

Historicizing African Contributions to the Emancipation Movement: The Haitian Revolution, 1791-1805

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Abstract

The Haitian Revolution was the first incidence of mass emancipation in a colonial society and the only slave revolt that resulted in the formation of a modern state. However, existing canonical works on this revolution have largely concentrated on providing a central symbiotic relationship between the slave revolt and the broader changes in the Atlantic World during the 18th century. It has even been widely assumed that the Haitian Revolution was intellectually inspired by Western cultural values. Indeed, the Yoruba slave, Dutty Boukman, who ignited the revolution has been reduced to a mere footnote in the body of the prevailing Western-biased Haitian hegemonic historiography. This paper argues that the revolution, which was historically rooted in a legendary Yoruba tradition that abhors injustice, corruption and oppression, represents the very best of Yoruba's cultural attainment in the Diaspora. The study further 'resurrects' the monumental contributions of Dutty Bookman to the outbreak of the revolution and underscores the fact that the Yoruba god of *Ogun* was the most portent rallying force that drove the revolution. Thus, the paper situates the cultural roots of the Haitian Revolution in its proper historical perspective and challenges one of the prevailing stereotypes about the "meagre" contributions of enslaved Africans to the emancipation of African slaves. The study, therefore, represents a major revision of the current historiography on the emancipation movement, and further highlights the methodological challenges of reconstructing the history of the slave trade in the Diaspora.

Introduction

The Haitian Revolution was a unique case in the history of humanity. Indeed, it remains one of the most remarkable revolutions in the history of the modern world. It involved the establishment of a new nation by exploited slaves who successfully liberated themselves and radically and permanently transformed their society. The new state became the second independent state in the Americas, and the revolution was the first anti-colonial racial war, the first incidence of mass emancipation in a colonial society and the only slave revolt that eventually culminated in a modern state.¹ The Haitian model of

state formation drove xenophobic fear into the hearts of all Whites from Boston to Buenos Aires and shattered their complacency about the unquestioned superiority of their own political models.²

It is, therefore, not surprising that the literature on the Haitian slave revolt is so extensive to the extent that this fundamental historical phenomenon continues to attract considerable scholarly interests and debates.³ However, existing canonical works on the Haitian Revolution have concentrated largely on providing a central symbiotic relationship between the Haitian slave revolt and the broader changes of the Atlantic World during the eighteenth century, particularly the forces unleashed by the 1789 French Revolution, the Enlightenment which advocated a rational basis for re-organising, state, society and nation, the political independence of the United States between 1776 and 1783 as well as the efforts of the abolition movements in Britain, the United States and in France under the auspices of the French Antislavery Committee (*Societe des Amis des Noirs*).⁴

There is no doubt that these are historical facts but it appears that the impression being created is that the Haitian slave revolt was exclusively influenced and was a direct fallout of the cultural values and political vicissitudes of Western civilisation. Franklin Knight in his insightful work did not mince words in reiterating this fact, “The victory of the slaves in 1793 was, ironically, a victory for colonialism and the revolution in France.”⁵ More worrisome is the fact that one of the most important leaders of the revolution, the Yoruba slave, Dutty Boukman, who ignited the Haitian Revolution has been reduced to a mere footnote in the body of the prevailing Western-biased Haitian hegemonic historiography. Indeed, attempts have even been made to cast doubt on the

historical validity of the widespread view that Dutty Bookman actually started the revolution during a religious ceremony at a place called Bois Caiman in modern day Haiti.⁶ Though, Carolyn Fick tacitly underscores the organisational abilities of the major protagonists of the revolution, she however, fails to do justice to the remarkable contributions of Dutty Boukman. Her exact words:

It can be argued therefore that the abolition of slavery in Saint Domingue resulted from a combination of mutually reinforcing factors that fell into place at a particular historical juncture. No single factor or even combination of factors-including the beginning of the French Revolution with its catalytic ideology of equality and liberty, the colonial revolt of the planters and the free coloreds, the context of imperial warfare, and the obtrusive role of a revolutionary abolitionist as civil commissioner-warranted the termination of slavery in Saint Dominigue in the absence of independent, militarily organized slave rebellion.⁷

Another major drawback of the current canons of the Haitian Revolution is the reluctance to locate the larger cultural significance, typicality and centrality of the Yoruba gods of *Sango* (the god of thunder) and *Ogun* (god of iron and war) to the eventual success of the Haitian slave revolt.⁸

