

“Torn from the womb of slavery and born again to freedom” – The Interplay of Transcendence and Military Emancipationism”

Claudius Fergus

### **Introduction**

Enslaved Africans in the Caribbean embraced ancestral spirituality and esotericism to counteract the dehumanization strategies of European enslavers, to forge Pan-African bridges across ethnic clusters of fellow enslaved, and to sustain the generational struggles for emancipation (Rucker 91; Voeks 68, 71-72; Campbell, 4). The current study on this subject was inspired by the representation of African martial esotericism from two different genres of historical interpretation. The first, an extant fragment of an anti-slavery ditty, was reproduced in Bridget Brereton’s *History of Modern Trinidad* (1981, 48; 51n2). Brereton describes the song as intrinsic to the “subversive” ideology of “a network of secret societies” among enslaved Africans in Trinidad. The first two lines, with translation, read:

*Pain c’est viande bequé, San Domingo!*

*Vin c’est sang bequé, San Domingo!*

[The bread is the flesh of the white man, San Domingo!

The wine is the blood of the white man, San Domingo!]

The second source of inspiration is Lance Horner’s and Kyle Onstott’s representation of the 1791 Bois Caiman “congress” of revolutionary emancipators in *The Black Sun* (1968), a historical fiction on the Haitian Revolution.

In a 2006 article Brereton decisively embellished the subversive song as “a seditious ditty” and presented it in more conventional patois orthography. Although she does not explain the different renderings, L. M. Fraser’s *History of Trinidad*, was cited as “the sole source for the song and incantation” (Munro & Walcott-Hackshaw, 129). Following Fraser, Brereton tells us that the song was as an invocation of African spirits during a “blasphemous Mass,” with clear indications of empowering the participants as they prepared for a major revolt. As far as is known, Brereton was the first historian since Fraser to appreciate African esotery as agency in militant resistance to slavery in Trinidad; by doing so she boldly challenged a popular view of Africans in that colony as “the most moral and well behaved” accommodators of enslavement in the English Caribbean (see De Verteuil 1981, 5-9). Furthermore, Brereton’s return to this subaltern appropriation of the Eucharist after some twenty-five years testifies to her deep appreciation of the seminal role of Haiti/Saint Domingue in the evolution of modern Trinidad as well as her wide historiographical interest in the social history of the wider Caribbean. My own interrogation of this and similar other extant lyrical artefacts of revolutionary declarations offers exciting vistas into the esoteric heritage of Africa as an analytical tool for reinterpreting the emancipatory struggles of Africans under enslavement in the Caribbean and elsewhere in the Americas. It is in this context that this essay pays homage to the intellectual legacy of Professor Emerita Bridget Brereton, a mentor, professional colleague and friend for many decades.

The apparent parody of the Eucharist is a richly loaded linguistic artefact comprising several strands of Caribbean history, including the epic Haitian Revolution; migration to Trinidad immediately before and after British capture; the diasporisation of African cosmology; creolisation of language; and the value of oral tradition, namely songs, in reconstructing the subaltern during the period of slavery. This paper will examine the significance of the “San Domingo” song as a coded representation of the Christian “Last-Supper” that combined with African-derived conjuration to impart an African-centred epistemology into Caribbean slave revolts. The paper will employ a combination of historical analysis and literary criticism. Hopefully the effort will contribute to a better understanding of the psychosocial dimensions of revolutionary emancipationism in the Caribbean as well as stimulate greater appreciation of the value of historical fiction and linguistics in the study of Caribbean history.

### ***Significance of the Theology of Eating the Gods***

The plantocracy’s presumption of absolute power over the enslaved put them in the position of gods, albeit in the realm of an evil pantheon. Indeed, to some enslaved Africans, plantation slavery was hell, the consequence of sorcery that had its beginnings in Africa (Taylor, 101-02). Accordingly, the extirpation of slavery warranted the spiritual extirpation of associated evils. Although “couched in mystical terms” appropriate for its conservative abolitionist readership, emancipated Quobna Ottobah Cugoano’s prophecy of spiritual destruction provides explicit testimony to this interpretation:

“What revolution the end of that predominant evil of slavery and oppression may produce, whether the wise and considerate will surrender and give it up, and make restitution for the injuries that they have already done, as far as they can; or whether the force of their wickedness, and the iniquity of their power, will lead them on until some universal calamity burst forth against the abandoned carriers of it on, and against the criminal nations in confederacy with them, is not for me to determine? But this must appear evident, that for any man to carry on a traffic in the merchandize of slaves, and to keep them in slavery; or for any nation to oppress, extirpate and destroy others...will be evidenced in the destruction and overthrow of all the transgressors....but that *those who are doers of it will meet with some awful visitation and righteous judgement of God*, and in such a manner as it cannot be thought that his vengeance for their iniquity will be the less tremendous because his judgements are long delayed” (Fryer 1984, 100-01, emphasis added).

Cugoano was very likely a Fante from the Gold Coast (Southern Ghana), who became an influential humanitarian abolitionist during his sojourn in England toward the end of the eighteenth century. In his native Africa, the destruction of one’s enemies by spiritual means was conceptualised as gods eating their enemies; likewise, victors often described the defeat of their enemies as eating them. This ontological praxis was transferred to the Americas and diasporized. Thus, a Haitian song commemorating the Revolution asks a member of the Petro pantheon of *Iwa* (loa), “How many little men have you eaten?” (Taylor, 113). Early Europeans in western Africa often misconstrued the context of such declarations as actual acts of cannibalism (Shaw 2002, 227-30). Accordingly, the “seditious” Trinidad song might well reflect a desire for vindication and political empowerment. As such, it perfectly synchronises with *The Black Sun*’s substitution of a white, male youth—a “goat without horns” (Horner and Onstott 1968, 175)—for the conventional black, female pig as the sacrificial victim in the Bois

Caiman ceremony. In the context of white supremacy and chattel slavery in which African life was wasted in myriad ways, the sacrifice of the white youth as the “first-fruit” was a perfect gift to the gods in expiation of the crimes against humanity committed under the aegis of the God of the whites. Such was the context of Boukman’s “Voice-of-Liberty” prayer at Bois Caiman.

