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The Haitian Revolution: Survival and Resistance through Vodou Performance

In an inspiring speech honoring Mozambican Liberation Front leader Eduardo Mondlane, who Portuguese agents assassinated in 1969, Amilcar Cabral described the role of indigenous culture in national liberation movements. Cabral stated that foreign oppressors could not assert their political and economic domination over native people while letting them preserve their cultural identity. However, culture is a critical component of a people's history, and Cabral emphasized that the study of the history of national liberation struggles reveals that these struggles were preceded by an expansion of cultural expression that affirmed the artistic personality of the dominated people and rejected the oppressor culture. Cabral further argued that regardless of the economic, social, and political factors involved, it is through culture that we find the seed of opposition, which leads to the formation and evolution of the liberation movement (Cabral "National Liberation & Culture"). Cabral did not specifically cite the struggle of enslaved Africans and the role of indigenous culture during the successful overthrow of French colonists in Haiti beginning in the late 18th century in his speech. But this essay will inspirationally reveal that Vodou performance provided these enslaved people with the emotional resolve to challenge their oppressors and the organizational structure needed to successfully execute their inspiring rebellion while also highlighting how the stories of performance and revolution can seamlessly intertwine.

Due to a variety of factors, including the frustrated aspirations of the affranchis, the barbaric cruelty of slave owners, and inspiration from the French Revolution, enslaved Africans and their descendants successfully overthrew the French regime in Haiti and established an independent country after a series of conflicts between 1791 and 1804. The Haitian Revolution was a monumental achievement that secured black independence in the former French colony. A critical source of both inspiration and organization for this successful uprising came from the independence-oriented perspective expressed in the practice of West African Vodun, often referred to as Vodou in Western culture.

To appreciate the importance of Vodou, one must first understand the impact of slavery in Haiti. Professor Bayyinah Bello, a Haitian historian and distinguished humanitarian worker, noted that "Haiti's revolution did not begin in 1791. It began the day the first white person went to Africa and began to kidnap people in Africa" (Bello). Bello states that enslaved Africans fought their oppressors from the moment they were kidnapped until they earned their freedom following the Haitian Revolution.

The history of Vodou as a means of building a revolutionary culture seeking liberation can indeed be traced back to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, for it was through religion that enslaved Africans found the means to survive their horrific circumstances. Because their colonial slave owners sought to eradicate their culture and religion, the enslaved population needed to evolve their faith based on the restrictions of slavery. This evolution was no easy task, given that these enslaved people experienced multiple atrocities, including death, forced resettlement in a new territory, and the loss of their civil liberties. But while enslaved Africans were expected to conform to their new conditions, their religion allowed them to resist. And rather than adopting

the faith of their slave owners, the enslaved population instead adapted certain aspects of Christianity into their core values and beliefs, which they held sacred.

Vodou not only helped to free enslaved Africans from the psychological chains of slavery, but it also permitted them to see themselves as independent people. Importantly, the practice of Vodou gave these enslaved people a sense of human dignity. And while Vodou performance could not protect enslaved Africans from the physical cruelty that slave owners inflicted upon them, their joy came from their shared experience. Vodou helped ensure their emotional survival during this challenging period and facilitated a more homogeneous culture.

Additionally, Vodou was a catalyst for resistance and unity against the French colonists. Based on text from the historically accurate novel *The Kingdom of This World* by Alejo Carpentier, these colonists may have made the initial mistake of underestimating the cultural significance that Vodou performance had on the enslaved population: ". . . When he remembered this, he was filled with anxiety, realizing that under certain circumstances, a drum could mean more than just a goatskin spread tightly over a hollowed-out tree trunk. The slaves had a secret religion that encouraged and united them in their rebellions. They had kept up the practice of this religion under his own nose, perhaps for many years, speaking to one another with those holiday drums without him suspecting anything. How could a cultured person have been concerned about the savage beliefs of people who worshipped snakes?" (Carpentier 52).