It is against this backdrop that this paper sets out to achieve three major objectives. First, it intends to situate the cultural roots of the Haitian Revolution in proper historical perspective by arguing that the revolution represents the very best of Yoruba's cultural attainment in the Diaspora and that the course and success of the revolution were deeply rooted in a legendary Yoruba tradition that abhors injustice, corruption and oppression. Interestingly, about the period of the Haitian Revolution, similar revolutionary tendencies aimed at curbing dictatorship, imperial ambitions and emphasising the dignity of the human person were sweeping across Yorubaland.⁹ Second, the paper aims at 'resurrecting' the monumental contributions and significance

of the Dutty Bookman Rebellion to the success of the Haitian Revolution. Third, the paper underscores the fact that the most portent rallying force that drove the Haitian Revolution was the Yoruba god of *Ogun*. In fact, it is an acknowledged fact that:

Throughout the history of the human race, even up till the present moment, one of the most portent forces which men use to rally oppressed peoples together, in their drive towards freedom and emancipation from their oppression is religion...¹⁰

Theoretical foundations

Given its research objectives, this present work considers three theoretical frameworks as appropriate paradigms for a thorough understanding and appreciation of the cultural dynamics of the Haitian Revolution. The first is the genetic model of comparative inquiry. A genetic approach involves an attempt to increase our understanding of Yoruba slaves in pre-revolutionary Haitian society through the investigation of what they share in common with the larger Yoruba nation with which they are genetically related through lines of descent. Institutional and cultural similarities often rest on the fact that one society descended from the other or that both had a common ancestor from whom each had acquired some traits.¹¹ The second analytical paradigm is the theory of theosophical intervention.¹² This theory emphasises the fact the Haitian slaves were successfully mobilised with a rallying cry through and an appeal to a deity (*Ogun*) which had its origin in the subconscious of the slaves; for deliverance from slavery, servitude and oppression. Human history is replete with examples of this recourse to supernatural intervention by oppressed and disenfranchised people. The third paradigm is the theory of heroic determinism, this theory advances the fact that the quality of statesmanship at any given point in time has the innate tendency to shape the destiny of any nation.¹³ This theory supports the fact that the success of the Haitian slave

revolt is largely predicated on the outstanding organisational abilities and commendable leadership skills displayed by the leaders of the revolution. One of these leaders was Dutty Boukman who was the first leader of the African slave rebellion, which eventually led to freedom for the oppressed peoples of Haiti.

The Yoruba and their Homelands

The Yoruba are one of the most researched ethnic groups in Africa. By 1976, the available literature on the Yoruba despite many omissions numbered 3,488 items. This vast amount of work is quite substantial and unrivalled in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁴ The Yoruba country lies roughly between latitudes 6⁰ and 9⁰ N and longitudes 2⁰ 30' and 6⁰ 30' East. Its area is about 181,300sq kilometres. This area spreads from the present Edo state of Nigeria, across the Republic of Benin and Togo.¹⁵ Large concentrations of the Yoruba are also found in such places as Sierra Leone, Gambia and across the Atlantic, as far as the Caribbean, West Indies and the Americas especially in Brazil, Cuba and Haiti. Worldwide it is estimated that they have a population of over forty million. The Yoruba comprise a number of sub-ethnic groups. In Nigeria, some of these include the Oyo, Ibarapa, Ife, Ijesa, Igbomina, Egba, Egbado, Awori, Egun, Ijebu, Ekiti, Ilaje, Ikale, Owo, Akoko, Ondo, Yagba, e.t.c. In Benin and Togo, we have the Ife, Isa, Idaisa, Ajase, Ketu, Sabe and “Anago” as the major Yoruba sub-ethnic groups.¹⁶

In Brazil and Cuba the major Yoruba sub-groups are known as Nago and Lucumi respectively.¹⁷ The Yoruba speak a standard Yoruba language that is mutually intelligible to all the sub-groups. This is despite the fact that the Yoruba language has many dialectal variants peculiar to the various Yoruba sub-groups. The historical consciousness of the Yoruba started at Ile-Ife, the cradle of the Yoruba race and civilization. The Yoruba claim

descent from Oduduwa, a deified personality and the acclaimed progenitor of the Yoruba people. A basic element in the crystallisation of the salient aspects of Yoruba civilization is the fact that virtually all the indigenous inhabitants of Yorubaland belonged to the same linguistic stock. In fact, it is generally agreed that language is the basic element of Yoruba civilisation. It seems that the period of the emergence of the Yoruba as a distinct people coincided with the late Stone Age in West African history.¹⁸

