
Groundings

Tidalectics, Marasa, and *Istwa*

*Twa fè, twa rasin o
Jete bliye, ranmase sonje.*
(Three leaves, three roots, oh
Throw away to forget, pick up to remember.)
—Haitian Vodou song

It is relatively common knowledge that one of the initial acts of Gen. Jean-Jacques Dessalines as the first leader of the newly liberated nation of Hayti was to tear the white from the tricolor flag of the former French colonizer. The color blue in the original flag is believed to have represented Saint-Domingue's black inhabitants; red, the mulatto class; and white, the white population. The removal of the white strip symbolized not only the extrication of the colonial power but also the unification of the two subaltern groups.¹ While this story and explanation are commonly found in history books, there is a parallel "secret" history that is not so widely known. According to Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, the colors of that resultant flag transcend the profane and hold another parallel and equally important and sacred meaning for those who serve the spirits or *lwa* of the Haitian spiritual belief system, Vodou. That bi-color flag, found in most *ounfò* (inner sanctuaries) and *wogatwa* (personal and family altars) also bears the colors of the two *lwa* who were invoked most strongly during the Haitian Revolution: Ezili Dantò and Ogou Feray. The dark blue of Ezili Dantò "represents maternal love and collective welfare" while dark red, the color of Ogou Feray, invokes his "iron will necessary in warfare."² The prolific artist and *oungan* (Vodou priest) André Pierre also articulates the centrality of Ogou and Dantò to the nation's foundations when, in an interview

with Donald Cosentino, he “testifies” to the presence of Guinea spirits at Haiti’s birth, saying “Ogou returned with a red and blue flag. And the woman saint brought the Kongo packet. Ogou took away the white, and left a bi-color. He changed the country. He took the white away from the French flag. He said, ‘I am giving this land back to you, and I am coming home.’”³

Dessalines is the one that history records ripping the white from the French flag and declaring Haiti’s independence. However, as both Bellegarde-Smith’s and Pierre’s assertions attest, Dessalines was not alone as he stood before those who had fought hard to win their freedom. He was being ridden by the *lwa* Ogou, and it was he who made the pronouncement through his horse.⁴ Ezili Dantò was by his side, holding the *pakèt kongo* (kongo packet)⁵ that would heal the spiritually wounded warriors both above and below the earth, a healing that was facilitated by Danbala, *lwa* of the earth and sky, and Simbi, the *lwa* that straddles both worlds. But there was one other *lwa*, or rather, family of *lwa* who were present on the battlefield, showing up even if they were not purposely invoked or invited, just as they do in contemporary Vodou ceremonies: the Gede. As the *lwa* who preside over the domain of life and death, they moved among the men and women who fell under bayonets while fighting to create a new life for themselves and their progeny, some of whom were undoubtedly conceived on the battlefield. I agree with Leah Gordon’s suggestion that this less performative Gede than the one that manifests today “pervaded the struggle as the invisible army of the ancestors that mirrored the insurgents. The spirit manifested as the healer that stalked the injured on the battlefield, tending to his beloved flesh—be it torn, diseased, or rotting—and finally he was there laughing back at the enemy in the form of the bones and skulls kept as macabre souvenirs of victory by the rebel leaders.”⁶ In fact, it is appropriate that the Gede were there, for they signify rebirth in the midst of death. As Leslie Desmangles relates, “Gede, the master of Ginen, is lord not merely of death but of life as well. That is why Haitians often identify him with his regenerative rather than with his destructive powers. Even in his official capacity as lord of death, Vodouisants use such appellations for him as the Giver of Life and the ‘Rising Sun.’”⁷ Indicative of the balance that Vodou as a belief system based in nature strives for, Gede helped restore life in the midst of death, having a bit of fun in the process, as he is wont to do.

There is another aspect of Pierre's pronouncement that is equally intriguing: that is, that in Ogou taking the white from the flag, he declared that he was giving the land *back* to those who had fought to liberate themselves and coming "home." We may ask ourselves to whom was he speaking and to which home was he returning? Perhaps it was not only the African and African-descended people who were readily identifiable among the insurgents but also the Taíno, those who originally inhabited the land and who, in solidarity with African captives, fought to the death to liberate themselves and their land from the colonial oppressors. I would also suggest that the "home" to which Ogou refers is not limited to the geographical space of Ayiti, as the original inhabitants named the land, but the ancestral and spiritual homes of the diverse group of insurgents. Many of the enslaved originated from the West African region of Dahomey and the Central West African area of the Kôngo Kingdom. As such, "home" consists of the Old World and the New, both of which are physical and metaphysical sites of origin for contemporary Haiti.