The doctrine of eating the gods has a noble pedigree in lower Nile Valley religion (Gabriel 2002, 182-83). In one example, the Ancient Egyptian god Nun (Nu), “the primeval watery mass, out of which all the gods came into being” (Budge, 1959, 113-14), instructed his first alter ego, Atum, “Eat of your daughter Maat; It is your son Shu who will raise her up” (Asante 2000, 115). Maat was the supreme ethical ideal of Ancient Egypt as well as the perfection of femininity and womanhood.

The belief in eating the gods was also prevalent among Africans who were sold to European slave traders. Jamaican planter-scholar, Edward Long (1774 v. 2, 379) affirmed, “The Mocas not only worship, but eat, snakes; and now adore, and presently devour, their deity.” The Mocas (Moco) were from the Cameroon region. They also constituted a substantial minority of African-born persons in Trinidad. In the 1759 insurgent plot in St. Croix, leaders cut their finger and drank the blood. In some instances of pre-revolutionary rituals, blood was mixed with earth—sometimes with grave dirt—and drunk. In all traditional African religions, the earth is sacred and worshipped as a major deity, often female but sometimes male.

In Ancient Nile Valley, by eating the flesh and drinking the blood of a god the initiate became one with that deity. Transposing this theology onto the seditious ditty above, one could easily perceive the power relations between enslaved and enslaver and the insinuation of revolution as a means of subverting that relationship. Historically, live blood was a staple of many contemporary traditional African religions (Rucker 2001). Among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria the Osu caste was a special reservoir of sacrificial victims. On initiating a new Osu member as a servant of the gods, the officiating priest cut off the Osu’s right ear “in order to allow his blood to seal the people’s petition to their god.” The shed blood signified that the Osu had become “a gift and property of the god” (Idika 1983, 23).

### **Religious syncretism – The Journey from Africa**

It is important to deconstruct the Christian allusions in the San Domingue ditty that Brereton restored to the study of African resistance to enslavement. Some Africans were already familiar with Jesus’ Last Supper prior to their capture and forced embarkation to European colonies. Wherever this occurred, Christian doctrines and iconography were Africanised in varying degrees. The case of the Kingdom of Kongo is well known to students of African history (Thornton 1984; Hilton 1982). Less well known are the many pockets of African Christians and Christianized Africans from modern-day Senegal to Cameroon. Thus, Ewe-Fon, Yoruba and Kongolese, the key cultural inflows into Haitian Vodou, originated from pre-transatlantic sites of Africanised Christianity (Thornton, 1988). The fact that the bulk of the Saint Domingue insurgents were of “Bantu” origin further underscores the potential for pre-transatlantic correspondence between Africanity and Christianity in Saint Domingue. During the ten-year period prior to Boukman’s Bois Caiman congress of 1791, some 116,000 African soldiers were imported into the colony from the ports of Kongo and Angola, which had been under Catholic influence since the late 15<sup>th</sup> century; another 55,000 Africans originated from Lower Guinea, which included other

sites of Africanized Christianity, such as Allada in modern-day Benin—a core Ewe-Fon area (Thornton 1991, 60).

Evidence for the transliteration of Christian and African gods also existed within Atlantic Africa prior to the Sugar Revolution, the event that triggered the first large-scale importation of African labour into the Caribbean. In Kongolese Christianity, Yahweh was known as Nzambi Mpungu; among the Ewe-Fon of West Africa, Jesus was known as Lisa, and Mary as Mawu (Thornton 1984, 267). Thornton is convinced that that “a certain number” of Africans in New World colonies were already Christians; others comprising a “sizable group” had “fairly strong ideas about Christian doctrine.” Many were baptized by African clerics.

It is more than likely that African Catholic priests and laymen were among the captives bound from the Kingdom of Kongo to the Americas. Thus, one should not take lightly the report that some Christian rebels in the 1736 rebellion in Antigua were administered the Eucharist, while non-Christians were administered the Akan communion of grave dirt “in rum and beer” by their peers (Gaspar 1983, 322n36). A combination of Christian Eucharist and Akan Communion similar to the Antigua example was evident in Jamaica’s Baptist War of 1831. Although professed Christians, they took the Akan *okomfo* oath by kissing the Bible (Stewart, 1983 365). Testimony by captured insurgents of the 1831-1832 uprising indicates that they were committed to holy war. For example, insurgents informed the overseer of Ginger Hill plantation that the rebellion “was not the work of man alone, but they had assistance from God.” Another prisoner of war, Thomas Gordon, expressed his belief in divine guidance: “...the word of God said that freedom belonged to them;” he added, emancipation “was the work God gave them to do—they must be ready for it” (“Report,” 1831-32, 211, 235).

Here and there, colonial documents hint at recognition of the established Church in Kongo. A picture on an altar in Cartagena (Colombia) depicted arriving Africans being baptized in the *blood* of Jesus as it flowed from his wounds (Thornton 1988, 272). The colour of Jesus was not mentioned. However, Edward Long confirmed that French colonial churches “have images of *black saints*, like the Portuguese at Madeira, for the particular devotion of these poor wretches” (*History* 2:430, emphasis original). The French sacralization of blackness might well reflect their recessive memory of the adoration of “The Black Madonna and Child.”

