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# The King, a Queen, and an Oath Sealed in Blood: A Cultural Re-Evaluation of the Bois-Caiman Ceremony and its Impact on the Early Haitian Revolution

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The King, a Queen, and an Oath Sealed by Blood: A Cultural Re-Evaluation of the Bois-Caiman Ceremony and its Impact on the Early Haitian Revolution.

by

Sean D. Anderson

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

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in

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The King, a Queen, and an Oath Sealed by Blood: A Cultural Re-Evaluation of the Bois-Caiman Ceremony and its Impact on the Early Haitian Revolution.

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## ABSTRACT

Historical studies have set up a paradox where religious practices are discussed as socially important to enslaved people while simultaneously are described as peripheral to the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution. Yet at the heart of the lead up to the 1791 insurgency was an Afro-Caribbean religious event called the Bois-Caiman ceremony. The timing of that ceremony in conjunction with a cultural analysis of its religious leadership and its religious practices, primarily dance and blood-oath, lead to a reading of the sources that stresses that religion played a more central role to the insurgency than previously argued. By employing recent anthropological methodologies and insights about the active role of culture in slave life, this study finds that the religious practices of enslaved people in Saint-Domingue were necessary to the organization and mobilization of the 1791 insurgency. The Bois-Caiman ceremony was a crucial moment in the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution.

## Introduction

One of the earliest and most complete accounts of insurgent life in Saint-Domingue is the account penned by M. Gros, a white attorney syndic of Valiere, who was captured by insurgents on October 26, 1791, two months after the start of the uprising.<sup>1</sup> In that account, Gros mused over what he thought were the causes of the insurrection. He blamed the uprising on a royalist plot led by General Blanchelande. Gros linked that plot to “the promises of the King again, who had granted them [the black insurgents] three days in the week” of free time. In addition to the rumor of three rest days a week, Gros revealed another reason for rebellion in his account. He wrote that the insurgents were stirred up by “the cause of religion, which appears to animate them when they reproached us with the destruction of the clergy.”<sup>2</sup> By blaming religion and the King, Gros captured the complexity of insurgents' motivations, while he simultaneously painted a picture of the insurgency that attributed the causes of the rebellion to the leaders of the Old Regime rather than originating within the ranks of the black insurgents.

Of the two causes given by Gros, there has been little argument in the historical scholarship over the political importance to the insurgency of the “three days a week” rumor.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, scholars are often left divided over Gros's second reason for rebellion: “the cause of religion.” That cause, in Gros's account, partially involved

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- 1 Gros, *An Historick Recital, of the Different Occurrences in the Camps of Grande-Riviere, Dondon, Sainte-Suzanne, and others, from the 26<sup>th</sup> of October, 1791, to the 24<sup>th</sup> of December, of the same year: By M. Gros, attorney syndic of Valiere, taken Prisoner by Johnny* (Baltimore: Samuel & John Adams, 1793) in *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Revolution*, edited by Jeremy D. Popkin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), chapter 6. Popkin provides a transcript of most of the English account, which was an expanded version of the French account published one year prior.
  - 2 Gros, “An Historick Recital,” in *Facing Racial Revolution*, ed. Popkin, 128. By “us” in this quote, Gros meant those advocating revolution in France at the time. Gros, himself, held revolutionary sentiments and supported the National Assembly in 1791.
  - 3 For an example see Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 106-07.



Catholic priests exerting a corrupted royalist influence over slaves. Blaming Catholicism and the clergy reflected the anti-clerical sentiments expressed by Gros. Yet, in his account, the extent to which the clergy influenced the majority of insurgents is questionable. Gros described several scenes where insurgents outside the leadership group were indifferent to or even outright hostile to the priests living among them.<sup>4</sup> If priests were generally unpopular, then what sorts of religious practices did many insurgents draw upon? Gros recorded a few moments in his account that described insurgents drawing upon African and Afro-Caribbean religious practices when confronted with social challenges, such as the death of an insurgent leader.<sup>5</sup> Thus, if Catholic priests were unpopular among the insurgents, then the presence of Afro-Caribbean religious practices at transitional moments in Gros's account strongly suggests that it was these practices that insurgents drew upon for their religious motivations. Then if religion animated insurgents, as Gros suggested, and that religion was Afro-Caribbean in character, then those religious practices have the potential to expose the motivations that Gros did not explicitly explore: those coming from enslaved men and women. At the very least, Gros's account makes it clear that religion should be considered among the major causal elements in analyses of the Haitian Revolution.

Despite visibility in major sources such as Gros's account, Afro-Caribbean religious practices have largely been left out of the historical scholarship about the coming of the Haitian Revolution. Many of these studies have discussed Afro-Caribbean religion to some extent and many scholars agree that religion potentially provided a means for slaves to gather together in Saint-Domingue. Yet studies of the early Haitian

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4 Gros, "An Historick Recital," in *Facing Racial Revolution*, ed. Popkin, 131.

5 For an example see Gros, "An Historick Recital," in *Facing Racial Revolution*, ed. Popkin, 134.

Revolution overwhelmingly relegate their discussion of religious practices to secondary information or cultural context as they explain the revolution primarily in terms of political ideology, slave resistance, or social tension between slaves and planters. For example, scholars have explained the 1791 insurgency in terms of a Marxist explanation of class struggle, as driven by marronage and slave resistance, as a struggle between free-colored men seeking upward mobility and white efforts to deny them that opportunity, as motivated by French Revolutionary politics or enlightenment ideas, and due to the safety valve of manumission being shut off in the years before the outbreak of the insurgency.<sup>6</sup> Therefore a paradox has developed in the scholarship where Afro-Caribbean religion is discussed as socially important to enslaved people in Saint-Domingue, yet scholars have largely downplayed its importance to the formation of the insurgency.

Despite attenuating the importance of Afro-Caribbean religion to the insurgency, historians of Saint-Domingue have linked religious practices to other moments of slave resistance in the mid-eighteenth century. In January of 1758, authorities in Saint-Domingue burned at the stake a runaway slave called François Makandal, who they charged with poisoning a few enslaved people and many cattle. Colonial authorities linked Makandal to Afro-Caribbean religious practices when they noted that he was a religious leader. Although the ability to shape-shift did not prevent his death, Makandal could, according to legend, transform into a fly and move about the island at will. This

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6 On resistance see Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990). For class struggle see C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963). On the struggle of free-people of color see Stewart R. King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Whig: Free People of Color in Pre-Revolutionary Saint Domingue* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001). On revolutionary politics see Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). For a discussion of safety valves see David Patrick Geggus, "Saint-Domingue on the Eve of the Haitian Revolution," in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, edited by David Patrick Geggus and Norman Fiering (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

ability reflected his status as a long-term runaway slave. More telling, Makandal crafted and then distributed magical packets to others. These talismen came to be known as *makandals* on the island and were worn by enslaved and free men and women for luck and for various sorts of protections from harm. Exposed by the Makandal case and threatened by the potential that these religious practices held, the Consiel of Le Cap issued an ordinance in 1758 that banned both superstitious assemblies and the manufacture and wearing of *makandals*.<sup>7</sup> Although he noted that *makandals* may have predated Makandal, Laurent Dubois argued that Makandal's life as a magic man, his charge as a poisoner, and his dramatic death imbued *makandals*, and the talisman in general, with a new importance for enslaved men and women in Saint-Domingue.<sup>8</sup> Like Dubois, many historians have written about Makandal as a religious leader and they have largely used his story to link magical practices to slave resistance and to show the importance of religious practices, *makandals*, to the social lives of the enslaved.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the story of Makandal shows how Afro-Caribbean religious practices were connected to the religious, social, and political worlds of enslaved people in Saint-Domingue and that those practices could be used actively as resistance.

In light of the association made between resistance and religion shown by the case of Makandal, the lack of attention given to Afro-Caribbean religious practices by scholars of the Haitian Revolution is striking since one of the key moments in the run-up to the insurgency was itself a religious ceremony: the Bois-Caiman. All the major scholarship

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7 Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 34-35.

8 Laurent Dubois, *Avengers*, 51-52.

9 See Dubois, *Avengers*; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 59-61; Pierre Pluchon, *Vaudou, sorciers, empoisonneurs: de Saint-Domingue à Haiti* (Paris: Plon, 1987); Karol K. Weaver, *Medical Revolutionaries: The Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 89-97.

on the Haitian Revolution has portrayed the ceremony as an Afro-Caribbean religious event.<sup>10</sup> In short, on August 21, 1791 a group of enslaved men and women assembled at night in a wooded area in the North of Saint-Domingue. Once assembled, male and female religious leaders conducted a ceremony that featured the sacrifice of a black pig and the taking of a blood-oath by participants.<sup>11</sup> Occurring at a key moment on the night right before the outbreak of the insurgency, the Bois-Caiman ceremony came at the end of a week characterized by a series of events that can be best characterized as contingent and cobbled together as a leadership group of enslaved individuals attempted to organize the uprising. In the sources, the ceremony marked the moment in the run-up to the insurgency when a socially diverse group of enslaved men and women first assembled together.

If, as David Geggus, wrote “the documentary evidence does hint at a religious organization that was bringing together different ethnic groups before the revolution” and since the Bois-Caiman came immediately before the start of the insurgency at a decisive time, then it is curious that scholars have largely downplayed how the religious practices at the Bois-Caiman ceremony helped to facilitate revolution in Saint-Domingue.<sup>12</sup> Few scholars have afforded the ceremony more than a couple of paragraphs of analysis in their histories, even while some have suggested that the ceremony was part of the organization

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10 See, for example, Dubois, *Avengers*; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*; David Patrick Geggus, “Haitian Vodou in the Eighteenth Century: Language, Culture, Resistance,” *Jahrbuch für Geschichte Lateinamerikas* 28, issue 1 (December 1991): 21-52; Robin Law, “On the African Background to the Slave Insurrection in Saint-Domingue (Haiti) in 1791: The Bois Caiman Ceremony and the Dahomian 'Blood Pact,’” paper presented to the Harriet Tubman seminar, York University, Ontario, November 1999, accessed March 21, 2014, [http://tubman.info.yorku.ca/files/2013/law\\_99.pdf](http://tubman.info.yorku.ca/files/2013/law_99.pdf); and Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*.

11 For the earliest known account, see Antoine Dalmas, “Histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue,” in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804*, ed. and trans. Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus (New York: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2006), 90. I will go into much more detail about this ceremony in the coming pages.

12 David Patrick Geggus, “Saint-Domingue on the Eve,” in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, eds. Geggus and Fiering, 15.

of the insurgency.<sup>13</sup> Yet, the timing of the ceremony, the link between Afro-Caribbean religious practices and resistance shown by Makandal, and the fact that the Bois-Caiman ceremony has been characterized as a moment of Afro-Caribbean religion by scholars all strongly suggest that religious practices did play a significant role in the organization and mobilization of the rebellion. In light of Gros's suggestion that religion animated insurgents, these reasons warrant a serious re-consideration of the impact of the Bois-Caiman ceremony on the insurgency.

In this study I will show that the tendency to downplay or even avoid the causal role of religious practices is the product of a longstanding methodological choice made by historians of the Haitian Revolution. In particular, scholarly historians for many years did not absorb the insights found in the anthropological research about Afro-Caribbean culture and society. The anthropological literature, in general, argues that culture under stress often results in both cultural and social change and that cultural practices are part of and work in concert with social action.<sup>14</sup> Recently, some historians have begun to absorb the insights advanced by the anthropological literature written about slave culture. For example, Vincent Brown and James Sweet have both stressed that the culture of enslaved people served new social ends in the American context and that religious practices were a crucial subset of that culture.<sup>15</sup> This study will follow a similar approach.

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13 On the Bois-Caiman ceremony and the Haitian Revolution see James, *Black Jacobins*; Fick, *Making of Haiti*; Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Dubois, *Avengers*; Ramsey, *Spirits and the Law*.

14 Stephan Palmié, *The Cooking of History: How Not to Study Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). For example, Stephan Palmié argues here that Afro-Cuban religion must be situated within the social context of Cuba and put in relation to the power dynamics of Cuban society. In other words, culture does not remain static and when it does remain unchanged that is also an active process. Thus, for him and many other anthropologists cultural and religious practices are intimately intertwined with social action and historical change.

15 Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); James H. Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

Since such an approach stresses a broader anthropological conception of religion, that will allow this study to consider a range of cultural practices as part of the social lives of insurgents that are often described by historians as being peripheral.