Following the development of agriculture, the process of state formation began in Yorubaland with the emergence of village settlements.¹⁹ Before the nineteenth century, the Yoruba lived for many years in separate autonomous kingdoms. In the central region, there was a number of centralised states, notably Oyo, Owu, Ijebu, Ketu, Sabe, Ife, Ijesha, Ondo, and Owo with Oyo being the most powerful until its eventual collapse during the nineteenth century.²⁰ It is a fact that the Yoruba remain one of the most urbanised ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa.²¹

The fall of Oyo and the attendant military and political crises that plagued Yorubaland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries affected the fortunes of many of these kingdoms.²² This period also witnessed the forced migration of millions of Yoruba men and women to the New World.²³ Despite the century long disturbances, turbulence and revolutionary developments, the basic culture and civilisation which the Yoruba have built endured and in fact political, economic, religious and intellectual development were promoted. The Yoruba developed a highly sophisticated system of government with effective checks and balances, which was spiced with a high level of gender consciousness. A nineteenth century white American missionary, William H. Clarke has this to say about the Yoruba system of government:

The highest excellence of the best government among white people consists in constitutional checks or limits to prevent abuses of powers. Strange as it may seem...the Yoruba people had studied out this balance of power and reduced it to practice, long before our fathers settled in America before the barons of England had extorted the great charter (the Magna) from King John.²⁴

Yoruba Influence in the Diaspora

Of the Africans forcibly removed to the Americas and the Caribbean Islands during the Atlantic slave trade, the Yoruba seemed to have been the most widely scattered. At the beginning of the slave trade the Yoruba were among the largest number of Africans were taken from West Africa.²⁵ Scholars have investigated the diffusion of Yoruba culture in the Diaspora and how it has endured in these societies. The influence of Yoruba culture is so pervasive in Latin America and the Caribbean that Anani Dzidzienyo equated the totality of the way of life of peoples of African descent in the diaspora with Yoruba civilization. To him “africanity” is the same thing as “yorubaism” both terms meaning “the African way of life.”²⁶ Arthur Ramos opines that the Yoruba seem to have a superior culture and that this explains why Yoruba culture played a dominant role in the African influence in Brazil and the Caribbean. In fact most of the religious patterns and traits among Black people in the Americas as in other parts of West Africa seem to be Yoruba derived. This is as a result of the resilience and dynamism of Yoruba culture. Bascom sums it up when he asserts that “No African group has had greater influence on the New World culture than the Yoruba.”²⁷

Two major trends are consistent and easily discernible in Yoruba history and culture. These are organisation and adaptability under adverse conditions. Yoruba culture away from home sustains itself and adapts to other culture more than any other culture. J.H. Clarke rightly asserts that Yoruba culture acted as a catalyst that set many of the

slave revolts in motion in the Americas and the Caribbean Islands and the cohesive force that held them together.²⁸ The most prominent of these slave revolts were at Os Palmares in Brazil, 1630-1697. Guyana in 1763, Suriname, 1715-1863 and most importantly Haiti, 1791-1805. In Bahia, the former capital of Brazil, the Yoruba helped to create an African state by force of numbers while at Os Palmares an African state was created by force of revolution. This experience endured for more than 500 years and was unparalleled in the annals of Brazilian history.²⁹ The slave revolt in Suriname threatened the very foundations of the economy based on slavery. In fact, semi-independent African communities were established in the hills of Jamaica. Some of them still exist up to this day.³⁰ Mention should also be made of Luiz Gama, the son of a (Nago) Yoruba woman in the city of Salvador capital of Bahia province in Brazil. He was referred to as the “real precursor” of the abolition campaign in Brazil. He was not only a prolific writer but also a brilliant lawyer who relentlessly “promoted the trials of free people who were criminally enslaved even to the point of illegally assisting in slaves escapes.”³¹ In the book by Arthur Ramos, *The Negro in Brazil* published in 1939, it is stated that the slave revolt as Palmaras, was, “the first great epic of the African in this country.”³² In this revolt Yoruba participation was wide spread and well recorded.