In another context, the subversive Trinidad ditty might well equate with a hymn composed for clandestine observation of the Eucharist. Scholars on the subject tell us that at the quarterly meetings of the many African secret societies in Trinidad, a Grand Judge would conduct a “blasphemous mass” during which the bread and wine were trans-substantiated into the white man’s flesh and blood and consumed by participants (Brereton 2006, 129; Fraser 1971, 270).

To summarise, on the surface the seditious Trinidad ditty appears to be a mere caricature of the Eucharistic sacrament. However, just as well, it could have been a parody of an ancient African doctrine of eating the gods, which predates the influence of Christianity. Implied is a belief in personal deification and redemption. The provocative, subversive ditty might also have betrayed western Africans’ assimilation of Christianity before the transatlantic slave traffic. In other words, the song could well have

been another case of historical misrepresentation of Africans as mimic men of European cultural patterns.

### ***Possession, Sacrifice and Militarism***

The doctrine of eating or feeding the gods is closely intertwined with animal and human sacrifice. As an aspect of Caribbean revolutionary emancipation, sacrifice as Last-Supper rituals is a recurring motif by which the enslaved found a pathway to military alliances, personal redemption, deification, transmigration and political emancipation. In the plantation landscape of constant conflict, "Sacrifice is the weapon that brings about resolution and tranquility" (Abimbola 1994, 106). According to Patterson, "The sacrificial ritual created not only a compact between the sacrificers and their god but a compact of fellowship among the sacrificers themselves" (1998, 183; also Doumbia 2004, 8). By extension, eating the gods is closely associated with the phenomenon of "spirit possession" and spirit "visitation," two different but related metaphysical experiences, but both of which featured prominently in resistance to slavery in the Americas. Adama and Naomi Doumbia (6) contend, "Spirits seldom possess us; they make visits upon us," and they usually do so only on invitation. Whether invited or not, it is well recognised in Haitian Vodun that *lwa* mount their target *serviteurs* becoming riders on high-spirited horses (see Herbert Marks in Brian Gates, *Afro-Caribbean Religions*, 61).

Spirit mediums radiate exceptionally strong spiritual energy, which goes by the name "*nyama*" in the language of the Bamana, a Mande people of the Upper Niger in West Africa. When a spirit enters a person, that medium or *serviteur* is filled with *nyama*, which may be directed toward good or evil (Doumbia 2004, 5-6; Deren, 1953, 217-18). The Doumbias explain, "blood is a substance full of *nyama*. The shedding of blood makes way for new life, new beginnings. The fluid of fertility, rebirth, and life, blood is the ultimate offering to the spirits" (22). It is this context that gives meaning to the title of this paper. To the Bamana, blood is the only part of the sacrifice not consumed by devotees; it is reserved "for the spirits' consumption." Therefore, human consumption of sacrificial blood may be interpreted as an act of impersonation of the gods as well as a leap toward deification itself (see Gabriel 2002, 183).

According to Patrick Taylor (98), possession involves the ingestion of a holy spirit. The phenomenon takes two forms: ritual consumption leading to oath taking and transformation into a spirit medium. This ritual had obvious military significance, since some *lwa* were gods and goddesses of war, lightning, and fire, such as Ogun and Shango. In Haitian Vodun Shango is a servant of Ogun (Herskovits 1975, 316). In the Haitian Revolution, Ogun was often syncretized with Shango as Ogun-Shango. Many of the Revolution's military leaders as War Chiefs were devotees and even priests of these deities. Ogun was the major "army strategist" of the Revolution (Taylor 1989, 115). Dessalines often dressed in red, the colour of Shango. Taylor (116) states, "Sometimes Ogun-Shango possessed him and thus himself directed the combat." Toussaint might also have fought under Ogun-Ferraile (Taylor 1989, 116). A slavery-age extant calypso-verse attesting to spiritual militarism through Shango in Trinidad is rendered by J. D. Elder (1966, 89): "Ja Ja Romey eh/ Ja Ja Romey Shango." A modern Yoruba transcription makes it: "Ja Ja ro mi, o/ ja ja ro mi Sango," and translated: "Fight for me/ Fight for me, Shango" (Olemoh 2009).

Oaths of secrecy and commitment to fight to the death accompanied these rituals; thus, the famous Haitian mantra, "Liberté ou la mort" (Liberty or death). Although many plots were betrayed, evidence

suggests that oath-takers were not the primary traitors. In the Court Martial that followed the failed 1736 uprising, rebel Tilgart Penezar, an Igbo creole, “swore that they ‘would Die first’ rather than ‘betray the Secret’ as ‘they knew what would befall them after drinking a grave Dram’” (Gaspar 1985, 242-44). Whites referred to the oath as the “Damnation Oath,” which was taken by laying of hands on the Bible or “a white dunhill cock” depending on religious affinity (Gaspar 1985, 322n36). Several insurgents confirmed that the oath was administered with liquor only; liquor and blood; liquor with strained grave dirt; or, any of these combinations (Gaspar 1985, 244).

Captured insurgents refused to confess or betray their comrades, even under the severest torture and sentence of death. This cult of secrecy was an essential element in the war against slavery. An unsuccessful rebellion was a battle lost, not the war itself. For example, when about to be hanged, the leader of the 1815 Jamaica revolt warned his captors that there were enough of his countrymen in the colony to carry on the struggle until victory was secured (Hart 2002, 227). In the 1831 sequel called the Baptist War, rebel prisoner Gardiner made a similar forecast. He told the military tribunal, “In about three to four years the negroes will break out again” (“Report” 1831-32, 206-09). That revolt was the largest and most destructive in the Caribbean, after Haiti; it was also the last revolt the British were prepared to risk, thus overturning decades of apology for preserving slavery to declare that the enslaved were now fit for immediate emancipation.