Historians who have written at length about the Bois-Caiman ceremony have mainly been concerned with just one of its many component parts: the blood-oath ritual.<sup>16</sup> While blood-oath is important, enslaved men and women also drew upon other religious practices as they organized the insurgency. Dance and the central role of religious leaders were two such practices. Both are visible in the sources that describe the coming of the Haitian Revolution. Yet instead of analyzing dance, religious leadership, and blood-oath as component parts of an emerging religious system like an anthropologist would, historians have largely separated out the blood-oath ritual and analyzed it out of its broader ceremonial context. This has much to do with how historians have focused on finding a specific African origin for blood-oath in Saint-Domingue. That focus stresses African culture as passive and receptive, while anthropologists have stressed that the culture of enslaved people is, in contrast, actively created and actively used to drive social action.<sup>17</sup> When dance, blood-oath, and religious leadership are analyzed as an intertwined system and placed in the historical context of the coming of the 1791 insurgency, the confluence can tell us much about how slaves employed religious practices at the Bois-Caiman ceremony.

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<sup>16</sup> Geggus, "Haitian Vodou in the Eighteenth Century;" Law, "On the African Background."

<sup>17</sup> See Kenneth Bilby, "Swearing by the Past, Swearing to the Future: Sacred Oaths, Alliances, and Treaties Among the Guianese and Jamaican Maroons," in *Origins of the Black Atlantic* edited by Laurent Dubois and Julius S. Scott (New York: Routledge, 2010); J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 15-16.

For example, in Saint-Domingue, authorities captured Makandal after he attended a large dance held by slaves in the Limbé region.<sup>18</sup> Makandal is recognized as a religious leader by scholars. It is reasonable to suggest that Makandal distributed his charms at such gatherings and that his presence show how dances were also moments of religious practice. That makes sense since James Sweet has argued that Afro-Caribbean dance was enmeshed in the religious lives of enslaved men and women in Saint-Domingue.<sup>19</sup> Thus, it is telling that an enslaved religious leader both employed magical practices as resistance and attended large dances, which more than likely facilitated the distribution of his *makandal*. The story of Makandal shows how religious practices, religious leadership, slave resistance, and the manner in which slaves gathered were all intertwined in Saint-Domingue. Without the recent ethno-historical work of Sweet, informed by anthropological approaches, these linkages may have remained unrecognized. So, if religious practices, slave resistance, and social organization are all apparent in the case of Makandal, why do historians find it so hard to imagine that religion and culture were an active component in the social action that became known as the Haitian Revolution?

If fifteen years ago “the role of religion in slave resistance” was a “notably murky area,” as Geggus suggested, then recent work by ethno-historians and anthropologists has done much to clarify that murk.<sup>20</sup> In order to fill in our understanding, recent anthropological and ethno-historical scholarship on culture will prove to be a crucial set

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18 Médéric-Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description Topographique... de Saint-Domingue* [Philadelphia, 1797-1798] in *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*, trans. and ed. David Geggus (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing: 2014), 19.

19 James H. Sweet, “The Evolution of Ritual in the African Diaspora: Central African Kilundu, St. Domingue, and the United States, Seventeenth-Nineteenth Centuries,” in *Diasporic Africa: A Reader*, ed. Michael A. Gomez (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

20 David Patrick Geggus, “The Causation of Slave Rebellion,” in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 68.

of tools in my re-consideration of the impact of the Bois-Caiman ceremony on the Haitian Revolution. The approach advocated here will be anchored by integrating cultural practices into historical events and drawing social meanings from that analysis. Tracing the key moments in the week before the start of the insurgency will uncover the extent to which religious practices and social action were intertwined. Because the cultural practices found at the Bois-Caiman ceremony were assembled by a diverse group of people, looking at the revolution from an anthropological perspective allows this study to reconsider the meanings that blood-oath, dance, and religious leadership held for enslaved people. Then the meanings behind and the uses of blood-oath, dance and religious leadership can be integrated into the lead up to insurgency to understand how insurgents employed culture, broadly, and religious practices, specifically, to organize and mobilize the 1791 insurgency. In the end, I will argue that an assemblage of Afro-Caribbean religious practices, in general, and the Bois-Caiman ceremony, in particular, were necessary for the organization and the mobilization of the 1791 insurgency in Saint-Domingue.

### **The Coming of the Haitian Revolution: A Historiography**

The Haitian revolutionary period has often been described as the period between the years 1791 and 1804, or from the start of the slave insurgency until the declaration of the independent Haitian Republic by Dessaline. In reality this long period of time contains several distinct phases.<sup>21</sup> The analysis here will focus on the first year of that period, 1791, including the events that occurred at the start of the insurgency and those

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<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of this, see Jeremy D. Popkin, *You are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).



that came shortly after fighting began. Many scholars have debated how and why slaves revolted in 1791. Much of that scholarship has argued that the years immediately before 1791 have much to tell us about the organization and contours of the slave insurgency. Yet scholars to date have not come to a consensus on what caused the slave insurgency.

In this section, the scholarship on the coming of the Haitian Revolution will be surveyed in order to draw out the different factors that scholars have stressed as leading to the coming of the Haitian Revolution. In general scholars have argued that factors other than religion led to the social action and resistance that coalesced into the revolution. Often they argue that religion either served to dissipate social tension or should be seen as the context surrounding political or social action. Yet as shown briefly in the introduction, Makandal stands as an example of those individuals who resisted the slave regime by employing magical or religious practices. In his story religion, social organization, and resistance were all intertwined. This has led me to question if historians' arguments that religion is best characterized as contextual is correct. In addition, the story of Makandal also throws into question scholars' arguments that religious practices should not be considered among the major causes of the Haitian Revolution.

C. L. R. James wrote in 1938 what is often considered the classic account of the Haitian Revolution. In *The Black Jacobins*, James drew heavily upon Marxist theory to explain the coming of the Haitian Revolution. Social class based upon economic stratification became the basis by which James saw the Haitian Revolution being organized. For example, James wrote that “it was the quarrel between whites and

Mulattoes that woke the sleeping slaves.”<sup>22</sup> In his analysis, slaves, as a class, only gained a consciousness of their own plight when they were exposed to the rhetoric of the French Revolution that began in 1789. When exposed to the ideas of the French Revolution, enslaved men and women, which James called a “modern proletariat,” came together as “a thoroughly prepared and organised mass movement.”<sup>23</sup> Once aware of their common bond, slaves rose in revolution while whites and mulattoes fought over who would be included as citizens in the new French Republic. For James class struggle expressed in loose racial terms provided the framework by which enslaved men and women organized by class through political awareness. Once they revolted, the now wide awake slaves drove the revolution forward.

While James stressed that class struggle informed by revolutionary political rhetoric led to insurgency, he curiously argued that “Voodoo was the medium of the conspiracy.”<sup>24</sup> Let us leave aside for now the notion that Vodou was in 1791 a coherent religion and instead take James's argument as a suggestion that Afro-Caribbean religious practices played a part in the coming of the slave insurgency.<sup>25</sup> Here, James has expressed two of the central concerns of this historical survey of literature. The first is that scholars have often written that religion played a role in the coming of the insurgency, yet devoted little space to explaining how or why religion was important to enslaved men and women. James only briefly discussed Afro-Caribbean religion in his account and never

22 James, *The Black Jacobins*, 73. James did modify class by race at points in his work and noted that race often determined a person's economic place. Yet it was for James the economics of those places and the politics that sprang from those economic based classes that drove interactions.

23 James, *The Black Jacobins*, 86.

24 James, *The Black Jacobins*, 86.

25 Much recent scholarship places the formation of Vodou after the Haitian Revolution. See Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 91; Law, “On the African Background,” 5; Sidney Mintz and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “The Social History of Haitian Vodou” in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald J. Consentino (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 8; Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*.

described what he meant when he called Vodou a “medium of the conspiracy.” The suggestion that Afro-Caribbean religion was involved in the organization of the insurgency without an explanation of how that happened has been repeated over and over in historians' accounts of the 1791 insurgency. Second, James wrote that “the slaves travelled miles to sing and dance and practise the rites and talk; and now, since the [French] revolution, to hear the political news and make their plans.”<sup>26</sup> Since he stressed that French Revolutionary political ideas drove a slave proletariat to rebel, James did little to suggest that religion had a role apart from providing a gathering space where enslaved people could discuss politics. Implicitly, James divorced politics, which he saw as originating outside slave society, from Afro-Caribbean religion, which he saw as a cultural expression of the enslaved. In this way, James has reflected the longstanding historical approach to the Haitian Revolution mentioned in the intro that views the culture of enslaved people as passive and receptive rather than as an active component of their social lives.

This separation of the political motivations of slaves and Afro-Caribbean religion as two distinct social strands can be traced throughout the historiography of the coming of the insurgency. James made it clear that religious practices were a central feature of slave life. But if religious practices such as blood-oath and dance or events like the Bois-Caiman ceremony were removed from James's account, the Haitian Revolution would still have occurred in August of 1791 for the same political reasons. In short, James stressed political motivations as the action that drove the revolution and mentioned religion as a context to those motivations. Thus, the manner in which James framed his

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<sup>26</sup> James, *The Black Jacobins*, 86.

study leads to one the major question that is central to this study. If Afro-Caribbean religion was an important aspect of slave life in Saint-Domingue, why is it that scholars have by and large argued that religious practices were part of a passive cultural context rather than one of the active components that drove the organization and formation of the insurgency? This tendency to relegate Afro-Caribbean religious practices to passive context has continued into the recent literature.

In 1990 Carolyn Fick released a social history about the coming of the Haitian Revolution called *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*. The title aptly describes Fick's approach. Unlike James, who condensed very heterogeneous slave communities into a homogeneous proletariat, Fick's book explores how different conceptions of ethnicity and identity were held by a heterogeneous African and Creole population, who all socially mixed in Saint-Domingue before the insurgency. Because of that, Fick paid much attention to the dynamic relationship between Creole and African slaves. This sensitivity to internal difference lends a complexity to the social aspects of her study not present in James's telling. David Geggus described her approach well, “the book lies not only in the Marxian tradition of *The Black Jacobins* but also extends the tradition of the Haitian nationalist historians such as Jean Fouchard, who stressed the continuity of slave resistance in Saint Domingue between the colonial and revolutionary periods.”<sup>27</sup> Fick described the coming of the insurgency as the culmination of a long history of slave resistance. Marronage, the running away of slaves from plantations, was both “a mode of slave resistance” and also “provided conditions that allowed” for other

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27 Geggus, “New Approaches and Old,” in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 40. Geggus, here, referenced Jean Fouchard, *Les marrons de la liberté* (Paris: École, 1972).

forms of resistance “to pervade.”<sup>28</sup> Poisoning, Afro-Caribbean religious practices, dance and conspiracies in Fick's analysis, were all forms of resistance that depended upon marronage for success. According to Fick, “marronage became the organizational vehicle... for building a resistance movement aimed at nothing less than the destruction of the white masters and of slavery.”<sup>29</sup> Here, Fick has followed a common trope of assuming that slaves uniformly rejected the slave system and worked tirelessly to destroy that system.

Unlike James, Fick discussed in great detail many of the social and cultural aspects of slave society such as dance, Afro-Caribbean religious practices, and marronage in the years before the start of insurgency. Despite spending much time explaining different instances of Afro-Caribbean religious practice before the insurgency, Fick, though, argued that “insofar as voodoo was a means of self-expression and of psychological or cathartic release from material oppression, the slaves' acquired consciousness as autonomous beings remained stoically imprisoned within themselves.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, in Fick's narrative, Afro-Caribbean religion seems to hold little potential for active resistance, since she portrayed religious practices as cathartic release and therefore they served as a means to dissipate rather than drive resistance. What religion did do, in her telling, was to give slaves an excuse to organize through marronage. In her words, “voodoo provided a medium for the political organization of the slaves, as well as an ideological force.”<sup>31</sup> Yet, while Fick alludes here to religion as an ideological force, since

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28 Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 57. Marronage could either be short term or long term depending on the circumstances.

29 Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 61.

30 Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 45.

31 Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 94.

she stressed social action, religion often gets relegated to context and separated out from political and social action in her analysis.