In fact, we can trace the spirits that led the fight on the battlefield even further back than the revolution. They were there from the beginning in the belief systems of Ayiti's indigenous populations as well as with African captives on the middle-passage voyage. They were also constant companions in the enslaved person's life in Saint-Domingue when, as Madison Smartt Bell avers, "labor conditions . . . were so cruelly severe that the slave population could not reproduce itself. Premature death, suicide and infanticide were so common that an importation of some 200,000 slaves from Africa were deemed necessary between 1789 and 1791, simply to keep the work force stable. . . . In *Vodouisant* terms, the fact that so many people died on the ground meant that the reservoir of *Les Morts et Les Mystères* was brimful and unusually turbulent."⁸ Many of the enslaved Africans who arrived in Saint-Domingue during that period time came from the Kôngo, victims of the surge in wars that the transatlantic slave trade engendered. According to John K. Thornton, "The European beneficiaries of this great surge were French merchants who fixed their operations along the coast north of the Zaire River, but regularly visited the Kongo coast as well. In the 1780s, French ships carried a total of over 116,000 slaves from this coast, mostly to Saint Domingue, while their closest competitors, the English exported only 25,000."⁹ This means that many of those exported to Saint-Domingue during those years were also warriors and contributed

their military skills to the revolution that gave birth to the nation of Hayti. They also brought their spiritual belief systems across the water. Those who were already subjected to the colonial system not only joined in the physical world with those captives who arrived in later years but also in the spiritual realm, to create new systems of existence that recalled their former lives that also accounted for their new conditions of enslavement. This joining together resulted in the reservoir of “brimful and unusually turbulent” *Les Morts* and *Les Mystères* (the dead and their spirits) that Bell suggests populated the colony on the eve of the revolution.

The fate of *Les Morts* and *Les Mystères* has always been inextricably tied to those who serve them. I propose that, following the success of the revolution, they continued to manifest, speaking to the living through Dessalines’ secretary, Louis Félix Mathurin Boisrond-Tonnerre, who, on the eve of Haitian independence, famously pronounced, “To prepare the independence act, we need the skin of a white man for parchment, his skull for a desk, his blood for ink, and a bayonet for a pen.”¹⁰ Regarding Boisrond-Tonnerre’s speech, Sibylle Fischer argues that, “if slavery deprived people of color of their personhood and humanity, the declaration of Haitian independence reduces the slaveholders to an assemblage of exploitable body parts: bones, blood, skin”—again, the domain for the Gede.¹¹ She further remarks that while the Haitian declaration looks back to the colonial power in wresting writing away from the former master, the act of writing one’s own name—Hayti—reduces the former master to a bag of body parts.¹² Thus, in addition to the physical manifestations of the Gede’s domain found in “the bones and skulls kept as macabre souvenirs,” the turning of the slaveholders into “exploitable body parts” and the act of those formerly enslaved inscribing their names in effect rendered the former master impotent and the domain of the Gede.

Furthermore, in returning the name of the island nation to that bestowed by its original inhabitants, the new leaders symbolically cut Europe out of the island’s future, basing their rule on their memory and a celebration of a time before the Spanish invasion. It also looked forward to the writing of a “completely new script”—one where blacks would control their own destinies.¹³ In this dual conceptualization of the nascent nation, the new leaders reclaimed its distant past while simultaneously disavowing its recent history as a requisite for the imagining of a liberated future.

Vodou, History, and Memory

More than a religion, Vodou has been central to Haitian history from the first moments of the nation's inception. While the Haitian Revolution was in no sense a religious war, Sidney Mintz, in his introduction to Alfred Métraux's *Voodoo in Haiti* (1972) argued that Vodou played a critical role in, not only the resistance of the enslaved to their colonial masters but also other would-be colonizers who vied for control of the "immensely profitable colony."¹⁴ Furthermore, Jean Price-Mars' writing that "*1804 est issu du Vodou*" (Vodou is responsible for the revolution of 1804) also reflects the impossibility of disentangling Vodou from the sociopolitical history of the country.¹⁵ Finally, the spiritual underpinnings of Haiti's history and destiny are also made clear in Bellegarde-Smith's assertion that "the engagement of Vodou in Haitian temporal affairs and history has been constant [with] the many revolts of the enslaved [being] efforts toward freedom and liberation writ large, from within an ethos that, at the outset had incorporated similar elements from diverse African"¹⁶—and I would add, indigenous—ethnicities. This intimate relationship between the revolutionaries' spiritual beliefs and their commitment to the liberation struggle to which these scholars refer is evidenced in the story about the flag that Dessalines created while declaring Haiti's independence. Cosentino highlights this relationship when he calls Vodou Haiti's secret history.¹⁷