In all colonies, African military science incorporated psycho-spiritual defence against gun technology. Like Africanised Christianity, this aspect of African revolutionary emancipation had its provenance in Africa. African conjurers had well-established tradition of war-magic guaranteeing invulnerability against conventional weaponry. Firearms had been used with devastating effect against Africans in the Kingdom of Kongo since the end of the fifteenth century. They had a dramatic introduction into West African warfare with the Moroccan invasion of Songhai in 1590. Up to the end of the seventeenth century West Africans and Central Africans had experienced the dreadful effects of gunnery mainly as human targets. During the eighteenth century, between 100,000 and 150,000 English-made guns were imported annually by Africans to be used mainly against Africans for defence or procurement of captives for enslavement (Inikori 1977, 343-48; Davidson 1980, 242). In due course African religious leaders developed a unique defence against this new power. According to Edward Long, Tacky, the leader of the massive uprising in Jamaica in 1760, “could not be hurt by the white men, for that he caught all the bullets fired at him in his hand, and hurled them back with destruction to his foes” (History 2: 451). The claims of similar counter-propulsions are even more dramatically associated with Maroon Warrior Queen Nanny (Campbell, 51). During the Haitian Revolution the claim of invulnerability against bullets was a qualification for acceptance as Commander of an insurgent unit or War Chief.

Although the archival sources “remain hypothetical” (Taylor 1989, 117) they consistently support the oral tradition that war magic was critical to the success of the Revolution. Unit Commanders were conjurers, oracles and personifications of deities, including Christian saints. Bois Caiman was certainly framed in the context of jihad. Indeed, some scholars even assert that the leader of the first phase of the revolution, Zamba Boukman, also called Boukman Dutty, a *Papaloi* or High Priest, was a literate Muslim; his chief assistant, the mambo Cécile Fatiman, a likely cognate with Fatima (and indeed, Cesil Fatima in Haitian Kreyol), might also have been Muslim (Diouf 1998, 152-53, 229). If there was any

doubt that the revolution was a crusade for liberty, Boukman's declaration to Governor Blanchelande dispelled it completely. On the fourth day of full-scale revolt, Boukman informed Governor Blanchelande, "It is too late. God (Gran-Met) that struggles for the innocent is our guide. He will never abandon us. So here is our motto: to vanquish or perish" (Laguerre 1989, 63).

### **Bois Caiman in history**

During the 1980s there was an upsurge of interest in the Haitian Revolution by Anglophone Caribbean scholars. Partly accounting for this was the significant commemorations of two of the most significant milestones in Caribbean history: the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Emancipation in the former British Empire, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, first published in 1938 and still one of the best known works on the Revolution. Two years prior, James had written and directed a play by the same name, at least in part. In a 1967 remake, the play began with a Kikongo war song; the same song appears as the epigraph to the *Black Jacobins'* chapter that treats with the opening episodes of the proletarian Revolution: "Eh! Eh! Bomba, hen! Hen! Canga bafio te Canga de la Canga do ki la Canga li." Like most scholars, James depended primarily on Antoine Dalmas' seminal account of the Bois Caiman ceremony, *Histoire de la Revolution de Saint Domingue*, purportedly written in 1793, but first published in 1814. On the other hand, Dalmas had depended on the oral account of "an old black slave" who was a witness to the events of 1791.

All conventional accounts irrefutably identify Bois Caiman, nestled "in the thick forests of Morne Rouge," as the cradle of the Haitian Revolution. The dedicated space of the Vodun ceremony and its mountain environs conjure images of desolation, secrecy, totemism and mysticism. In retrospect, Morne Rouge was a surrealist setting for the twelve years of incubatory bloodletting that gave birth to independent Haiti.

Until recently, the conventional account of the Vodun ceremony at Bois Caiman was accepted uncritically. According to this account, Boukman, in true tradition of holy war, assumed the role of military commander of the insurgents as the final act of a sacrifice-cum-oath-taking ceremony attended by representatives of all the neighbouring estates on 14 or 21 August 1791. The earliest written account identified the sacrificial animal as "a black pig," and assigned anonymity to "the *nègres*" who "slit its throat" and drank its blood (Dubois 2006, 90). In later accounts Boukman sacrificed the pig to the Petro *Iwa* and drank its warm blood; immediately afterward, he proclaimed emancipation and declared war against the plantocracy. In other accounts, it is mambo Cecile, whom Fick (1991 4-5) describes as both "an old negress" and "a creole mulattress," that ritually slaughtered the pig while Ezili Danto, a Petro *Iwa*, possessed her; she then offered its blood to all the participants to partake. Interestingly, James' 1936 dramatization of the Haitian Revolution did not mention Boukman or the preparatory oath-taking ceremony. In his historical narrative, however, the war song sets the tone for the sacrifice; interestingly, he does not identify the killer of the pig; only that Boukman sucked its blood (James 1963, 87).

Historians have often quoted the “Voice of Liberty” speech put into Boukman’s mouth by Antoine Dalmas to demonstrate the ideological independence of the insurgents. The following translation comes from H. Pauleus Sannon’s *Histoire de Toussaint Louverture* (1920):

The god of the white man inspires him with crime, but our god calls upon us to do good works. Our god who is good to us orders us to revenge our wrongs. He will direct our arms and aid us. Throw away the symbol of the god of the whites who has caused us to weep, and listen to the voice of liberty, which speaks in the hearts of us all (Laguerre, 62).