By separating religious practices from political action, Fick mirrored James. Both called the decision to rebel a political decision made within a social context of oppression. While James stressed that French Revolutionary political rhetoric actively created a slave consciousness which led to the decision to rebel, in his telling religion served as merely a context of rebellion. For James religion and politics were entirely different realms of society. As shown above, Fick portrayed Afro-Caribbean religion as ethereal and cathartic, not outwardly resistant, and serving as a context for social organization. Although she affords religious practices a place in the coming of the revolution, for Fick other sources of resistance ultimately led to the social organization of the 1791 insurgency. In her analysis, marronage served as the single most decisive factor for the organization of the 1791 insurgency after the political upheavals of the French Revolution opened up an opportunity for slaves to revolt.<sup>32</sup> Like James she portrayed Afro-Caribbean religion as a passive context useful in order to understand other active social factors such as marronage, poisoning, slave conspiracies, or parliamentary regulations. It was those other factors that actively led to the Haitian Revolution.<sup>33</sup> Yet, both Fick and James have set up boundaries between religious practices and political and social action that may be much more blurry in real life.

In 2002, David Patrick Geggus challenged Fick's argument that marronage was the decisive factor leading to the 1791 insurgency. Geggus has often attempted to

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<sup>32</sup> Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 75.

<sup>33</sup> This is reflected in the organization of Fick's book. Her most sustained argument for religion and dance come in the chapter entitled "Slavery and Slave Society," while marronage is discussed at length in the chapter entitled "Slave Resistance."

dismantle other scholar's arguments. In this case, Geggus argued that “to confuse [marronage] with the violent and collective enterprise of openly risking one's life in an attempt to change the system... greatly underestimates what the slaves of Saint-Domingue took on in 1791.”<sup>34</sup> For Geggus, marronage served to defuse rather than build tension in Saint-Domingue. In contrast to Fick, Geggus argued that “the rapid clearing of mountain forests in Saint-Domingue that made it progressively more difficult to become a successful maroon may have made outright rebellion more likely.”<sup>35</sup> Therefore, in Geggus's telling new social and environmental constraints placed upon slaves' ability to resist in small ways, which dissipated the tension of the plantation, were more likely to lead to rebellion. Or in other words, when slaves could no longer run they chose to fight.

Geggus has done much to expose certain contextual factors which help to explain why the Haitian Revolution occurred when it did. The coming of the Haitian Revolution in Geggus's telling can be characterized by multiple cultural and social factors that serve as a context out of which certain politics were stressed. For example, Geggus noted that right before the insurgency marronage opportunities were on the decline and access to manumission had declined sharply, while troop strength in Saint-Domingue had decreased.<sup>36</sup> Thus Saint-Domingue became less defensible internally, while opportunities which released the pressure that kept slaves in Saint-Domingue from rising were becoming less available. Within this social context of increasingly limited opportunities for slaves to advance socially, Geggus has argued that French Revolutionary political thought flourished as the planter class of Saint-Domingue internally fought over their place

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34 Geggus, “New Approaches and Old,” in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 41.

35 Geggus, “Saint-Domingue on the Eve,” in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, ed. Geggus and Fiering, 5.

36 Geggus, “Saint-Domingue on the Eve,” in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*.

in the revolution. As he argued, “that potential [of resistance, social factors, activism] was realized only through the seismic tremors that issued from revolutionary France.”<sup>37</sup>

In the end, Geggus stressed local and national politics and political ideology as the active factors that led to the 1791 rebellion.

In contrast to the active role he attributed influences from France, Geggus often described culture and Afro-Caribbean religion, in particular, as socially passive and contextual. Geggus has written at some length about Afro-Caribbean religion before the 1791 insurgency. He has expressed the idea that Afro-Caribbean religion had been potentially useful to the organization of the 1791 insurgency. But like many other factors in the coming of the revolution, Geggus has remained rather skeptical of the impact that Afro-Caribbean religion and practices could have made to the early insurgency. For example, he argued in 2002 that “whether vodou played a critical role... remains to be proven.”<sup>38</sup> In 2009, he expressed a similar sentiment, arguing that “the documentary evidence does hint at a religious organization that was bringing together different ethnic groups before the revolution, but as long as it promoted magical rather than political remedies to real-world problems, its revolutionary potential was limited.”<sup>39</sup> While James implicitly relegated politics and religion to different social spaces, Geggus here has explicitly divorced the socially active political organization and aims of the insurgency from religious practices. Much like Fick and James, Geggus described religion as socially passive and incapable of driving social action. In this way, as late as 2009 many of the major scholars writing about Saint-Domingue still viewed religious practices as

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37 Geggus, “Saint-Domingue on the Eve,” in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, ed. Geggus and Fiering, 14.

38 Geggus, “Marronage, Vodou, and the Slave Revolt of 1791,” in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 80.

39 Geggus, “Saint-Domingue on the Eve,” in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, ed. Geggus and Fiering, 15.



contextual to the Haitian Revolution. In turn, these historians have stressed a stark contrast between political action and culture, or specifically between the political aims of the insurgents and the religious practices of enslaved individual before the insurgency.

In 2004, Lauren Dubois released a broad history of the Haitian Revolution entitled *Avengers of the New World*. In this study, Dubois talked at length about economic, cultural, and social factors as specific contexts to political motives in the manner of Geggus and James. For example, he called Afro-Caribbean religion “a space of freedom” that “helped lay the foundation for the revolt.”<sup>40</sup> Dubois often described that cultural foundation as a distant backdrop to French Revolutionary politics, the political desire of free people of color to be part of the French Republic, and the effects that French political movements had on enslaved men and women. Like Geggus, Dubois often focused on how enlightenment ideas were a causative factor of the Haitian Revolution. To that end, Dubois wrote that “the most useful approach is to focus on the political projects that emerged at the different stages of the revolution, and on the ways they were shaped by and in turn shaped the individuals and groups that articulated them.”<sup>41</sup> Similar to Geggus, Dubois stressed the role that local and national politics played in the coming of the Haitian Revolution.

Dubois though, unlike Geggus, did not starkly separate politics and religion. In his discussion of the Bois-Caiman ceremony, Dubois noted that “though religious practices facilitated and spurred on insurrection, it was only their combination with careful political organization that made the 1791 uprising successful.”<sup>42</sup> Dubois, here,

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40 Dubois, *Avengers*, 43.

41 Dubois, *Avengers*, 6.

42 Dubois, *Avengers*, 101.

inverted the relationship between religious practices and political action advanced by James, Fick, and Geggus. In addition, Dubois suggested that religious practices, and in particular the blood-oath at the Bois-Caiman ceremony, were active factors in the coming of insurgency. Unfortunately, while Dubois wrote at length on culture and society in Saint-Domingue, he spent comparatively little time discussing Afro-Caribbean religion or how it could have played an active role in the coming of the revolution. For example, the religion of slave society occupied paragraphs in his study while French Revolutionary politics and their relation to the Haitian Revolution occupied chapters. Thus, while Dubois's argument is suggestive in its discussion of Afro-Caribbean religion, Dubois did not discuss Afro-Caribbean religion and particularly its potential use in spurring on the insurrection in any sustained manner in this work.

This section has focused on how some of the major scholars wrote about the coming of the Haitian Revolution and how religion played into their arguments. Marxist social movements, resistance, the loss of opportunities for social advancement, and slave adoption of the politics of the French Revolution have been some of the major causal factors posited by scholars. Because scholars have focused on these factors, Afro-Caribbean religious practices have often been relegated to a place of context or given a passive role in the coming of the 1791 insurgency. In addition, some scholars have largely ignored or left under-examined Afro-Caribbean religion in their works even when they have suggested that it had an important role to play. James and Dubois are two examples of such scholars. Others have simply left the religious practices of enslaved men and women out of their studies. For example, Stewart R. King in 2001 argued at length about the social impact of the free-colored militia to the northern province of

Saint-Domingue. He wrote about how the militia gave people of color a route toward social advancement, while at the same time militia politics caused social strife between whites and free people of color as the Haitian Revolution approached.<sup>43</sup> In 2006, John D. Garrigus extended Stewart's study of free people of color to the southern and western provinces of Saint-Domingue. Garrigus argued that free people of color were increasingly racialized and thus denied political and social inclusion in the years leading up to the Haitian Revolution.<sup>44</sup> Both of these studies have expanded our understanding of elite politics in Saint-Domingue, free people of color, and the militia. Yet the respective focuses of both studies are different from the focus of this study. A survey of the recent literature on the coming of the Haitian Revolution has revealed that scholars have largely either relegated Afro-Caribbean religion to context as they stressed other factors or they have under-examined religion altogether.

That said, two scholars have written about religion at length while also affording it an active place in the political and social movements of Saint-Domingue and Haiti in both the colonial and post-revolutionary periods. In *The Spirits and the Law*, Kate Ramsey explored the ways in which Afro-Caribbean religion gave enslaved individuals a space to organize in the eighteenth century and how those meetings were reflected in colonial laws. Since the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are the focus of her study, Ramsey did not dwell upon the factors that led to insurgency. Rather, she drew heavily upon Geggus during her discussion of the coming of the revolution and relied on his telling of the events. Still, Ramsey did argue overall that religion was an active force in

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43 Stewart R. King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Whig*.

44 John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

people's lives. For example she wrote that “because such religions permeated every aspect of believers' lives, and because their practice was officially constructed... they become the key to everything.”<sup>45</sup> Writing before Ramsey, Joan Dayan argued that the violence and politics of the Haitian Revolution drove the formation of Vodou in the nineteenth century.<sup>46</sup> Like Ramsey, Dayan was less concerned with the coming of the Haitian Revolution than its later effects on Haitian society and vodou. For both Dayan and Ramsey, the political aims of slaves and peasants had an intertwined relationship with Afro-Caribbean religion in Haitian history. Thus, while the work of both scholars suggests that politics and religion were much more intertwined than other scholars have argued, the scope of their studies has left the coming of the Haitian Revolution under-explored.

The intertwined political-religious framework argued for by the work of Dayan and Ramsey suggests that a re-consideration of religion before the start of the Haitian Revolution is warranted. Missing from the major narratives so far is how religion could have been employed by enslaved men and women as they organized the insurgency. Much of that has to do with how scholars have relegated religious practices to contextual information. While other factors such are shown to be socially active, religion has largely been portrayed as socially passive. Therefore, in light of the work of Ramsey and Dayan I am led to ask the question: what would be the impact of religion on the Haitian Revolution if we consider that religious practices can lead to social action?

To answer that question, this study will re-integrate Afro-Caribbean religion and religious practices into the local political goals of specific enslaved individuals in order to

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45 Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 11.

46 Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*.

come to a better understanding of how those individuals both organized and mobilized the insurgency. In the scholarship, the Bois-Caiman ceremony has been a contentious moment in the lead up to the insurgency. As a religious ceremony, the Bois-Caiman still holds much potential for understanding the ways in which religious practices and social action were intertwined right before the insurgency. Still, many of the scholars mentioned above have argued that the Bois-Caiman ceremony should be considered a peripheral event, much like they argued that religion was socially inactive. In the next section, I will turn to the events that led up to the Bois-Caiman ceremony in August of 1791 in order to show the organizational potential of that event and to assess the impact that religious practices had on the coming of the Haitian Revolution.

### **Stumbling Toward Insurgency**

This section will take a look at the series of events that occurred the week before the outbreak of insurrection in order to draw out some of the complexities of organizing the insurgency. Scholars have generally agreed that a group of elite slaves decided to rebel on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1791 at the Lenormand de Mézy plantation. According to an early account written by Antoine Dalmas, a group group of elite slaves, who would later act as the leadership of the insurrection, proposed that August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1791 be set as the date for the insurrection at that meeting.<sup>47</sup> According to David Geggus, the Lenormand meeting should be seen as the crucial moment in the organization of the 1791 insurgency. For him that meeting represented the fundamental political moment in the lead up to insurgency because elite slaves made the decision to rebel at Lenormand.<sup>48</sup> Yet despite making the

<sup>47</sup> Antoine Dalmas, *Histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1814), in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, eds. Dubois and Garrigus, 90.

<sup>48</sup> Geggus, "The Bois Caiman Ceremony," in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 92. Geggus here made a powerful argument for the dates of the Lenormand de Mézy meeting and the Bois-Caiman ceremony.

decision on the 14<sup>th</sup> and setting the date for the 25<sup>th</sup>, the insurgency actually began on August 22<sup>nd</sup>. Instead of following the plan made at the Lenormand meeting, insurgents began to burn the northern plains of Saint-Domingue the day immediately after the Bois-Caiman ceremony, three days earlier than planned. What had happened that changed the planned date and how does that change our understanding of the importance of the decision to rebel?

