections when focusing on the circulation of narratives of magic between Europe and the Caribbean. On the one hand, popular manuals for practicing ritual magic, like the *Petit* or the *Grand Albert* (the first dating from 1668, the second probably written in the 13th Century, with a French translation dating from 1703), were transferred from Europe to the Caribbean (Revert 1951: 92). On the other hand, the circulation also comprised human agents. Researchers have stated that some Europeans convicted for the supposed practice of magic were banished to the Caribbean (Bernier 2001: 659). Although such accounts are rare and cannot be considered representative, what they do indicate is that the circulation of narratives (and repressive discourses) was not limited to Africa and the Caribbean.

Interestingly enough, the first text that features the term *zombi* also links Caribbean discourses back to Europe. *Le Zombi du Grand Pérou, ou la comtesse de Cogne* (1697) raises a number of questions regarding the intra-Caribbean and Caribbean-European circulation of the *zombi*. Hailed as the “first colonial novel” by its eventual publisher Guillaume Apollinaire, it seems likely that *Le Zombi du Grand Pérou* was first printed in Guadeloupe (Murphy 2011: 48). The text is attributed to the author Pierre-Corneille Blessebois, a French author condemned to the galleys for deserting the French army. Blessebois was also involved (as a witness) in a 1679 trial on black magic at the French court, known as the “Affaire de Poison”. Colonial archives register a conviction against him on Guadeloupe. But official documents also state that “the verdict was given in the defendant’s absence”, and all traces of Blessebois’ eventually disappear (Garraway 2005: 173; Houdard 2007).

In the text, the author draws a connection between several notions of the *zombi* and *sorcellerie*. The text’s narrator, who arrives on a sugar plantation on Guadeloupe as a French *engagé*, is requested by the Creole lady of the house to transform her into a *zombi*; she wants to scare her lover and thinks the *engagé* has learned magical practices during his journey from Europe. Although the narrator does not have this kind of magical knowledge, he accepts just for the fun of it. When the lady finds out that she has not been turned into a *zombi* but rather humiliated in front of the whole plantation society, she seeks revenge. Accusing him of being a sorcerer, he is eventually charged and finally condemned. The text thus reads as a commentary on the persecution of alleged magicians that had been prevalent since colonization. Rather than shaping the *zombi* as a concept related to African slaves, the text particularly exposes the part Europeans played in the cultural imaginary. Thus, the text can be read as a provocative mode of resistance against plantation society, as the French *engagé* takes sides with the enslaved Africans and ridicules the ruling French and Creole elite (Rath 2014b). Researchers have thought of sorcery as a relational con-

nection that mediates power asymmetries between the dissimilar – men and women, Europe and Africa, master and enslaved, the strong and the weak (Parés/Sansi 2011: 11). Accordingly, this text shapes the magic of the *zombi* as a narrative weapon through which established power relations can be questioned.

5 Zombi Multiplicity, Past, and Future

Even though the first text to mention the term raises more questions than it answers, what remains clear is that *Le Zombi du Grand Pérou, ou la comtesse de Cocagne* brings into focus the *zombi* as a figure of the Transatlantic. I have argued that if we take into account Blessebois' *Le Zombi du Grand Pérou, ou la comtesse de Cocagne*, European contributions to the *zombi* concept have to be taken into account. Contrary to many current scholarly explanations, which reduce the history of the *zombi* concept to African pre-stages, this narrative questions any linear and over-simplifying history of origins.

This also holds true for a closer examination of possible West and Central African pre-stages of the concept. Although *zombi* narratives undoubtedly bear African traces, any reduction of *zombi* narratives as 'purely Haitian' on the one hand and a West and Central African 'residual' on the other tend to reinforce preexisting stereotypes. These stereotypes – which have for a long time represented Africa as a 'place of sorcery and the occult' and Haiti as a 'place of cannibals and evil magic' – are still perpetuated today and have to be questioned, particularly so in academic scholarship.

The history of the *zombi* concept is not only based on an 'African past' but also on European narratives of magic. At least that is what the history of the term *Nzambi*, other possible African similarities, and *Le zombi du Grand Pérou* suggest. And yet, the concept cannot be reduced to either of these lineages. What remains is the *zombi* in continuous transformation. The figure of the living dead, one could argue, has not only reached a global level when it became highly popular in Hollywood films. It was and always will be a global and multiple figure, sprawling across the Transatlantic in diverse forms and meanings.

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