This is the version that also appears in James’ *The Black Jacobins* (87). On that fateful day the new nation was born. This thinking is consistent with other anti-colonialist revolutions in the hemisphere. Boukman’s speech was at once a declaration of emancipation and political independence. Horner’s and Onstott’s version of the speech seems to convey this meaning. In the historical accounts the metrological background to the Bois Caiman ceremony of a raging thunderstorm accords perfectly with Ewe-Fon and Yoruba millenarian retribution. According their worldview, lightning is an agency of retribution that the priests of Heviosso or Shango, the gods of thunder, invoke to strike their enemies.

The true significance of Bois Caiman lies in its symbolism of the “gathering of ‘nations’ in the pursuit of freedom” (Dubois, 2001). It is also important to note that even if the details of the congress, including Boukman’s emancipation speech, belong to the realm of historical fiction, the situation is no different from the received accounts of some of the greatest episodes in world history. Francis J. Brooks (1995, 161) contends, for example, that the three great capitulatory speeches credited to Aztec Emperor Montezuma were “fabrications” put into his mouth by Hernando Cortes, the Spanish conquistador. The fabrications extended to many other aspects of the Conquest of Mexico, including the fatalism in white gods from across the seas (Brooks, 161; Townsend 2003, 659), but such constructions were consistent with epic encounters in history. As Brooks (161) affirms, “Putting elaborate speeches into the mouths of the *dramatis personae* not to report what they had said but to set down, what in the writer’s opinion ‘was called for by each situation’ had been customary since the days of Thucydides.” David Geggus (1991, 42) and Carolyn Fick allude to two separate gatherings of insurgents. Based on the testimony of white eyewitnesses, Geggus (1991, 45) establishes that the first meeting was not held in secret, even though it did incorporate a last-supper event; rather, the planters allowed the enslaved to attend the occasion (*repas*) that culminated in “*un grand diner*.” Such public display of subversive camouflage, however, was fairly widespread in plantation colonies (Ortiz 2001, 4-5; Naipaul 1969, 253-56).

Although Kongolese and other Bantu sub-groups vastly outnumbered all other African ethnicities in San Domingue, the Ewe-Fon cosmology was the dominant influence in the construction of Haitian Vodun. Most of the principal deities or *lwa* classified as Rada were of the Ewe-Fon pantheon; the names of the principal Vodun functionaries, including *houngan* or *bocor* (priest), *mambo* (priestess), and *hounsis* (consorts of the gods) were cognate with Ewe-Fon and the wider Kwa language bordering the Gulf of Guinea. The Yoruba-Fon matrix of deities of war, fire, lightning and technology, namely Ogun, Shango and Heviosso, were critical to the spiritual militancy of the insurgents and belong to the Rada pantheon. Notwithstanding the dominance of Ewe-Fon-Yoruba worldview, the most terrifying deities called Petro were associated with Kongo cosmology. Although sub-regions of San Domingue pursued their own

version of Vodun, by 1791, there was sufficient cross-fertilization to support the synodic convocation of Rada and Petro devotees sharing common belief in Gran-Mèt, the Supreme Being (Laguerre, 22).

### **Bois Caiman as literary fiction**

Marcus Wood (87) consigns *The Black Sun* to the genre of “plantation pornography,” an understudied field of study, but which has become “a huge business” that “has infiltrated literature, fine art, popular publishing, film video, and BDSM cultures on the Web.” Wood (87) also argues that Edgar Mettelholzer’s *Kaywana*, set in Guyana and written in the same year, belongs to the same genre. Accordingly, the aged Cécile was an unsuitable candidate for *The Black Sun*’s robust pornographic scenes. Accordingly, she was reincarnated in the young, curvy, seductive Topaze whose smooth, polished skin (Horner and Onstott 1968, 189-90) contrasts with the old mambo’s “strange eyes and bristly hair” (Fick 1991, 4). Their preference for human sacrifice was not a matter of co-authors’ literary license alone, because some historical accounts also suggest a human option (Pogue 2009, 131). Like Cécile, Topaze symbolises the triumph of womanhood and gender equality in the civil, religious, political and military spheres. Another deviation from the historical record is the placement of Toussaint, Henri Christophe and other key revolutionary leaders at the scene of Bois Caiman.

From the moment the participants came within range of the drums, they became spellbound to their “pulsing rhythm,” the rhythm of Petro, “the rhythm of the body, the steady rhythm of generation.” Against this background, Horner and Onstott attempt to endow the two pornographic scenes at the Bois Caiman congress with great solemnity. In some respect, the apparent solemnity merely serves as a mechanism of self-censorship in the making of a soft-core pornographic rating consistent with the public decencies of the 1960s. In the first pornographic sequence, there are subliminal and overt indications of homosexuality (not for the first time in the novel), rape and orgy.

The authors drive home the racist stereotyping of enslaved Africans as libidinous and licentious savages, reminiscent of Edward Long’s *History of Jamaica* (1774). Even the drums beat out a “primitive message...Their rhythm became sexual, erotic, orgiastic, bestial, a compelling command.” In obedience, “a Negro...reach[ed] for a woman, pull[ed] her violently to him, rip[ped] her single garment from her and cover[ed] her body with his. Another giant buck grabbed an adolescent youth by the shoulders and forced the boy to his knees in front of him...compelling him to yield to his demands.” The novelists ascribed such frenzy to the Petro *Iwa*. Captivated by the rising crescendo of the drums, “...men and women ground their bodies together, shrieking and groaning in mass ecstasy, until their tense bodies grew limp, lips became unlocked, and arms helpless” (187-88).