An analysis of the series of events leading to the start of insurgency and an understanding of how those events relate to the Lenormand de Mézy meeting and Bois-Caiman ceremony are important to answering this question. Since only elite slaves, who were almost entirely Creole-born, were those present at the Lenormand meeting, then between the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 25<sup>th</sup> those elite slaves had to bring other enslaved individuals into the fold of insurgency, many who were African-born and non-elite. In order to do that, a leadership group of elite slaves had to appeal to African-born and non-elite Creole slaves in some manner. Over the course of the week, as knowledge of the insurrection was disseminated, false starts and small acts of arson began to occur. This created an environment of tension out of which elite leaders had to make decisions about how to progress with the organization of the insurgency. Key to that process were the events of August 21<sup>st</sup> which culminated in the Bois-Caiman ceremony. The fact that the insurgency began the day after the Bois-Caiman ceremony strongly suggests that the ceremony played an important role in the outbreak of the insurgency. It is the role of the Bois-Caiman ceremony that will be teased out in this section. Instead of focusing on the decision to rebel, like Geggus, I will, here, focus on the process of organizing the insurgency in order to show how the Bois-Caiman fits into the story. Stressing the

struggle to organize over the decision to rebel will involve a reconsideration of Geggus's argument about the Lenormand meeting as the crucial moment in the run in to insurrection. To that end, I argue here that the dissemination of knowledge about the rebellion, false starts, secretive meetings, and the religious practices that occurred before the start of the insurgency have much to tell us about how the effort to organize and the decision to rebel were intertwined and best characterized as an unfolding process that culminated at the Bois-Caiman ceremony.

Recent scholarship and early accounts of Saint-Domingue have all agreed that Creole and African born slaves often viewed each other as socially and culturally different. In his account of Saint-Domingue first published in 1789, Moreau de Saint-Méry argued that Creole and African slaves could be characterized as distinct despite sharing a status of enslavement. Moreau wrote that “two thirds of these latter [slaves]... came from Africa, while the balance were born in the Colony. Thus, we must speak separately of these two classes, which in certain respects have traits which make them more or less distinct.”<sup>49</sup> There is a strong sense in Moreau's *Description Topographique* that slave owners trusted Creole slaves more than African born ones, which gave those born on the island preferential access to elite jobs such as coachman, *commandeur*, and household domestic. Geggus has argued that “the collation of estate inventories reveals an occupational hierarchy on the plantations, which by the 1780s was dominated by a Creole elite that monopolized the most prestigious posts.”<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Stewart King noted that the “creoles can be seen as the “domestic” slaves while the *bossales* [African born]

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49 Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description Topographique... de la Partie française de l'Isle Saint-Domingue* (1797-98) in *A Civilization the Perished: The Last Years of White Colonial Rule in Haiti*, trans. and ed. Ivor D. Spencer (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 39.

50 Geggus, “New Approaches and Old,” in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 35.

were the “trade” slaves, subject to commodification in the market.”<sup>51</sup> These scholars, thus, all suggest that elite slaves on the plantations were often synonymous with Creole slaves. By extension, African born slaves were rarely elite slaves. The net result of this distinction was a level of cross-class tension, jealousy, and social isolation within the enslaved community because Creole slaves held many of the positions of power on the plantations.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to holding better jobs, elite slaves were often offered opportunities not available to many of the enslaved men and women born in Africa. In certain situations, planters allowed elite slaves from across the Northern Plain of Saint-Domingue to gather together on a plantation. At these meetings, elite slaves held feasts, danced, and were able to network across plantation lines. The Lenormand de Mézy meeting held on August 14<sup>th</sup> of 1791 was one example of this type of meeting. Participants held the meeting on a Sunday, the day of rest normally given to enslaved men and women. *Commandeurs* and coachmen or in the words of Geggus “the slave elite from about 100 plantations” gathered at the Lenormand plantation.<sup>53</sup> According to one account, the meeting “was made up of two deputies from all the workforces of Port Margot, Limbé, Acul, Petite Anse, Limonade, Plaine du Nord, Quartier Morin, Morne Rouge, etc.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, elite slaves from all over the northern province attended the meeting. Although scholars have no

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51 King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Whig*, 100-101. The difference between local and external slave was, according to King, a reflection of West African slave holding practices. In West Africa, locally born slaves were kept as domestics while slaves captured in war or bought from elsewhere were sold externally into the Atlantic trade.

52 For examples of intra-slave tensions see Andrew Apter, “On African Origins, Creolization and *Connaissance* in Haitian Vodou,” *American Ethnologist* vol. 29, no. 2 (May, 2002): 233-260; Yves Benot, “The Insurgents of 1791, Their Leaders, and the Concept of Independence,” in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, ed. David Patrick Geggus and Norman Fiering (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 99-110; King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Whig*, 100-101;

53 Geggus, “The Bois Caiman Ceremony,” in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 92.

54 New York Public Library, Fischer Collection, 8:5, in *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*, ed. Geggus, 77.



direct evidence of precisely who attended, some of the enslaved individuals crucial to the early insurrection such as Boukman Dutty, Georges Biassou, and Jean-François would have been able to make the trip to the centrally located Lenormand plantation. As well, all three were elite-Creole slaves. Like these men, if the normative social patterning of elite slaves held, then by extension most of those present at the meeting should have been Creole by birth. All told around two hundred elite slaves, most of whom were Creole, met at the Lenormand de Mézy plantation, ate dinner, and decided to rebel on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August. They did all this after being granted permission by planters and overseers who were unaware of the subversive motives of these enslaved individuals.

Two significant points stand out that help us to understand the organization of the insurgency in the Lenormand case. First, this meeting was not held in secret. This exemplary fact differed significantly from the many secret meetings that other slaves held all over the island. The Lenormand meeting was an elite slave privilege that many other slaves had to run away from the plantation to experience. Carolyn Fick has argued that covert meetings over time drove enslaved men and women to rebellion.<sup>55</sup> Yet it was at a sanctioned meeting that an elite group of slaves decided to rebel. In this important case at least, marronage did not play a significant part in planning the insurrection. This leads to the second point. This meeting is an example of how the trust and privilege given to elite slaves by planters and overseers provided an opportunity for those slaves to organize without suspicion. That proved to be a crucial decision made by planters that allowed for the initial stages of the insurrection to be organized by elite slaves. In that way, the mobility and privileges given to *commandeurs* and coachmen by plantation managers and

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<sup>55</sup> See Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 49-50.

owners directly aided the planning of the insurrection. The insurgency may have never been as large nor brought into its folds so diverse a group, if people like Boukman and Jean-François were forbidden from having dinner together at meetings like Lenormand. Marronage, then, likely played less a role in the initial decision to rebel than scholars like Fick have argued.<sup>56</sup>

While the decision to rebel was crucial for the initial stage of organizing the insurgency, it is reasonable to assume that on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August only the enslaved individuals at the Lenormand meeting were aware of that decision. As mentioned earlier, around two hundred individuals attended the Lenormand meeting. Realistically, the insurrection had no chance of succeeding without the involvement of the much more numerous African and non-elite Creole slaves that elite Creole slaves, those who went to the Lenormand meeting, supervised on the plantations. The problem faced by elite slaves was how and when to bring those other individuals into the insurgency. *Commandeurs* often whipped and punished the non-elite slaves they were now tasked with organizing. As one writer noted in 1785: “The merciless eye of the plantation steward watched over the workers while several foremen, dispersed among the workers and armed with long whips, delivered harsh blows to those who seemed too weary to sustain the pace.”<sup>57</sup> They sometimes abused that power and it was the field workers who felt the sting of that abuse. One early chronicler, Girod de Chantrans, noted that “the worst part of the life of a slave was perhaps in being hurried on during his work, by such slave drivers” who, not

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<sup>56</sup> My contention here is constructed around Geggus's argument that other factors rather than marronage were more likely the driving forces behind the organization of the initial revolution. See David Patrick Geggus, “Marronage, Vodou, and the Slave Revolt of 1791,” in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, ed. David Patrick Geggus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 69-74.

<sup>57</sup> Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 28.

receiving payment or bonuses, merely drove other slaves harder to finish the days work.<sup>58</sup> Field slaves had very little incentive to trust and back the elite slaves who whipped them. Due to this plantation power dynamic, it is clear that the task of organization should not be seen as an easy or automatic process of slaves banding together to rise in rebellion.<sup>59</sup> While the decision to rebel had been made, the process of disseminating that decision faced some hard to overcome obstacles.

The process entailed somehow convincing African-born and non-elite Creole slaves that the choice to revolt was a choice that would make their lives better. The choice to rebel was often not the choice that they ultimately made. The fear of death, violence, and capture may have weighed heavily upon the minds of people as they decided whether or not to join the insurgency. Common in the early accounts of the insurgency were tales of faithful slaves, slaves saving masters, or slaves fleeing as insurgents approached.<sup>60</sup> Many early accounts note how fractured the enslaved population was in the early rebellion. For example, right after he was captured in October of 1791, an early chronicler named Monsieur Gros observed that, in the cell next to him, Jeannot Bullet had imprisoned “wounded Negroes and slaves, yet faithful to the whites, taken during the frequent excursions of these thieves.” Torture, Gros said, was the means by which Jeannot planned to bring the white-faithful into the insurgency.<sup>61</sup> In another

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58 Girod de Chantran in *A Civilization that Perished*, ed. Spencer, 267.

59 William C. Van Norman Jr., *Shade-Grown Slavery: The Lives of Slaves on Coffee Plantations in Cuba* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2013), 123. I am drawing on Van Norman's argument that slavery is often not a satisfactory explanation for outright resistance. Rather he urges scholars to look for social breaches and how people could have responded to those breaches by drawing upon cultural reasoning.

60 The rub here was that many of these stories could have been fabricated by white writers as a way to soften the events that were happening. But, the accounts were so widespread, and the fact that Le Cap did not erupt in revolt immediately, that there is most likely some shred of truth in the perception that many slaves did not want to join the insurgency. For an example see “The First Days of the Slave Insurrection,” in *Facing Racial Revolution*, ed. Popkin, 52-53.

61 Gros, “An Historick Recital,” in *Facing Racial Revolution*, ed. Popkin, 125.

example, one anonymous writer wrote that “we quietly followed the brigands who were looking for recruits in the Black’s huts, as much by force as by goodwill.”<sup>62</sup> These accounts from early in the insurgency suggest that in the week before rebellion only certain enslaved individuals or groups of individuals were brought into “the know.” Many enslaved individuals either were not told about the insurgency, or when told decided that it would be best to not fight when the insurgency did break out. The account of the planter François Carteaux corroborates this telling. Slaves on his plantation never stopped working which led Carteaux to pose the question “Why is it that neither my work team, nor many others in the area, ever took this decision [to rebel]?”<sup>63</sup>

Thus, fractured and partially disseminated knowledge of the insurgency makes sense because knowledge of the rebellion would have been dangerous both to the organizers and to the enslaved men and women who knew. The more people that knew the more dangerous that knowledge could become. That knowledge led to false starts, denials, and a heightened level of tension between August 14<sup>th</sup> and August 22<sup>nd</sup>. For example, on August 16<sup>th</sup>, a “slave driver from the Desgrieux plantation [Chabaud]” burned the plantation trash house. After being caught, that driver then confessed that elite slaves had planned a conspiracy to rebel and directly named “the Negro Paul, driver on Blin’s estate in Limbé.” The driver’s confession shows that he had knowledge of the coming insurrection. Yet, he either ignored or had been misinformed about the insurrection date set at the Lenormand meeting. When other slaves on the plantation were questioned a few days later by the plantation manager, they replied that “the Desgrieux

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62 “La Révolution de Saint-Domingue, contenant tout ce qui s’est passé dans le colonie française depuis le commencement de la Révolution jusqu’au départ de l’auteur pour la France, le 8 septembre 1792,” in *Facing Racial Revolution*, ed. Popkin, 52.

63 François Carteaux, *Histoire des désastres de Saint-Domingue*, in *Facing Racial Revolution*, ed. Popkin, 176-77.

driver's disposition was a detestable lie, and they swore unshakable loyalty to their manager.”<sup>64</sup> This incident nearly uncovered the plot, yet since the manager of the plantation believed the version of the story told by non-elite slaves, authorities dragged their feet over a more thorough investigation that might have foiled the plot. In this instance can be seen the danger to the insurgency that could stem from knowledge of the insurrection. In addition, the Desgrieux case serves as another instance like Lenormand where planters seemed to believe that slave rebellion was unthinkable.