Thus, it was the culture and religion of Yoruba slaves that formed the philosophical organisational frameworks of the slave revolts in the Americas and Caribbean Islands most especially the Haitian slave revolts which happened to be the most successful slave revolt in recorded history. This revolution has been described as the greatest achievement of Yoruba away from home.³³ The Yoruba slaves were spoken of as being “tall, robust, courageous and hard-working. Better tempered than the others and

noted for intelligence. J.H. Clarke opines that Yoruba slaves, their culture and their religion formed the organisational basis of the slave revolts in the Americas and in the Caribbean Islands all of which served as veritable dress rehearsals for the most successful slave revolt in history-the revolt of the slaves on the plantations of Haiti. Perhaps it is plausible to establish a powerful correlation between the political activism and revolutionary tendencies of the Yoruba in Diaspora with the pace setting roles of their kith and kin in Yorubaland especially with regard to their legendary role in championing the cause of democracy, justice, fairplay and equity. It shows that the blood of resistance runs through the veins of every son and daughter of Oduduwa.³⁴

The Haitian Revolution: A Yoruba Cultural Legacy

The influence of Yoruba culture on the outbreak, course and success of the Haitian Revolution is most discernible in two major areas. These are mainly in the realm of leadership as well as the philosophical and religious foundations of the revolution. A slave named, Makandal, was the first to conceive of a plan to liquidate the entire white population of the island. After Makandal came Dutty Boukmon, a Yoruba slave from the Egun sub-ethnic group in modern Benin Republic. He was captured, enslaved and shipped off to the West Indies as a young man already versed in the esoteric knowledge and nuances of his religion, the worship of Voodoo. A man of imposing stature and granite features; Boukman was tall and huge. He was first sold into slavery on the sugar plantations of Jamaica, but later found his way to Hispaniola, where he joined the bands of Maroons.³⁵ Boukman's approach was different in technique because he studied the colonial policy for the right moment to revolt. His initial plan was to create panic by burning down houses in different areas where colonists resided. The panic was a

diversion to remain in control. Boukman will be remembered as an enslaved African male who did not only use his physical force but his intellect was an important element in the revolt.³⁶

Boukman used religion and culture to organize virtually all the Yoruba slaves on the plantations. He had his greatest success with newly arrived slaves who had not adjusted to the slave condition. Soon he had an island-wide movement against slavery.³⁷ This great revolutionary leader successfully used Voodoo to make Haiti the first black republic in the world and the second nation to achieve independence in the Western hemisphere and to make the Haitian revolution the first social revolution in the Third World. The Haitian revolution changed many factors including the situation of enslavement and introduced religion as a form of escape from reality. According to Laguerre, "Voodoo evolved as a political-religious phenomenon and served, during the Haitian revolution, as a vehicle for the expression of a separatist political ideology."³⁸ Voodoo gave the enslaved community a belief or hope of victory over their state of enslavement. This faith and hope reinforced their determination for action.

The historical deliverance of Black African slaves of Haiti from French colonial servitude was in no small measure aided by an appeal for help to the well-known Yoruba deity particularly *Ogun*, the god of iron and war. In Egun dialect of Yoruba language, Voodoo can be translated as Almighty God, the Overall Supreme Deity. *Ogun*, the god of iron and war, is regarded as man's ultimate mediator with Voodoo in times of civil conflict and war. Therefore, Boukman's appeal to Voodoo through *Ogun* to come to the aid of the African slaves in their time of distress was very appropriate.³⁹ The dedication of all those present at the ceremony to the god of war was also timely; because the

beginning of the slave rebellion in August 1791 coincided with the annual festival of worship of this fearsome deity. It was at the beginning of the season of heavy rains. As thunder rumbled and lightning tore through the skies, as if in affirmation of the presence of *Sango*, the Yoruba god of thunder, men and women danced convulsively to the scintillating sounds of Yoruba *Bata* drums and chanting of sacred songs.⁴⁰

Boukman made a great speech which so fired up his listeners that they made a blood pact to execute Boukman's orders: to break their chains or die. During the service, spectators claimed that a slave woman became possessed by the warrior spirit *Ogun*, who represents the seemingly masculine aspects of society in Voodoo, including warfare, politics, fire, lightning, thunder, iron, and metal working (*Voodoo Loa*). After sacrificing a black pig, the woman spoke under the voice of *Ogun* and listed those who would lead Saint Domingue to independence: Boukman, Biassou, Jeannot, Toussaint, and Jean François. Consequently, Yoruba culture, especially the Yoruba god *Ogun* became the cohesive force and the communication system that helped to set in motion the Haitian Revolution.⁴¹ Thus, began the great 13 year struggle which culminated in the independence of the first black nation in the world.