Horner and Onstott confer on Boukman the power of life and death. Boukman is appropriately dressed in red, the colour of Ogun-Shango, which is also the colour of Petro *Iwa*. Although the cosmic Ogun “eats” red cocks and red beans mixed with rice (Herskovits 1975, 316), Boukman enters the sacred space holding two black cocks, thus maintaining some consistency with the traditional sacrificial pig. Boukman ritually kills the first of two cocks, drinks its blood and scatters its feathers on the impaled body of the white youth whose “horrible shrieks” contrast sharply with the legendary stoicism with which Africans faced death by fire and other terrifying means at the hands of whites. Boukman then stretches the neck

of the second cock along the neck of the youth, takes a machete out of the fire and with the blade still glowing red, guillotines both in one stroke.

Patterson (1998, 182) asserts that like all rituals, sacrifice “involved drama, celebration, and play;” he adds, “The climax of the drama is the killing of the victim.” Taylor (98) tells us, “The loa are the chief actors in a ritual drama.” These two statements complement each other, since the *Iwa/loa* direct the drama after their incarnation in the bodies of the *serviteurs* (Taylor 1989, 98). According to Patterson, at the moment of killing the victim, “there was usually absolute quiet, often in stark contrast to the mirth and singing, even rowdiness, of preceding and later stages” (182). Horner’s and Onstott’s reconstruction of the Bois Caiman sacrifice reflects perfectly this ideal profile of sacrifice. Having killed the victim, Boukman commanded silence. “Even the drums stopped” (Horner & Onstott, 189). This was the moment for Topaze to take centre stage.

Here again Horner and Onstott carnalizes a profound spiritual experience into unmistakable pornography and cannibalism. Topaze picks up the severed head, holds it up high and drinks the dripping blood; she then begins to gnaw at the flesh, stripping it with her teeth. Stopping short of grotesque cannibalism, the authors make the drums rise to a crescendo, matched by Topaze’s “wild” dancing as the *Iwa* rides its mount. This is the cue for the climax of the pornographic display. “A young buck arose from the group near the fire and she motioned to him to come closer. He danced over to her, but she eluded him with sinuous motions, holding the mutilated head between them” (Horner & Onstott, 190). As Topaze halts, her body quivers from the *nyama* of possession and sexual desire. This is another cue for the dancing buck to shed his clothes with only the severed head of the youth separating the two naked bodies. The stud then takes the head and flings it into the fire for ritual consummation, while Topaze curses the symbol of her people’s oppression. Drawing mainly upon Old Testament accounts, Patterson affirms, “...the fire itself was important in itself, for it invariably symbolized the deity. As the victim was consumed by the flames, he was symbolically devoured by the god” (Horner & Onstott, 183).

Until Boukman addresses the delegates, Topaze is doubtlessly the central character of the drama. She was not just a mambo and serviteur but also a symbol of the indispensable role of the woman in revolutionary emancipation. This role is underscored by her dramatic act of “eating” the sacrificial food of the gods. Immediately after the head is flung into the flames, Boukman takes up the body and flings it into the arms of the highly aroused buck who offers it to Topaze as if she herself were the goddess of revenge. In response Topaze tears at it with her teeth and rakes the chest with her fingernails. The body is then cast into the fire as offering to the gods. The “young buck” now moves quickly to satisfy the throbbing body of the mambo: “...he grabbed Topaze, pressed her to him, bore her to the ground, and consummated the dance, his body heaving in rhythm with the drums until, exhausted, he fell on top of her” (190). The climax of the coitus was also announced with the dramatic silencing of the drums. It was time for Boukman to declare the emancipation of his people and the start of war.

Scholars invariably reproduce the received view of Boukman’s address as a prayer for guidance in the imminent struggle for freedom. In Horner’s and Onstott’s depiction, the address is unmistakably a declaration of emancipation. Boukman affirms, “Petro gods have consumed him with fire, and from his blood you have seen a new man conceived. This new man is you...and you, and you, and you,” pointing

at the devotees. Thus Boukman pronounced the first Emancipation proclamation in San Domingue, at least two years prior to the historic recognition given to Jacobin Commissioner Leger Sonthonax and thirty months before the decree of the French Convention. Boukman continued to elaborate his decree:

“Yes, all of you are new men, conceived from the blood of a white man. You have been torn from the womb of slavery and born again to freedom. The past is now dead and now you are free. Free! As you and your fathers were free in Guinea. You are free to become hunters again. You are free to have your compounds in the mountains and your villages in the plains. Strip yourselves of the false ways of the white man. Free Africans you were and free Africans you now are. Use that freedom and use it now. Become hunters. You have the power of death in your hands! You have the power of fire in your hands! Just as your fathers destroyed the villages of their enemies, destroy the whites. Send them to death and consume them with fire as you have seen me do tonight, and from their blood and ashes a new race will arise. A race of free Africans” (Horner & Onstott, 191).

Here was a man certain of his destiny. As James (1963, x) said of Toussaint L’Ouverture, “Great men make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make.” Boukman’s role was to launch the revolution. Although he fell in the first military clashes, he wrote his name into history with such authority that no study of the revolution could be complete without reference to him and his militarization of Voodoo, which provided a more profound unifying ideology than the French Declaration of Rights. Even from the historic account, Boukman clearly assumed a role larger than ordinary men. He was not simply a spirit medium in the ordinary sense of the word, but one worthy to be in the company of the gods themselves. According to Laguerre (1989, 62-63), having completed his address to the war party at Bois Caiman, he announced “that the loas had agreed to his plans.” If Toussaint “did not make the revolution” (James 1963, x), Boukman certainly did. The *lwa* did not instruct Boukman; rather, they ratified his plan, making him the ultimate master of the situation.