With regard to non-elite slave, this false start and the reaction to it may be interpreted in two ways. Either non-elite plantation slaves had already been informed and had lied to authorities about their knowledge or they had not yet been incorporated into the rebellion and were telling the truth. Considering that other important events, such as the Bois-Caiman ceremony, did not occur until much closer to the planned day of insurrection, it is reasonable to assume that slaves at the Desgrieux plantation did not know about the plot, especially since they did not help the slave driver burn the plantation trash house. This suggests to me that elite slaves did not wish to make knowledge of the insurrection widely known until closer to the date they set for insurrection. What can be said with some certainty was that the week from the 14<sup>th</sup> till the 21<sup>st</sup> of August was probably very tense for the many elite Creole slaves who had attended the Lenormand meeting, especially after the mishap at Desgrieux.

That situation became more tense on the morning of August 21. Since the Desgrieux manager believed that Paul was trustworthy and loyal despite being named as

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64 Archives Parlementaires, 35:460-61 in *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*, ed. Geggus, 79-80. According to Carolyn Fick this attack actually occurred on the 17<sup>th</sup> of August. See Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 262. Geggus as well argued for the same date. See Geggus, “The Bois Caiman Ceremony,” in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 88.

a conspirator, authorities had released him after the August 16<sup>th</sup> incident. According to one account, “this is how matters rested until August 21, when the Limbé mounted police went to the Desgrieux estate at the town council's request to arrest the black cook, who was accused of being a ringleader,” like Paul. The cook managed to escape. He found Paul and together “they prepared to bring their horrible plan to completion.”<sup>65</sup> By this point, many of the elite slaves who had planned to rebel on the 25<sup>th</sup> had begun to become anxious. According to Antoine Dalmas, one man named Ignace said the day before the fighting began that “No more delays, no more worries; the plot is too widespread to leave any refuge or security for the whites.”<sup>66</sup> Boukman Dutty, a coachman, enslaved Creole, and the leader of the initial revolt on the 22<sup>nd</sup> was likely one of these worried individuals. By evening of Sunday August 21<sup>st</sup>, he along with many other enslaved men and women left their respective plantations and gathered in the woods on a hill called *morne rouge*. This gathering would be very different from the one held at Lenormand.

While they may have feared being found out and may have had little trust that the non-elite and African slaves all around them would get the timing correct, elite slaves still had to incorporate other enslaved individuals into the insurrection. This became all the more important after the events early on August 21. Unfortunately for the insurgent leadership, they could not hold an “official” meeting like at Lenormand in order to rally other enslaved individuals to their cause. To do so would have brought suspicion from planters and overseers, especially after what had occurred at Desgrieux. Authorities in Saint-Domingue had never sanctioned the majority of slave meetings and gatherings that

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65 *Archives Parlementaires*, 35:460-61, in *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*, ed. Geggus, 80.

66 Antoine Dalmas, “Histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue,” in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, ed. and trans. Dubois and Garrigus, 89.

were held. Although often not followed in practice, the 1685 “Code Noir” article XVI forbid slaves from gathering, dancing, getting married, and practicing religion, especially across plantation lines. One of the reasons why authorities forbid these gatherings was because they feared the threat of violence. The article immediately preceding, XV, forbid slaves from carrying weapons, including large sticks.<sup>67</sup> The fear of disorder and violence expressed by the Code Noir lingered throughout the eighteenth century, yet contrary to planters' desires, contemporary chroniclers, such as Moreau de Saint-Méry and Etienne Descourtilz, made note of the large numbers of slaves that gathered without permission.<sup>68</sup> For example, in 1785 a planter advisory committee remarked that “on holidays you find 2000 of them gathered in La Providence, La Fossette, and Petit Carénage all armed with sticks, drinking rum, and doing the kalinda... the police do nothing to prevent these parties and they never end without quarrels and fighting.”<sup>69</sup> While this account describes both social disorder and violence, it also reveals another common aspect of non-sanctioned slave gatherings: Afro-Caribbean cultural practices. In this case that practice happened to be calenda, but other practices linked to Afro-Caribbean religion such as blood-oath, divination, and trance also occurred at these gatherings.<sup>70</sup> While these cultural practices will be discussed at length later, what is immediately important was that non-sanctioned or secret gatherings tended to conform to and follow Afro-Caribbean cultural

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67 1685 Code Noir, in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, ed. and trans. Dubois and Garrigus, 52. See John K. Thornton, *A Cultural History of the Atlantic World, 1250-1820* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 394. The ban on sticks may be in part due to what John Thornton describes as “military dancing, called *Sanga* in Kikongo,” where people danced “with weapons in hand.”

68 For various examples see Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, chapter 2; Ramsey, *Spirits and the Law*, chapter 1.

69 Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, F3/126, 408-10 in *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*, ed. and trans. Geggus, 19.

70 See for example Moreau, *Description Topographique*, in *A Civilization that Perished*, ed. Spencer, 1-6.

forms that were often demonized by planters in Saint-Domingue and that by 1791 there had been a long history of secret and unsanctioned slave gatherings on the island.

The meeting at *morne rouge* on the night of August 21, 1791 would come to be known as the Bois-Caiman ceremony.<sup>71</sup> That night the Creole-born leader Boukman and a priestess, alongside “the cultivators, manufacturers, and artisans from several work gangs,” gathered in the woods in secret.<sup>72</sup> The enslaved men and women who attended the ceremony, thus, came from a broader mix of enslaved individuals, from laborers to elite-slaves and artisans. In addition, unlike the public and approved Lenormand meeting, the Bois-Caiman ceremony did not have planter approval. Because of that, anyone who went to the meeting would have been seen as engaged in marronage which made them at temporary fugitive. The meeting in that way was much more dangerous for attendees than the Lenormand meeting. Therefore, in its locale, its secrecy, and in the potential consequences for those attending, the Bois-Caiman differed in many ways from the meeting held at Lenormand. Whereas the Lenormand meeting was an elite-slave privilege, the Bois-Caiman ceremony fit into a long tradition of illegal slave gatherings.

The earliest description of the Bois-Caiman ceremony comes from Antoine Dalmas, who was a colonist that left the island in 1793. Here is the description he gave of the ceremony.

They had a kind of celebration or sacrifice in the middle of an uncultivated woods on the Choiseul plantation, known as Caiman, where the *nègres* [blacks or slaves] gathered in great numbers. A black pig, surrounded by objects they believe have magical power, each carrying the most bizarre offering, was

71 For a detailed discussion of the date of the Bois-Caiman, see Geggus, “The Bois Caiman Ceremony,” in *Haitian Revolutionary Studie*, 81-92.

72 Beaubrun Ardouin, *Études sur l'histoire d'Haïti* (1853), vol. 1, page 228, accessed April 4, 2014, [http://books.google.com/booksid=a1gIAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/booksid=a1gIAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false). The presence of Boukman at the ceremony has been a contentious issue in the scholarship. I will return to that issue later when the role of the priest and priestess at the ceremony is explored. On the heterogeneous makeup of the participants, see Hérard Dumesle, *Voyage to the North of Haiti, 1824*, in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, ed. Dubois and Garrigus, 87.



offered as a sacrifice to the all-powerful spirit of the black race. The religious ceremony in which the *nègres* slit its throat, the greed with which they drank its blood, the importance they attached to owning some of its bristles which they believed would make them invincible reveal the characteristics of the Africans. It is natural that a caste this ignorant and stupid would begin the most horrible attacks with the superstitious rites of an absurd and bloodthirsty religion.<sup>73</sup>

What stands out from Dalmas's telling is the way in which Afro-Caribbean religion, and especially blood-oath, were central to the Bois-Caiman ceremony. While at least one scholar has expressed doubt over the existence of the Bois-Caiman ceremony, most scholars agree that the ceremony was a real event and that it was religious in character.<sup>74</sup> In Beaubrun Ardouin's telling of the event, a priestess “plunged a knife in the entrails of a black pig.” Afterwards, “the conspirators drank” and while “kneeling, Boukman gave the terrible oath that led the business.”<sup>75</sup> The ritual just described is known to scholars as a blood-oath. Since all the major early accounts describe blood-oath as the center piece of the Bois-Caiman story, scholars have often studied religious practices at the Bois-Caiman by looking at the blood-oath ritual.<sup>76</sup> While they focus on blood-oath, these scholars have often been in search of the African origins of the Bois-Caiman. For example, Fick and Geggus have both argued that blood-oath at the ceremony had a cultural origin in the Congo, while Robin Law, more convincingly, has

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73 Dalmas, “Histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue,” in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, ed. and trans. Dubois and Garrigus, 90. *Nègres* used in this context usually refers to black slaves, either African born or creole. Although often when the term is employed the author has stressed slaves Africanness. In contrast, *Gens de couleur* and *mulâtre* were often used to stress creole traits.

74 For a discussion of its non-existence see Léon-François Hoffman, “Un mythe nationale: la cérémonie du Bois-Caiman,” in *La république haïtienne: état des lieux et perspectives*, eds. G. Barthélemy and C. Girault (Paris: Karthala, 1993), 434-448. On the ceremony as a real event see Geggus, “The Bois Caiman Ceremony,” in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*. On the event as religion, see Dubois, *Avengers*, 101; Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 94; Ramsey, *Spirits and the Law*, 43-44.

75 Beaubrun Ardouin, *Études sur l'histoire d'Haïti* (1853), vol. 1, page 228, accessed April 4, 2014, [http://books.google.com/books?id=a1gIAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=a1gIAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false), 229.

76 Beside Dalmas's and Ardouin's accounts, see Hérard Dumesle, *Voyage dans le nord d'Hayti, ou, Révélation des lieux et des monuments historiques* (Cayes: Imprimerie du Gouvernement, 1824), 86-88. On why these are the most reliable accounts of the event, see Geggus, “The Bois Caiman Ceremony,” in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 82-83.

argued that the blood-oath ritual at the ceremony can best be characterized as West-African in origin.<sup>77</sup> Two general trends are apparent in the scholarship. First, most scholars portray the Bois-Caiman as a religious moment. Second, many scholars have focused on the African origins of the ceremony. Yet while the search for African origins are important, the scholarship has focused less fully on how the practice of blood-oath was used by and impacted the individuals who attended the event.

Just like arguments over the coming of the Haitian Revolution, much of the scholarship has often found it difficult to view religious practices and political motives as intertwined in their descriptions of the Bois-Caiman ceremony. The major scholars who wrote at length about the Bois-Caiman ceremony have argued that the ceremony mainly sacralized a previously made political decision to rebel.<sup>78</sup> For them, the Lenormand meeting takes precedence over the Bois-Caiman ceremony when it comes to the organization and mobilization of the insurgency. This mirrors the ways in which some historians have generally separated Afro-Caribbean politics from religion. In *Avengers of the New World*, Dubois did suggest a sort of middle ground. He wrote that “though religious practices facilitated and spurred on insurrection, it was only their combination with careful political organization that made the 1791 uprising successful.”<sup>79</sup> Yet Dubois did not fully elaborate on the point and his analysis gives the impression that the Bois-Caiman was not part of the “political organization” of the insurgency. Despite many scholars' insistence that the Bois-Caiman should mainly be seen as a moment of

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77 On its Congolese origins, see Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 264-265; David Geggus, “Haitian Vodou in the Eighteenth Century.” On the Dahomian origins of the ceremony, see Robin Law, “On the African Background.”

78 On the Bois-Caiman as a moment of sacralization, see Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 94; Geggus, “The Bois Caiman Ceremony,” in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 91.

79 Dubois, *Avengers*, 101.

sacralization, Law advanced a suggestive argument in his analysis of blood-oath at the ceremony. He wrote that “it was arguably inherent in the nature of the blood-pact... that they [the blood-oath] provided a means for organizing collective action independently of existing political institutions, which might therefore transcend the boundaries of existing communities.”<sup>80</sup> Blood-oath, when seen in this manner could potentially hold both “a quite different role in the Diaspora,” where it could specifically serve as an organizational tool that leaders could employ when they mobilized the insurgency.<sup>81</sup> Law's telling provides a means by which to understand both the religious power of and the political motives of blood-oath. Unfortunately, even though he advanced a compelling way to understand blood-oath in the diaspora, Law did not go into much detail about how blood-oath at the Bois-Caiman specifically served as an organizational tool. Keeping Law's understanding of blood-oath in mind, I am now going to show how the Bois-Caiman ceremony served as a key organizational moment in the lead up to the insurgency.