At the end of the ceremony on that fateful day in Bois Caiman in August 1791, erstwhile timid men and women went forth, emboldened by the assurance that Voodoo through his messenger *Ogun*, would lead them to victory over their oppressors. The oath of vengeance taken by these oppressed men and women would later translate to massive destruction of lives and properties of their slave masters. Soon after the revolt began, Boukman was taken and beheaded by the French authorities. The French then publicly displayed Boukman's head in an attempt to dispel the aura of invincibility that Boukman

had cultivated. The attempt failed and Boukman was eventually admitted into the pantheon of *loa* (Voodoo spirits).⁴²

Dutty Boukman, therefore, deserves the honour as the first leader of the African slave rebellion which eventually led to freedom for the oppressed peoples of Saint Domingue, and the birth of Haiti as the first autonomous Black Republic in the World. Those who took over the mantle of leadership of the African slaves of Saint Domingue from Dutty Boukman, after he was captured and beheaded by the French colonists, such as Cecile Fatiman, Georges Biassou, Jeannot Bullet and Jean François Papillon, were all present at the now unforgettable and landmark dedication ceremony to *Ogun* at Bois Caiman on August 14, 1791. They all became the new leaders of the Haitian Revolution.⁴³

In present day Haiti, the memory of Dutty Boukman is highly venerated as the first leader of the Haitian Revolution. Bois Caiman is now a Haitian national heritage site where all devotees of the ancient African religion, now corrupted as Voodoo, gather to pay homage to *Ogun*, and the memory of Dutty Boukman. Indeed, it is now becoming widely accepted that the religious ceremony to the Yoruba deity of war, *Ogun*, at Bois Caiman on August 14, 1791, was the starting point for the Haitian Revolution.

Conclusion

This paper examines the historical origin as well as the social dynamics of the 1791-1805 Haitian Revolution, and argues that it was the culture and religion of Yoruba slaves that formed the philosophical backbone, and provided the leadership and organisational frameworks of the Haitian slave revolt. Indeed, this revolution happened to

be the most successful slave revolt in recorded history. The revolution has even been fittingly described as the greatest achievement of the Yoruba away from home. Thus, the paper situates the origin and ethnic identity of the major protagonists of the Haitian Revolution in proper historical perspective.

The Haitian Revolution rubbished all slave societies. Antislavery movements grew stronger and bolder, especially in Great Britain, and the colonial slaves themselves became increasingly more restless. In the Caribbean, Whites lost the confidence that they had before 1789 to maintain the slave system indefinitely. Most of all, the revolution deeply affected the psychology of the Whites throughout the Atlantic world. Undoubtedly, the Haitian Revolution accentuated the sensitivity to race and status across the Caribbean.⁴⁵

The contributions of Yoruba slaves to the demise of slavery in the Caribbean as enunciated in this piece represent a major revision of current historiography on the abolition movement; a historiography that is tilted mainly in favour of the activities of Europeans and Americans. This paper, therefore, challenges one of the prevailing stereotypes about the “meagre” contributions of enslaved Africans to the abolition of the slave trade. The conclusion is that whereas Britain only officially pioneered the abolition in 1807, prominent Yoruba slaves in Latin America and the Caribbean had been involved in the abolition struggle since 1630 at Os Palmares, 1763 in Guyana, 1715 in Suriname and most significantly, 1791 in Haiti.⁴⁶

The paper further tries to show that the Yoruba are heirs to an ancient and cultured civilisation. This culture is known for its artistic triumphs, extraordinary oral

literature, complex pantheon of gods and an urban lifestyle. The Yoruba have also created sophisticated institutions of government. The Yoruba cultural impact is so great not only in Nigeria but also in modern Haiti, Brazil, Cuba and the Americas where their religion and culture have remained pervasive.⁴⁷ This remarkable cultural triumph makes the Yoruba experience one of the most fascinating subjects of historical study in the world.

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