### **From Bois Caiman to the Plantations**

Voodoo remained the medium of revolution, inspiring leadership and loyalty (See James, 86). Although Boukman was killed early in the revolt, he was succeeded by able leaders who were primarily devotees of Vodun and depended on spiritual militancy and conjuration to consolidate their authority and galvanize their followers. Some War Chiefs, like Georges Biassou and Jean Francois Papillon, organized guerrilla bands which provided training for new leaders. George Simpson (1971) tells us that Biassou surrounded himself with “sorcerers.” His tent was filled with ritual objects. At nights naked women performed ritual possession dances. Unlike Horner’s and Onstott’s persistent descent into pornography, these were not scenes of lewdness; the female’s naked body was an invitation to the *lwa* to possess them, like bees drawn to the sweet fragrance of nectar. In the middle of the night, after these performances Biassou would emerge before his troops to the accompaniment of drumming and singing. Assuming the role of oracle he would inform his men of the divine message that all who died in battle would return to their homes in Africa. Without hesitation, he would lead them in a night charge against the enemy. Dessalines was also known to inspire fearlessness in his men by assuring them that dying in battle was a blessing. He claimed to be protected by many *lwa* including Petro, Ogun and Loco, all

deities of war, gunpowder and fire. His wearing of battle-red supports the claim that he was a devotee of Ogun-Shango (Taylor 1985, 116). Toussaint was a member of Biassou's band in the early days of the Revolution. Tradition designates him as *bokor* or medicine man, a trade handed down to him from his father (James 1963, 19). In African cultures medicine and magic were inseparable. Thus, it is highly plausible that Toussaint's *nom de guerre*, L'Ouverture, originated from his assimilation of the character and qualities of qualities of *Iwa* Legba, deity of the crossroads or gateway, the sacred spaces and symbols of power where deity and humans meet (Taylor 1985, 103). This does not take away from the conventional interpretation of Toussaint's martial ability in opening the ranks of the enemy, because that is precisely the military dimension of "opener of the gate."

The belief in spiritual protection against physical injury was strong among rebel leaders. Hyacinthe, a twenty-one year old insurgent, led his forces of 15,000 against English troops at Croix des Bouquets, waving a bull's tail, while shouting, "Forward, forward! The bullets are like dust." Halaou, another revolutionary leader, always carried a white cock under his arm, claiming that it transmitted messages from the gods. His guards carried the tails of bulls to turn aside bullets (Taylor 1989, 112). Rebel leader, Romaine la Prophetesse claimed to be a godchild of the Virgin Mary and that all his actions were orders of the Virgin. Despite the name, Romaine was a male figure. This crossing of the gender barrier in incarnation of the gods is an African phenomenon and is reminiscent of an older Kongolese Christianity rather than new colonial syncretism. In seventeenth-century Kongo a charismatic, revolutionary prophetess named Beatrice Kimpa Vita claimed to be a reincarnation of Saint Anthony with a mandate to bring peace to her fractious country. Jamaican revolutionary leader, Queen Nanny, personified Anansi, the spider god of the Asante (Marshall 2007, 53).

## **Conclusion**

The field of subaltern Caribbean history and anthropology had its beginnings in the works of scholars such as Fernando Ortiz, Melville Herskovits, and C. L. R. James. Even in these early works religion, combined with varied aspects of African esoterism, was little more than subtext, which would take on a much more critical function in the narrative of resistance to slavery only from the 1960s. To do justice to the extant evidence, however, knowledge of Africa's pre-colonial cosmology and esoterism is crucial. Often, it is the novelist that holds the key to unlocking their more profound meanings; of these literary griots the Caribbean has no shortage; the deficit is in the historian's exploration of their work. This essay has explored several strands of this historiography: cursory explorations of Africa's cosmological heritage which was preserved and reconstructed in ingenious ways by enslaved Africans for survival, cultural rebirth, general resistance and revolutionary emancipation. For this author, the catalyst for his research into the cosmological dimensions of revolutionary resistance was Bridget Brereton's excerpt on the topic in her *History of Modern Trinidad*; but it was mainly Onstott's and Horner's *The Black Sun* that opened the gateway to the legacy of African epistemology in revolutionary emancipationism.

## **References**

Abimbola, Wande. 1994. "Ifa: A West African Cosmological System". *Religion in Africa: Experience and Expression*. Edited by Thomas D. Blakey, Walter E.A. van Beek, and Dennis L. Thompson. London: James Currey.

- Asante, Molefi. 2000. *The Egyptian Philosophers: African Ancient Voices from Imhotep to Akenaten*. USA: African American Images.
- Brereton, Bridget. 1981. *History of Modern Trinidad*. London: Heinemann.
- . 2006. "Haiti and the Haitian Revolution in the Political Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Trinidad." In *Reinterpreting the Haitian Revolution and Its Cultural Aftershocks*. Edited by Martin Munro and Elizabeth Hackshaw-Walcott, 123-49. Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press.
- British Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 47, Slave Trade, No. 80, 1831-34. "Copy of the Report of a Committee of the House of Assembly of Jamaica, Appointed to Inquire into the Causes, and Injury Sustained by, the Recent Rebellion in that Colony; Together with the Examinations on Oath, Confessions and Other Documents Annexed to the Report."
- Brooks, Francis. J. 1995. "Motecuzoma Xocoyotl, Hernan Cortés, and Bernal Diaz del Castillo: The construction of an Arrest." In *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 75.2 (149-83). Accessed at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2517303>.
- Budge, E.A. Wallis. 1975. *Egyptian Religion: Ideas of the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt*. Avenel, NJ: Gramercy Books.
- Campbell, Mavis. 1988. *The Maroons of Jamaica 1665-1796: A History of Resistance, Collaboration & Betrayal*. Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey Publications.
- Davidson, Basil. 1980. *The African Slave Trade: a revised and expanded edition*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- De Verteuil, Anthony. 1981. *The Years Before*. Trinidad: Imprint Caribbean.
- Diouf, Sylviane A. 1998. *Servants of Allah: African Muslim enslaved in the Americas*. New York: New York University Press.
- Doumbia, Adama and Naomi Doumbia. 2004. *The Way of the Elders: West African spirituality and Tradition*. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications.
- Dubois, Laurent and John D. Garrigus. 2006. *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- . 2001. Vodou and History. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. Vol 83.1 (92-100).
- Elder, Jacob Delworth. 1966. "Evolution of the Traditional Calypso of Trinidad and Tobago: a socio-historical analysis of song-change." (PhD diss. University of Pennsylvania. University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan.
- Fick, Carolyn. 1991. "The Saint Domingue Slave Insurrection of 1791: A Socio-Political and Cultural Analysis." In *Journal of Caribbean History*. Vol 25 1&2 (1-40).