The Bois-Caiman ceremony occurred during a time when it had become untenable for elite slaves to conceal knowledge of the insurgency for much longer from authorities. The sources are vague on exactly who knew about the plot to rebel, but at the very least the group of elite slaves who attended the Lenormand meeting had that knowledge on the morning of August 21<sup>st</sup>. After the attempted arrests at Desgrieux that day, those elite slaves who knew about the rebellion could no longer afford to wait for the 25<sup>th</sup> of August. It is unclear from the sources whether or not the Bois-Caiman ceremony at night on the 21<sup>st</sup> had been planned in advance or was a response to what had happened that morning. Although, the attempted arrests at Desgrieux suggest that the later is a

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80 Law, “On the African Background,” 13.

81 Law, “On the African Background,” 16.

likely interpretation. Regardless, the leaders of the Bois-Caiman conducted the ceremony with the knowledge that their original plans were beginning to fray. In that way, the Bois-Caiman came at crucial time where any longer delay may could have completely jeopardized the insurgency.<sup>82</sup>

As the plans set by the leaders of the insurgency began to unravel, the Bois-Caiman served as a powerful moment to bring a broader group of insurgents together. The power of the Bois-Caiman to mobilize non-elite and African slaves was analogous to the power that Lenormand held for the group of elite slaves. The earlier false start by the *commandeur* at Desgrieux came shortly after the Lenormand meeting. His actions show that Lenormand was a powerful moment for elite slaves in the lead up to the insurgency. Much like in the Desgrieux case, a group of slaves late at night, immediately after the Bois-Caiman ceremony, attacked the La Gossette plantation.<sup>83</sup> Ardouin wrote that “slaves from the *Chabaud* and *Lagoscette* plantations...who poorly understood Boukman's *explications* [orders], set fire to both these plantations at night.”<sup>84</sup> While Ardouin blamed the false start on a misunderstanding, judging from the timing of this second false start and in light of the earlier false start at Desgrieux, the Bois-Caiman ceremony likely inspired this group of enslaved individuals to take up arms. This time the difference lies in who prematurely began the offensive. Unlike at Desgrieux, non-elite slaves, many who could have been African-born, attacked the plantation. In the sources, this is the point when it is clear that non-elite and potentially African-born slaves were mobilized in the

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82 Geggus, “The Bois Caiman Ceremony,” in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 88. As Geggus has argued, “Boukman began the rebellion on August 22<sup>nd</sup> doubtless because he feared the conspiracy was being uncovered.”

83 Geggus, “The Bois Caiman Ceremony,” in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 87. Also see, Dalmas, “Histoire,” in Dubois and Garrigus, *Slave Revolution*, 90-91.

84 Ardouin, *Études sur l'histoire*, 229. My translation.

insurgency. Since that occurred immediately after the rituals and practices conducted at the Bois-Caiman ceremony and because participants at the ceremony were a mixed group, it is hard to blame this on coincidence. Therefore, while elite slaves had been definitively brought into the fold of insurgency at Lenormand, the Bois-Caiman ceremony was the moment when non-elite and African-born slaves were definitively brought into the insurgency. Since it was held on the crucial night before the start of the insurgency and in light of the tense situation among elite slaves, the Bois-Caiman ceremony served as the moment when elite slaves finished the initial process of organizing and mobilizing the insurgency.

Thus, it seems likely that Creole leaders, and more than likely Boukman, at the Bois-Caiman ceremony broadcast to slaves a key piece of secret knowledge after swearing the blood-oath: the decision to rebel. They chose a specific expression of religious practice, blood-oath, in order to do that. By looking at the decision to rebel as dangerous and esoteric knowledge, the use of blood-oath at the Bois-Caiman ceremony becomes key to unlocking how non-elite slaves were brought into the insurgency. Powerful knowledge often requires powerful rituals in order to disseminate that knowledge safely.<sup>85</sup> In response, the power of having that dangerous knowledge caused some men to act prematurely, both after the Lenormand meeting and after the Bois-Caiman ceremony. This is one reason why the Bois-Caiman ceremony and the blood-oath at the ceremony were so important to the series of events that led up to the insurgency. The blood-oath ritual at the ceremony was necessary in order to ensure safe transmission of dangerous knowledge to the many non-elite and African-born enslaved men and

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85 On the power of deep knowledge see Andrew Apter, "On African Origins: Creolization and *Connaissance* in Haitian Vodou," *American Ethnologist* Vol. 29, No. 2 (May, 2002), 233-260.

women, especially after the plot had started to become compromised. Without their help the insurgency did not have the numbers needed to succeed. The Bois-Caiman ceremony, far from merely sacralizing an already made political decision, was necessary for both the organization of the people involved and the transmission of that decision to a wider audience. In this way the political decision to rebel at Lenormand and the mobilization of non-elite men and women through blood-oath at the Bois-Caiman ceremony can be seen as intertwined in the ongoing process of organizing the insurgency.

A few hours later, after the sun had risen, Boukman began the insurgency in Acul. In little time, according to Dalmas, the plantations began to burn as “a band led by Boukman spread like a flood throughout the Parish.”<sup>86</sup> At that point, Creole and African-born as well as elite and non-elite enslaved individuals started to fight together in what would become a thirteen year period of conflict. Following Law's interpretation of blood-oath, I have argued here that the organizational potential of blood-oath at the Bois-Caiman ceremony worked in conjunction with the decision to rebel within a context of fear and worry, which brought forward the date of rebellion to the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August through the mobilization of a wider enslaved population in Saint-Domingue. Creole leaders were partly able to accomplish the level of organization and mobilization necessary for the success of the early insurgency by employing blood-oath ritual at the Bois-Caiman ceremony. When they took blood-oath, enslaved men and women also drew upon a culture of Afro-Caribbean religious expression that had been fermenting on the island. The contours of that culture can help us to further understand the social power and significance that blood-oath and other Afro-Caribbean practices, such as dance, held for

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<sup>86</sup> Dalmas, “Histoire,” in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, ed. Dubois and Garrigus, 91.

enslaved people in the early days of the insurgency. To date, much of the historical literature on the Bois-Caiman ceremony has underestimated the role that Afro-Caribbean culture has played in the formation of the 1791 insurgency. Since the time that much of the major literature on the Bois-Caiman ceremony has been written scholars' understanding of African and Afro-Caribbean religious practices has increased significantly, especially in the discipline of Anthropology. Still, the broader historical scholarship has only recently begun to reflect that understanding. In order to further explore how culture and Afro-Caribbean religious practices can help to understand the start of the Haitian Revolution, I will first discuss the larger approaches to culture taken in the major anthropological and historical scholarship over recent decades.

### **The Anthropological Approach: Studying Afro-Caribbean Culture**

The aim of this section of the paper will be to trace the rich anthropological literature of the twentieth century that has given rise to modern theories about the history of African-American culture. These theories provide the framework for much of the scholarship, both by historians and anthropologists, that scholars draw from when writing about slavery and slave life. Curiously, many of the current approaches taken by anthropologists have come to differ from those of historians. While anthropologists have long argued over how African culture and African-American culture were related, it was not until the 1990s that historians really began to grapple with that same question. Social history, the cultural turn, and a shift towards subaltern studies really drove the question of the formation of slave culture to the foreground for historians. But, rather than follow the anthropological scholarship that originally influenced history's cultural turn, historians

reached further back into the past and grabbed hold of an older political debate over cultural survivals and New World creativity that had long lost credence among anthropologists. Because of that, anthropology has, until very recently, forged a path separate from history. Like history and culture themselves, theories of cultural production are and have been an ongoing and contested process. This section will trace the history of anthropological approaches to understanding culture in order to show how those anthropological approaches can help to explain the ways in which culture and community have interacted.

Any discussion of cultural transmission has to begin with a discussion of how culture as a term or idea has been defined by social theory. Culture as an analytic tool has changed over time. In the late eighteenth century and through much of the nineteenth scientific explanations of culture emerged that stressed culture as a static feature of the human phenotype often attributed to environmental factors and a lack of “civility.” Moreau de Saint-Méry's system of racial classification by blood in the *Description Topographique* can be seen as an example of this way of imagining culture.<sup>87</sup> Central to the nineteenth-century conception of culture was the idea of mixture. But people like Moreau understood culture, which came to mean race later in the nineteenth century, to be internally static. Herbert Spencer serves as a nineteenth-century example of this paradigm. Discussing societies as “Social Organisms,” Spencer argues that “Just as in a living body, the individual cells that make up some important organ, severally perform their functions for a time and then disappear... so in each part of society, while the organ

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87 Moreau's stress on the mixture of different black and white blood as creating different degrees of acceptable or unacceptable social behavior serves as part of the historical racial context, from a European standpoint, that gave rise to theories such as Spencer's.



remains, the persons who compose it change.”<sup>88</sup> For Spencer and his contemporaries cultures could be located on an evolutionary hierarchy driven by a struggle for survival. Yet, despite their stress on evolution these categories of social progress remained rather static. Culture, rather than evolving, was evolved into.

Central to this Spencerian strain of anthropology was the linking of race to a categorically fixed evolutionary hierarchy with civilization or reason at the apex. In many ways, this racial hierarchy reflected social and political sentiments that were common in nineteenth-century America and Europe. Scientific racism was in vogue among many white intellectuals as they attempted to explain the relationship of culture and physical difference to social advancement. In anthropology, those sentiments would change in the twentieth century. In the early twentieth century, Franz Boas conducted a series of comparative experiments where he measured the cranial shapes of children born in America to those born in Europe. Boas' experiment marked the beginning of a shift away from earlier racial conceptions of culture. In addition, his experimentation served as a divergent point that prompted anthropologists to begin to explore how culture itself changed over time.<sup>89</sup> The Boasian understanding of a pliable culture divorced from race would prove fundamental to the emerging field of African American cultural studies.

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88 Herbert Spencer, “The Social Organism” in *Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History*, second edition, ed. R. Jon McGehee and Richard L. Warms (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2000), 15.

89 Charles Stewart, “Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory,” in *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory* ed. Charles Stewart (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007), 11. In fact, Boas directly attacked the social evolutionary school of anthropological thought. He wrote in 1920 that “During the second half of the last century evolutionary thought held almost complete sway and investigators like Spencer, Morgan, Tylor, Lubbock, to mention only a few, were under the spell of the idea of a general, uniform evolution of culture in which all parts of mankind participated.” See Franz Boas, “The Methods of Ethnology” [1920], in *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory* ed. Charles Stewart (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007), 134. In contrast to the evolutionary school Boas based his theory off of ideas informed by “the importance of diffusion and migration (134).”

The challenges posed by this new understanding of culture as change were reflected in the early twentieth-century writings of the two fathers of African-American cultural models: E. Franklin Frazier and Melville Herskovits. From the point of view of anthropological politics these two based their understandings of African-American culture on a debate, in the context of civil rights, that they raged over “Boas's complex and deeply ambivalent views on what was then known as the “Negro Problem.”<sup>90</sup> I will leave the history of that political debate for others. Yet, from the work of these two scholars sprang our concern in this paper. That central argument was the still scholarly debated, yet I often think overstated, opposition between *cultural retention* (Herskovits) and *cultural creativity* (Frazier). Melville Herskovits, in short, focused his work on the extent to which certain Afro-American groups, such as Haitians, retained African cultural practices. He called these practices “Africanisms.” Not totally divorced from the hierarchical tabulations of earlier anthropologists, Herskovits, for example, argued that “It is quite possible on the basis of our present knowledge to make a kind of chart indicating the extent to which the descendants of Africans brought to the New World have retained Africanisms in their cultural behavior.”<sup>91</sup> In contrast, Frazier argued that the New World context had profoundly changed African men and women. He wrote that “probably never before in history has a people been so nearly completely stripped of its

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90 Stephan Palmié, *The Cooking of History: How not to Study Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 121. Palmié often argues in this work that the inter-personal politics of anthropology shaped both the scholarship of the field and the people which were the subjects of its study. On the importance of the Herskovits versus Frazier debates, Palmié writes that “this curious oscillation between origin-centered “Africanists” and context-centered “Americanists” emphases... goes back (at least) to the debates, beginning in the 1930s, between Herskovits and his life-long opponent, the black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier.... Perhaps not surprisingly, similar analytical polarities are virtually absent in the scholarship originating in the Caribbean and have only recently emerged in Brazil.” (306, n13)

91 Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941), 16.

social heritage as the Negroes who were brought to America.”<sup>92</sup> For him, new *cultural creativity* was the hallmark of slave culture. To this day, the Herskovits-Frazier debate over the trans-Atlantic transference of culture forms the basis of scholars understanding of the contours of slave culture and society. As these two scholars worked toward their own political goals, they set up a dichotomy in the scholarship that has survived and simultaneously they left a split legacy that all future scholarship about African-American culture has had to contend with. It would not be until the 1960s, with a shift in theories on culture due to the publication of a landmark model of Afro-American cultural transference in the 1970s, that the Herskovits and Frazier debate would again become a major area of scholarly contestation.

