



The ‘Truth’ Behind Haitian Zombies

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Philippe Charlier. *Zombies: An Anthropological Investigation of the Living Dead* and translated by Richard J. Gray II. 2017. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. pp. 160 ISBN: 9780813054575

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In *Zombies: An Anthropological Investigation of the Living Dead*, Philippe Charlier uses biomedicine and physical anthropology to discuss the presence and cultural significance of zombies in Haiti. Charlier is qualified to evaluate zombies because he is a coroner, forensic pathologist, and paleopathologist with previous experience in archaeology and anthropology. His experiences give him the knowledge needed to assess the biological and cultural aspects of zombies. Charlier’s text is composed of nineteen chapters and is sprinkled with small instances of Charlier’s humor, an effective method to make the reader feel like they are on the journey with him. He uses a multidisciplinary approach to complete a self-described “anthropological investigation between life and death” (3). His justification for calling it an anthropological investigation comes from the use of traditional ethnographic methods such as participant observation, material collection, and interviews (x, 83). However, because of Charlier’s limited scope of anthropological methods, I do not believe the text can be advertised as a traditional piece of anthropological literature such as an ethnography.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading Charlier’s text, but it lacks a theoretical framework that could provide the structure needed for the piece to align with the style of other anthropological texts.

Additionally, it does not go into detail on the methods he used to gain his information. His methods are briefly mentioned on two pages in the text, which implies that he is relying solely on observations and participation within the Vodou world, completely disregarding any anthropological bodies of literature that would enhance his arguments. Despite not being a traditional text, there is a place for the book within anthropology classrooms, specifically advanced courses. The text would be a useful tool for helping seasoned anthropology students learn that the field is accepting of non-traditional texts and methods.

Charlier begins the work with an overview of zombies and how they are understood by Haitians. When I first think of zombies, my mind jumps to the popular works of *Zombieland* and *Walking Dead*. However, these zombies are not what Charlier means when he uses the term. The zombies we see on popular television are fictionalized characters that are meant to provide entertainment, but the zombies discussed in the text are important cultural entities that do not provide enjoyment. The zombies as understood by Haitians take three forms. The first are children who died without being baptized; however, this form of zombie is no longer recognized by Haitians. The second is a ghostly spirit that moves around without being attached to a body, akin to a ghost or specter. The third, which occupies Charlier's attention throughout the book, is a person who has become cataleptic (trance-like with a rigid body) due to poisoning. Because the person becomes unresponsive to external stimuli, she is considered "dead" and can, therefore, be buried. After burial, she is exhumed by a specific type of Vodou priest called a "bokor," which is associated with evil magic. She is then considered a zombie, completely submissive to the bokor. Zombification can be explained through poisoning from the tetrodotoxin of the fugu fish, a type of pufferfish that is considered a delicacy in Haiti. Interacting with this toxin leads to various clinical symptoms, the most severe of which can lead to a state of apparent death or actual death. The process occurs when an individual comes in contact with (either through physical contact or ingestion) a sub-lethal dose of tetrodotoxin which causes a state of apparent death. Often a scorned family member or friend will hire a bokor to poison someone because that person wronged them in some way. The person who consumes the toxin is then in a state of apparent death, which justifies a funeral and burial. Soon after the burial, a bokor exhumes the body, resuscitates it, and the individual is considered a zombie. The zombie will live their life

following the bokor's orders, and the bokor has full control of the zombie, stripping it of its autonomy and agency in life.

According to Charlier, zombies exist at the "convergence of toxicology, medicine, magic, and religion" (31). While medical explanations exist, the cultural reality of zombies finds purchase in religious discourse. The zombification process is carried about by bokors, which are prominent members of the Vodou religion. In addition to stripping them of their autonomy, the zombification process strips individuals of both biological and social personhood because when they are buried and a death certificate is signed, they are no longer considered to be living human beings.

The legal status of zombies is a confusing matter because they are legally dead even if still biologically alive. The question then arises as to whether or not zombies can ultimately rejoin the world of the living. Charlier is concerned with this question throughout his investigation. He learns that zombies have no legal rights and no true nationality. At the time of Charlier's research, there were no avenues for zombies to be "re-instated" as human; however, one criminal law attorney, Emmanuel Jeanty, is advocating for a certificate of resurrection that would allow zombies to regain their personhood. Jeanty is concerned with the legal status of zombies because if zombies are not legally recognized as people, they cannot be held accountable for any crimes (69-70).

When a bokor creates a zombie, he is punishing that individual for wrongdoings in life. He takes away the zombie's individuality to create a soulless being that is easily influenced by the power of suggestion. Essentially, the zombie becomes the bokor's slave. While it was never explained why the zombie is so heavily influenced by suggestion, it is known that the zombie carries out orders without any sense as to why (37). My previous coursework leads me to wonder if the enslaved zombie is tied to Haiti's long history of slavery and mistreatment by others. Haiti's history of slavery is not addressed by Charlier; however, a discussion of the history would undoubtedly contribute to the text.

Overall, the book is written (translated) in a compelling manner that will likely make it a well-read piece within and outside of academia. Charlier's thorough knowledge of anthropology and forensic pathology are obvious, and his well-placed humor adds levity to what is ultimately a tragic story about individuals losing their place in the world. I suspect that the text will find a

place within the field of medical anthropology, as it highlights the intersection of culture and biology in Haiti. I highly recommend this book to anyone with an interest in Vodou or zombies.

Natalie Basta is a Master of Science student in Anthropology at North Dakota State University. She has completed previous research on the use of radiocarbon dating in determining the death date of unidentified forensic remains. She is interested in police practices, personhood within the prison system, forensic death investigating, and the role of death care workers in post-death practices.



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