- Fraser, Lionel Mordaunt. 1891; 1971. *History of Trinidad*. London: Frank Cass.
- Fryer, Peter. 1984. *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*. London: Pluto Press.
- Gabriel, Richard A. *Gods of Our Fathers: The Memory of Egypt in Judaism and Christianity*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002.
- Gaspar, David Barry. 1985, *Bondsmen and Rebels A Study of Slave Relations in Antigua, with Implications for Colonial British America*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Geggus, David. 1991. "The Bois Caiman Ceremony." In *Journal of Caribbean History*. Vol 25 1&2. (41-57).
- Hart, Richard. 2002. *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery: Blacks in Rebellion*. 1985; repr. Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press.
- Herskovits, Melville, J. 1975. *Life in a Haitian Valley*. New York: Octagon Books.
- Hilton, Ann. 1982. *The Kingdom of Kongo*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Horner, Lance and Kyle Onstott. 1968. *The Black Sun*. London: Pan Books.
- Idika, Mba. 1983. "Osu." In *Traditional Religion in West Africa*. Edited by E.A. Ade Adegbola. Ibadan: Daystar Press (23-25).
- Inikori, Joseph. 1977. "The Import of Firearms into West Africa, a Quantitative Analysis." *The Journal of African History*. Vol. 18, no. 3 (339-49).
- James, C. L. R. 1963. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Laguerre, Michel S. 1989. *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti*. New York: St. Martin Press.
- Long, Edward. (1774); 1970. *History of Jamaica*, vol. 2. London: Frank Cass.
- Marshall, Emily Zobel. 2007. "Tracking Anancy." In *Caribbean Beat* vol. 88.
- Naipaul, V.S. 1969. *The Loss of El Dorado: a History*. London: Andre Deutsch.
- Olemoh Agnes. June-July 2010. Personal Interview.
- Ortiz, Fernando. "The Afro-Cuban Festival 'Day of the Kings.'" Trans. Jean Stubbs in Judith Bettelheim, ed. *Cuban Festivals: A Century of Afro-Cuban Culture* Jamaica: Ian Randle Publications, 2001.
- Patterson, Orlando. 1998. *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries*. Washington, D.C.: Civitas Counterpoint.

- Pogue, Tiffany, D. 2009. "Bois Caiman." In *Encyclopedia of African Religion*. Edited by Molefi Kete Asante & Ama Mazama. Thousands Oaks, California. SAGE. Accessed at [http://books.google.tt/books?id=B667ATiedQkC&pg=PT161&dq=boukman+dutty+in+twi&hl=en&ei=d-Q\\_Tt2GK4W-tgFR-7SIaw&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=5&ved=0CD4Q6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=bois%20caiman&f=false](http://books.google.tt/books?id=B667ATiedQkC&pg=PT161&dq=boukman+dutty+in+twi&hl=en&ei=d-Q_Tt2GK4W-tgFR-7SIaw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=5&ved=0CD4Q6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=bois%20caiman&f=false). 8/8/11.
- Rawick, George, P. P. 1977. Gen. Ed. "Introduction." In *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography. Vol. 6. The Mississippi Narratives, Part 1*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Rucker, Walter. "Conjure, Magic, and Power: The Influence of Afro-Atlantic Religious Practices on Slave resistance and Rebellion." *Journal of Black Studies* 32, no 1 (Sep. 2001): 84-103.
- Shaw, Rosalind. 2002. *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Simpson, George Eaton. 1971. *Peoples and Cultures of the Caribbean: an anthropological reader*. Edited by Michael M. Horowitz. New York: Natural History Press.
- Stewart, Robert. 1983. "Religion and Society in Jamaica, 1831-1880: Conflict, Compromise and the Christian Churches in a Post-Slave Colony." PhD diss. The University of the West Indies.
- Taylor, Patrick. 1989. *The Narrative of Liberation Perspectives on Afro-Caribbean Literature, Popular Culture and Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Thornton, John K. "The Development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1483-1750." In *Journal of African History* vol. 25 (147-67).
- . 1988. "On the Trail of Voodoo." In *The Americas*, vol. 44.1 (261-78).
- . 1983. *The Kingdom of Kongo: Civil War and Transition, 1641-1718*. Madison: Wisconsin University Press.
- Townsend, Camilla. 2003. "Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 108.3: (657-87). Accessed at <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/529592>>.
- Voeks, Robert. 1993. "African Medicine and Magic in the Americas." In *Geographic Review* vol. 83.1 (66-78).
- Wood, Marcus. 2002. *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography*. New York: Oxford University Press. Accessed at <<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=115317225>>.