Taking up M. Jacqui Alexander's proposition that cosmological systems house memory, and that "such memory [is] necessary to distill the psychic trauma produced under the grotesque conditions of slavery," this text seeks to explore intersections between history (even as it is unfolding), memory, and cultural production in Haiti vis-à-vis its secret history.¹⁸ It is conceptualized through three theoretical "anchors": tidalectics, a term coined by Jamaican poet and historian Kamau Brathwaite that is inspired by the ebb and flow of the ocean's waves; the Marasa or Sacred Twins, principal *lwa* that are often saluted at the beginning of Vodou ceremonies after Papa Legba, Master of the Crossroads; and *istwa*, a Haitian Kreyòl term encompassing both history and story and facilitated by memory.¹⁹ The text looks to Africa—more specifically, Dahomey (present-day Benin Republic) and the Kôngo—for historical and cultural "blueprints," in the words of Carole Boyce Davies, as twin influences on Haitian cultural production. But because culture is alive and fluid as those who produce it draw from a multitude of influences including time and space, I propose

that beyond blueprints as antecedent, the dialogical relationship between Africa and its diaspora persists and is thus also continually expressed as it evolves.

I am indebted to many scholars on both sides of the water who have investigated the intersections of memory and history with regard to Africa's fraught relationship with its diaspora as a result of the transatlantic slave trade.²⁰ Many texts from the diaspora perform a task similar to the one that I undertake here. These include full autobiographical and biographical narratives and, more recently, collected testimonies.²¹ Other written narratives—fictions, as it were—while not empirically verifiable, offer an important lens through which to view the slave trade and slavery and their impact on the lives of those who were exiled.²²

Several scholars have contributed to my thinking through this project. They include those who have explored historical African and African diasporic identity formation in multiple ways and through diverse lenses.²³ Some have focused on religious traditions and belief systems within the context of sociopolitical realities.²⁴ Others have lent their expertise in art history to explore processes of retention and transformation in the black Atlantic through material culture.²⁵ Some recent scholarship looks to specifically literary and aesthetic manifestations of memory.²⁶ We will note that many of these studies are edited volumes, signaling the need for a collective approach to the work of healing across both physical and spiritual waters. In my own exploration of history, memory, and Haiti's cultural production, the reader will find the scholarship of M. Jacqui Alexander, Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, LeGrace Benson, Karen McCarthy Brown, Claudine Michel, Leslie Desmangles, Donald Cosentino, Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique, and Joan (Colin) Dayan, to name a few, woven throughout the text. These scholars have contributed a great deal to the field of Atlantic World Studies from rich and constructive points of entry—from the historical to the visual to the anthropological in their work on Vodou's role in world history as well as contemporary reality. It is on their shoulders that I stand as I attempt to bring into relief some of the concepts that they introduce and expand upon in their work. I build on their scholarship from an interdisciplinary perspective that relies heavily on the oral and material culture that emerges from primarily Dahomey / Benin Republic, the Kôngo, and Saint-Domingue/Haiti. As such, I explore how oral and material culture from both sides of the water reflect and comment on history while facilitating memory with the ultimate goal

of restoring the balance that Vodou strives for and that I propose would facilitate the individual and collective healing that would result from that restored equilibrium.

I conceive of the traditions that emanate from the three geographical sites as engaging in what Benson characterizes as a “Long Conversation.”²⁷ However, where Benson conceives of this conversation as taking place between Haiti and her two motherlands, Africa and Europe, I conceive of the Long Conversation as one that takes place among two of Haiti’s other many motherlands, Dahomey and the Kôngo.²⁸ This Long Conversation began centuries ago and continues into the contemporary moment, constantly evolving as the conditions of Africa and its diaspora evolves. As Benson avers, “The Long Conversations are the communications aspect of an elaborate ecosystem, always in process, where giver and recipient constantly modify and modulate.”²⁹ I read this Long Conversation from within the belief systems of the populations about which I write.³⁰ I do so based on my understanding that, whatever earthly preoccupations may motivate the oral and visual art that I discuss herein, there are otherworldly forces that guide and manifest their will through their human charges and are illuminated in cultural production. My project seeks to tease out evidence of those otherworldly influences by privileging the cultural production of those who either lived or had access to these histories. Thus, I deploy history to support the stories—both oral and visual—that people express rather than the other way around.³¹

I conceive of the three—history, memory, and cultural production—as working in tandem, as a relationship that is echoed in my theoretical anchors—tidalectics, Marasa, and *istwa*. These two sites—one of inquiry (history, memory, and cultural production) and the other, theory (tidalectics, Marasa, and *istwa*)—are in turn manifest in both the Old World sites of Dahomey and the Kôngo and in the New World context of Haiti, forming a historical and cultural triad.

Vodou, the *lwa*, and the work of *sèvitè*, those who serve the *lwa*, wind their way throughout the text precisely because, as Desmangles notes, Vodou, as the folk religion of the country, “pervades the framework of Haitian culture.”³² The spiritual belief system “is an expression of people’s longing for meaning and purpose in their lives.”³³ But more than that, it is, as Joan Dayan, postulates, “thought thinking itself through history.”³⁴ Thus, the historical function of Vodou as the project of thought makes its presence known in and through historical practices and the stories