Eventually, the colonists began to understand that Vodou performances may be planting the seeds of revolution. In his engaging book on the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James vividly illustrated this perspective: "But one does not need education or encouragement to cherish a dream of freedom. At their midnight celebrations of Voodoo, their African cult, they danced and sang, usually this favourite song . . . "We swear to destroy the

whites and all that they possess; let us die rather than fail to keep this vow." The colonists knew this song and tried to stamp it out, and the Voodoo cult with which it was linked . . . In vain" (James 18).

These inspiring stories from Carpentier and James align with the insights Professor Eric Selbin provided in his trailblazing book, *Revolution, Rebellion, Resistance - The Power of Story*. Selbin argued that to understand why some revolutions succeed while others fail, we need to look more closely at the stories the leading revolutionaries share with their fellow citizens. The author revealed that radical social change succeeds not due to social, economic, or political conditions alone. Indeed, the thoughts and feelings of people matter a great deal, whether they are the individuals who lead uprisings and tell stories of resistance or those who hear these stories and identify themselves as key contributors in a journey of social transformation (Selbin 6-7). Through Vodou, enslaved Africans could communicate their desire for liberation through performance and envision a day when their oppressors no longer dominated them.

While Vodou gave the enslaved population mental strength and courage to resist their oppressors, it also gave them an organization through which they could revolt. One example of the direct connection between Vodou rituals and organized resistance was the story of enslaved African runaway and rebel leader François Makandal, who became known as the "harbinger of revolution" in the mid-eighteenth century. Despite losing an arm in a sugar mill, Makandal eventually fled his plantation and became a leader of one of the fugitive enslaved communities known as maroons. Makandal was a known Vodou practitioner, and he used his network of enslaved Africans and maroons to poison plantation owners and animals. Colonial leaders feared that Makandal had both the willingness and ability to kill all white residents on the island, so they captured him and sentenced him to be burned at the stake in 1758. Makandal initially broke

free before being recaptured and burned. But Makandal's actions enhanced his status as an early revolutionary, and future generations wove his story into the cultural fabric of the Haitian Revolution.

An even more historically significant example of the connection between Vodou performance and revolution was the Bois Caiman ceremony in August of 1791. As stated previously, Vodou rituals were not only a social and religious gathering, for they also provided the opportunity to organize acts of resistance. Following months of planning involving two hundred leaders and a large community of enslaved Africans, the Haitian Revolution began with the Bois Caiman ceremony. Before taking action, the enslaved population reaffirmed their commitment through a Vodou performance officiated by the Vodou houngan Dutty Boukman that also included animal sacrifice. Later that evening, the enslaved Africans initiated their rebellion. Plantations would soon be set on fire in a coordinated fashion once the organizers gave the designated signal.

Vodou performance made critical contributions to the success of the Haitian Revolution and the establishment of a culture of liberation. Additionally, Vodou provided a means to cope with the atrocities of slavery, facilitate cultural unity, and provide an opportunity for enslaved Africans to gather socially and eventually launch the rebellion that would lead to their independence. Ultimately, Vodou united a large, disparate population in the colony to fight side by side against their colonial oppressors while demonstrating the powerful correlation between performance and revolution.

Near the end of his speech, Amilcar Cabral argued that indigenous people who seek to achieve independence and live in a free society must develop a national culture based upon the history and accomplishments of their struggle and must also incorporate their values. This

culture must also promote the spirit of sacrifice and devotion to the cause of independence, justice, and progress. The culture must include the society's achievements in the domains of art, science, and literature. In Cabral's mind, such a culture would promote feelings of humanism, solidarity, and respect for human beings (Cabral "National Liberation & Culture"). Vodou performance remained a critical component of the national culture of Haiti following the emancipation of former enslaved Africans. Vodou also represented many of the essential attributes Cabral described in his remarks. Notably, Vodou serves as an inspirational reminder of how performance and revolution can seamlessly integrate to tell a compelling narrative. Not surprisingly, Vodou is still a critical part of daily life for most contemporary Haitians despite being widely misunderstood throughout most of the world.

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