In the 1960s cultural anthropologists roughly followed three major scholarly pathways. For our discussion here those paths can be labeled cultural materialism, symbolic anthropology, and structuralism. Ecological anthropologists such as Marvin Harris (1966) championed the first, cultural materialism. This group of anthropologists argued that culture and cultural systems grew out of and justified the material conditions under which people lived in the world. For example, in a classic work of materialist anthropology Harris argued that “explanations of taboos, customs, and rituals associated with management of Indian cattle be sought in “positive functioned” and probably “adaptive” processes of the ecological systems of which they are a part, rather than in the influence of Hindu theology.”<sup>93</sup> In this case, Harris argued that the sacredness of the

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92 E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 21.

93 Marvin Harris, “The Cultural Ecology of India's Sacred Cattle [1960],” in *Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History*, ed. R. Jon McGee and Richard L. Warms, fifth edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012), 277. See also Marvin Harris, *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches: The Riddle of Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974). A very modern and controversial analogue to cultural materialist theorists may be the history of J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-*

Indian cow was a function of its importance as a living producer of milk and cooking fuel. These theorists saw a direct association between the practices of food acquisition, population growth, and environmental stress and the practices of higher level culture, religion, and morality. While materialist explanations have persisted in anthropology through the years, they are often relied upon in the field of history as background or contextual information out of which people make the choices that shape their lives. I do believe that looking at material conditions (especially on the plantations) has much to teach us about social and cultural choices, but two other strains of 1960s cultural theory had a more direct impact on the shape of scholarship on Afro-American culture.

Clifford Geertz's webs of influence, Mary Douglas' ideas about purity and boundaries, and Victor Turner's analysis of the symbolic content of ritual profoundly changed the way scholars viewed culture and its production in the 1960s.<sup>94</sup> All three brought ideology, networks of ideological exchange, and symbolic production to the forefront. The theory of culture Geertz advanced stressed external-social “webs of significance” that placed emphasis on human cultures as multiple networks of understanding. Following that reasoning, if culture is external and imbued with meaning by the social system, culture as a system cannot be easily translated outside of the networks that give it form and meaning. Geertz's theory could have re-ignited a debate over the polarized stances held by Herskovits and Frazier. In many ways culture as an external-social web begs the question: did slaves even have the ability to retain their

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1914 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

94 See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1995 [orig. 1969]). Geertz's wrote all of the essays in the volume cited here in the 1960s.

former culture when they were removed from the social context that defined that culture? The answer would be complex. Symbolic anthropology, thus, seemingly had much potential to influence how scholars viewed African-American culture. Yet that potential has never seemed to materialize to any substantial degree. As Stephan Palmié has argued, “by the time Mintz and Price first launched their intervention in print (1976), the disciplinary subfield to which it most directly spoke had arguably, and in some sense purposively, missed the boat of the the hermeneutic and symbolic approaches dominating high-prestige debate in the late 1960s.”<sup>95</sup> Still, the confluence of a symbolic approach with modern scholarship about Afro-American culture, I believe, still has much to teach us. In particular, an approach influenced by symbolic anthropology would likely stress discovering how a shared African cultural grammar allowed enslaved men and women to come to similar meanings concerning new world practices, whereas by and large the existing historical and anthropological scholarship on the same topic stresses how a shared African cultural grammar produced a continuity of practice or institution. This shift in stress will become important later when we discuss the role of social power as a tool for shaping culture.

As we turn next to the last strain of 1960s anthropology, structuralism, we also will be discussing the foundation of the most provocative model of African-American culture produced in the twentieth century: *The Birth of African-American Culture* by Sidney Mintz and Richard Price. Structuralism can be best illustrated by the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Structuralism is based on the idea that “the underlying processes tying cultures together were found in bits of information that provide messages about the

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95 Stephan Palmié, *Cooking of History*, 239.

structuring of society. However, each culture is also the product of its own history and its technological adaptation to the world.”<sup>96</sup> Structuralism at its core is based around the analysis of binary contrasts (for example man and woman, night and day, sacred and profane, life and death). To structuralists these binary contrasts are key to understanding the underlying structures out of which cultural patterns are produced. Another key component of Lévi-Strauss' work was that as societies became more complex, “cultural interference created by our social environment” obscured the underlying structures that he saw as the basis of cultural production.<sup>97</sup> The challenge was to strip away this cultural interference. In his work Lévi-Strauss often wrote about religion and myth. In one essay about four Winnebago myths, Lévi-Strauss' purpose beautifully illuminates the structuralist stance on culture. He wrote that “My purpose will be to analyze the structural relationship between the four myths and to suggest that they can be grouped together... because they are of the same genre, i.e., their meanings logically complement each other.”<sup>98</sup> It is conceivable to see how Lévi-Strauss' work, with its emphasis on binaries (master and slave) and socially obscured underlying structures (for example slave religion), could influence anthropological research that was concerned with slavery and slaves. It is commonly accepted by scholars that it did just that. Mintz and Price's essay had at its core some very structuralist assumptions about culture. For example, they wrote that “we conceive of culture as being closely tied to the institutional forms which

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96 R. Jon McGee and Richard L. Warms, *Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History*, fifth edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012), 320.

97 R. Jon McGee and Richard L. Warms, *Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History*, fifth edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012), 321.

98 Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Four Winnebago Myths: A Structured Sketch [1960],” in *Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History*, ed. R. Jon McGee and Richard L. Warms, fifth edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012), 322.

articulate it.”<sup>99</sup> The concepts that they advanced, such as an underlying grammar of culture, history as a shaping force, institutions as key to cultural creativity, and the dialogue between master and slave all had deep roots in the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss. With an understanding of that theoretical foundation, we can dive into Mintz and Price's very influential essay.

Sidney Mintz and Richard Price produced what can be considered the most polarizing essay on the process of African-American cultural production. Rather than calling their theory a model like many historians, I believe “process” is a more appropriate description. As a process, Mintz and Price continually stressed that slaves struggled to create institutions within the context of the plantation in order to live culturally meaningful lives.<sup>100</sup> Two barriers stood in the way of that objective: the middle passage and the white-dominated power structure of slave society. Their essay placed much emphasis on historical context and the specifics of locale as key to understanding specific points of cultural production. Out this framework of production and process, Mintz and Price advanced a few key theoretical ideas that have been both highly influential to and hotly debated by scholars. The first is that the creation of African-American culture can proceed rapidly. The ramifications of this theoretical idea will be one of the central concerns of this paper. It is worth noting that Mintz and Price in the 1990s came under much scrutiny for this idea from Africanist historians. So much so, that in 2006 Richard Price wrote a defense of the Mintz and Price essay in which he argued that his fieldwork among the Saramaka specifically led to the suggestion of rapid

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99 Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992 [1976]), 14.

100Mintz and Price, *Birth of African-American Culture*, 41.

development. He corrected other scholar's readings of his essay by proposing that if we “separate out the methodological model” and “continue to insist on historical particulars” then different contexts will show that in some instances African culture changed rapidly while in others it changed more slowly.<sup>101</sup> Price's 2006 suggestion, which is echoed over and over in *The Birth of African-American Culture* when one re-reads the essay from that perspective, is fundamental. Stressing context and social particulars gives the process proposed by Mintz and Price an applicability over a much broader expanse of New World societies. According to Stephan Palmié, and despite many protests by historians who equated the fast pace of Saramaka cultural change to the theory presented by Mintz and Price, the Mintz and Price essay served as “a clarion call for the historization of African-American anthropology.”<sup>102</sup> Following that call, one of the central concerns and arguments of this paper's case study will be at what pace did the formation of religion in Saint-Domingue proceed in the context of the 1791 insurgency.

The second major theoretical advancement proposed by Mintz and Price is also central to the work I am doing here. They argued that “certain common orientations to reality may tend to focus the attention of individuals from West and Central African cultures upon similar kinds of events.”<sup>103</sup> These common assumptions, or underlying grammars, “would have been a limited though crucial resource. For they could serve as a catalyst in the process by which individuals from diverse societies forged new institutions.”<sup>104</sup> Mintz and Price did not originate this idea, rather they refined its use.

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101Richard Price, “On the Miracle of Creolization,” in *Afro-Atlantic Dialogues: Anthropology in the Diaspora*, ed. Kevin A. Yelvington, (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2006), 126.

102Stephan Palmié, “Is there a Model in the Muddle? “Creolization” in African Americanist History and Anthropology,” in *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory*, ed. Charles Stewart (Walnut Creek, Ca: Left Coast Press, 2007), 187.

103Mintz and Price, *Birth of African-American Culture*, 10.

104Mintz and Price, *Birth of African-American Culture*, 14.



Herskovits often employed the concept of an underlying “grammar of culture” in his work. Yet unlike Mintz and Price, Herskovits often employed that phrase when he could not explain how a certain African retention ended up in a New World context.<sup>105</sup> In contrast, Mintz and Price have argued that as knowledge of specifics of context (ethnicity, plantation life, African social structure) increase and the “poverty of our conceptual tools” lessens then scholars can show how these underlying basic assumptions “serve as a catalyst” for cultural and social change through the formation of new institutions.<sup>106</sup> Since, for them, institutions form the bedrock of culture, it follows that as new institutions grew, new cultural forms would emerge from those institutions. According to Mintz and Price, two major institutional forms were built from this shared cultural grammar: one form “limited in their scope to the slave group” and a second that “served as various kinds of links or bridges between the slaves and the free.”<sup>107</sup> In other words, internal and external institutions were in formation. People became communities out of the process of cultural change that went hand in hand with the creation of these institutions as they established “normative patterns of behavior.”<sup>108</sup> While historical context is key to understanding how a certain group of people over a certain time period

105Stephan Palmié, “Is There a Model in the Muddle?,” in *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory*, ed. Stewart, 183.

106Mintz and Price, *Birth of African-American Culture*, 9-15. Culture for Mintz and Price is “closely tied to the institutional forms which articulate it (14).” Therefore in order to look at African culture in the New World context, it is important to compare cultures and they argue that the most salient way to do that comparison is by looking at underlying grammars, which they also call cognitive orientations. Palmié argues that the use of “underlying grammar” has often been used improperly by historians and anthropologists alike because they have used the concept in place of attainable evidence. See Palmié, “Is there a Model in the Muddle?,” in *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory*, ed. Stewart. Furthermore, Palmié argued here that scholars have used the theories of Mintz and Price as a model of reality rather than as a model for reality, which attenuates the overarching drive toward historicization that is key to the Mintz and Price model (187). In this article Palmié offers no alternative model. Yet in *The Cooking of History*, Palmié both finds much merit in the Mintz and Price model and offers a new model for historicizing African American culture based upon a stratified cooking pot image borrowed from Fernando Ortiz.

107Mintz and Price, *Birth of African-American Culture*, 24.

108Mintz and Price, *Birth of African-American Culture*, 18.

created institutions and culture, the question that most concerns me, and to which we will return, is how or even if enslaved men and women employed specific concepts of underlying grammar to create a shared cultural practice within a context where institutional forms were often informal and apt to change.

In the 1980s anthropologists began to grapple with a new theoretical outlook often described under the umbrella term postmodernism or post-structuralism. Both “discourse” and “power” were two of the central themes of postmodern thought that re-organized the way that anthropologists looked at culture. Pierre Bourdieu conceived of the *habitus* as a dialogue between both objectivism, or the influence of the outer world, and subjectivism, action as a result of interpretation and understanding. Or in other words, internal agency and external structure interacted to create culture within a social context. The *habitus* can be seen in many ways as akin to the underlying grammar theorized by Mintz and Price. This is not surprising since all three borrowed much from earlier structuralist theory. What is important is that for all three culture emerges from a continual process of social change.<sup>109</sup> Power, social and individual, became a central concept explored by postmodernists. For example, Michel Foucault, in the late 1970s, brought attention to the ways in which forms of “power” (for example knowledge, surveillance, ideas of the normative) mediated the relation of individual to society and individual to individual. Since then, any serious approach to society has had to in some way pay attention to the ways in which power relations between unequal social actors were part of the cultural process. What is important to this study is that both power and

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<sup>109</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, “Structures, Habitus, Practices,” in *Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History*, ed. R. Jon McGee and Richard L. Warms, fifth edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012), 493-494. This excerpt is from *The Logic of Practice* written in 1980.

discourse based theories have since found their way into the anthropological approach to African-American culture. Yet another influential piece of postmodern writing may have had a larger impact on the course taken by theorists of African-American culture since then: the rhizome.

In 1980 (1987 in translation) Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari wrote the theory that would serve as the backbone to some of the the most prominent literature on African-American culture and society since. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the authors proposed that the rhizome could be used as a conceptual tool for the study of life and culture. The rhizome as a model of society and culture is in simplistic terms a continual process or “a veritable becoming” that has no beginning nor end.<sup>110</sup> The authors contrast the image of the rhizome (twisted with a multiplicity of shoots and branches) to a tree root as an example of a de-centered discourse that may be extended to any number of fields, such as culture or history. For them the crux of the rhizome was an attempt to move away from the idea of “roots” toward the aforementioned idea of becoming. As a brief example, they write that “History is always written from the sedentary point of view and in the name of a unitary state... What is lacking is the Nomadology, the opposite of a history.”<sup>111</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, history should be more concerned with what could have been and with what was happening, rather than an exercise of looking back toward a fixed point. Despite often ignoring the historical problems such as time period, series of event, and causality, theories like this became the basis on which many anthropologists crafted their conceptions of how culture functioned after the early 1980s. Following that trend, work

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110 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 10.

111 Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus*, 23.

on African-American culture began to use metaphors similar to the rhizome in order to re-imagine how culture was transferred around the Atlantic World.

In large part, the 1990s saw the anthropological study of African-American culture move further and further away from the African retention school started by Herskovits. For example, Édouard Glissant re-imagined Caribbean society as characterized by relation. To do that, Glissant employed a new image of the “rhizome” which “maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root.”<sup>112</sup> For him, in the context of very inter-mixed Caribbean, the mangrove tree served as a more apt concept than the traditional rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari. According to Glissant cultural exchange was both interconnected and rooted in a complex manner. For Glissant, “relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge. This experience of the abyss [middle passage] can be said to be the best element of exchange.”<sup>113</sup> While his language echoed that of Frazier as Glissant stressed the middle passage, Glissant made an attempt to both be sensitive to roots while also showing that roots were multifaceted. Frazier did not make that link. To that end, shared knowledge for Glissant could be African knowledge or European knowledge or some other new form of knowledge informed by experience. Unlike Frazier, Glissant stressed that people employed shared knowledge in order to forge a relationship during a period characterized by stress. So, while Frazier saw the middle passage as a socially disruptive and culturally destructive event, Glissant viewed the middle passage as a unifying and socially creative event that often drew upon shared knowledge. Yet, at the same time Glissant was not

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112 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997 [1990]), 11.

113 Glissant, *Poetics*, 8.

arguing for African cultural retention either. What is found in the theory of Glissant here is an early attempt to bridge the Herskovits-Frazier debate through a postmodern conception of inter-relatedness.

In much the same way that Glissant stressed the interconnection of Caribbean people and culture, Paul Gilroy saw a similar process in what he called the “black Atlantic.” For him the black Atlantic was “a webbed network, between the local and global,” which “challenges the coherence of all narrow nationalist perspectives and points to the spurious invocation of ethnic particularity to enforce them and to ensure the tidy flow of cultural output into neat, symmetrical units... whether from the oppressors or the oppressed.”<sup>114</sup> In Gilroy's telling, the black Atlantic was always in a dialogue with the white Atlantic or any other conception of the Atlantic. For example, Gilroy called this active process “the movements of black people.”<sup>115</sup> In that way, what emerges is a very untidy and often conflict riddled view of culture that could draw on currents that flowed powerfully against the politics or social desires of certain individuals. Yet, at all times Gilroy, like Glissant, left open the prospect that the interrelation of cultures were both local and trans-Atlantic. So, while they both stress cultural creativity and plurality, they remain sensitive to the influence of what Mintz and Price called an underlying grammar.

In this section, I have attempted to stress that culture in the work of Glissant and Gilroy, and many recent anthropologists, is a constant an ongoing dialogue between people. Culture to these scholars is and was an active process. Culture does not remain

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114Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 29.

115Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 16. Gilroy continually reiterates the idea that black men and women are both socially inside and outside the white world. Because of that, the culture they create is both inside and outside different fields of conceptualization, such as the white Atlantic, black Atlantic, European society, or American society. In that way, his conceptualization of the black experience is a powerful tool to look at how Atlantic people are inherently mixtures and multiple in identity and culture.

static and, if it does, it is because someone or some group has actively maintained that culture. Because they have stressed the process of culture, cultural change and interrelation are also stressed. In contrast, historical scholarship about African-American societies has mostly been concerned with roots, origins, and a re-capturing of an African past in the Americas. That search for origins, or roots, has emphasized the static or timeless quality of culture that recent anthropologists have dismissed as unrealistic. Still, a few recent scholars who stress the process of culture, like Gilroy and Glissant, have attempted to bridge this divide between rootedness and cultural creativity. They have left open the possibility that African cultural grammar could be integrated within their theories of culture as a process. That approach is reminiscent of the work of Mintz and Price. That is why I believe that Mintz and Price's work still has much relevance for the study of African-American culture. Their work and the work of some very recent anthropologists can go a long way toward helping us to be both sensitive to culture as a process and to culture as traditions or roots maintained by society. The next section of this paper will trace how the historical scholarship charted a separate course from the anthropological scholarship in the 1990s and will highlight some approaches to culture that may prove helpful for a later analysis of the Bois-Caiman ceremony.

### **A Theoretical Divergence: The New Herskovits-Frazier Debate**

Mintz and Price originally published their essay in 1976, but in 1992 the authors re-released it in a more accessible format, which led to an explosion in readership. That expanded readership created a division between scholars that closely followed disciplinary lines. Cultural and social historians working on histories of the African

diaspora were among the many new readers of the Mintz and Price essay. Many found fault with the Mintz and Price model. While anthropologists and historians have both leveled critiques against the Mintz and Price essay, Africanist historians by and large leveled the most criticism against it. Africanist scholar, at this time, largely argued that cultural retentions, rather than the creative process suggested by Mintz and Price, were the fundamental cultural feature of most slave societies.<sup>116</sup> Therefore, despite the ongoing integration of anthropological theory into the historical discourse of cultural and social history, historians of the African diaspora began to take a path that diverged from the dominant theories found in anthropology. Stephan Palmié put it best. He said that “by the time mainstream anthropology began to discover the Caribbean under the sign of... creolization, globalization, transnationalism, and so forth in the early 1990s, quite a few historians were turning away from what I would like to call an ackee and saltfish model [Mintz and Price model] of the origins and history of African American cultures!”<sup>117</sup> This scholarly divergence is curious and may account for many of the differences between the anthropological and historical approaches to African-American culture advanced today. So, while anthropologists and other social theorists by and large built upon the process based model advanced by Mintz and Price in the 1990s forward, historians began to

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<sup>116</sup>One of the most pronounced post-modern critiques can be found in David Scott, “That Event, This Memory: Notes on the Anthropology of African Diasporas in the New World,” *Diaspora* 1 (3): 261-284. Scott suggests that scholars should turn away from trying to find an authentic Afro-American past toward a method that stresses how memory was used by Afro-American people to construct the lives that they lived. He directly argued that the Mintz and Price model could not address the formation of African American culture. Richard Price offered his own rebuff of this critique in “On the Miracle of Creolization,” in *Afro-Atlantic Dialogues*, ed. Yelvington. He says that “Scott's radical critique would deny the primary object of historical study—pasts (134).” For a few examples of historians who have challenged the Mintz and Price model, see Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998); James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

<sup>117</sup>Palmié, *Cooking of History*, 230.

resurrect many of Herskovits' ideas about cultural change and cultural retention that anthropology had left behind in the 1960s and 1970s.

The scholars who re-discovered Herskovits have been termed the “new revisionism” school by Paul Lovejoy. According to Palmié, “it [new revisionism] emanates from the disciplinary core of the American historical profession where, after decades of research..., neo-Herskovitsian notions about the overriding importance of the slaves' original African cultural identity in such processes have once more gained ground in recent years.”<sup>118</sup> As historians began to put in a sustained effort to uncover specific African traditions in New World slavery, they also began to stress the retention of those traditions. John Thornton in *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World* may have summarized the “new revisionist” stance on culture the best when he said that “in the eighteenth century African culture was not surviving: it was arriving.”<sup>119</sup> For scholars like Thornton uncovering the cultural participation of African men and women often went hand in hand with showing the agency of the enslaved. For them the middle passage “was not going to cause the African-born to forget” their culture.<sup>120</sup> Since they stress tradition, origin and agency, new revisionist scholars have often argued that African cultural robustness led to a slow process of cultural change in the Americas. By doing so new revisionist scholars have tended to argue away, in a general sense, the possibility that culture could change rapidly in certain contexts. Because of that, the Mintz and Price essay (re-released in 1992) became the foil that the new revisionist scholars argued against. For example, Thornton contrasted his argument that Africa was a plurality of

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118Palmié, *Cooking of History*, 231.

119Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 320.

120Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 320.



complex societies whose people were “active participants in the Atlantic World” with the Mintz and Price model, which he described as precluding the direct transmission of culture and thus the participation of Africans from specific cultural groups.<sup>121</sup>

Unfortunately, at this moment in the early 1990s the tension that characterized the early Frazier-Herskovits duel also re-entered scholarship and manifested itself as a cross-disciplinary argument over retention and creation.

Even though the Mintz and Price model has often served as a foil to new “revisionist scholarship,” historical scholarship on Afro-American culture has also internally reproduced the divide found in the Herskovits-Frazier debate. A short example may suffice. Jon Butler in 1990 argued that the middle passage created a “holocaust” like situation, which essentially eradicated African religious practice in the American South.<sup>122</sup> While most scholars have described the middle passage as disruptive and life changing, Butler, drawing on Orlando Patterson, echoed the harsh language of cultural severance used by Frazier. In response, Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood in *Come Shouting to Zion* reacted against the harsh language and stark new-creationist stance advanced by Butler. Drawing on John Thornton's work, Frey and Wood argued that “the almost complete separation of black and white spiritual communities made it possible for Afro-Caribbeans to create a spiritual universe whose primary cultural essence derived from African antecedents... African American Christians created semi-autonomous spheres of life based in part on cultural assimilation and in part on cultural resistance and autonomy.”<sup>123</sup> By stressing “antecedents,” their stance drew heavily on the work of

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121 Thornton, *Africa and Africans* Press, 6.

122 Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 157.

123 Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998),

Herskovits. Yet by the end of their respective works, both Butler and Frey and Wood concluded that African Americans in the United States had created new forms of Christianity in the nineteenth century. They came to similar historical conclusions despite starting from different assumptions over cultural transmission and the middle passage. What differed was that Frey and Wood saw those forms of Christianity as African based while Butler characterized them as American based.

Differing assumptions about the interaction between culture and resistance led to the differences between the work of Frey and Wood and Butler. For Frey and Wood, like Thornton, a slave's resistance to planter domination and power illustrated the continuity of African cultural practices in the New World. In a semi-circular argument they also often argue that those practices are then forms of resistance. These scholars have tended to stress African agency, which in turn has stressed a continuity of African cultural practice characterized as origins and traditions. Because of that, agency and resistance are often the keys to unlocking an understanding of “new revisionist” scholarship. Their reliance on those two theoretical issues explains why new revisionist scholars have often echoed the theory of retention first advanced by Herskovits. The argument often goes: if white, European, or planter culture was the new and the powerful, then African culture had to resist that force in order to survive. It does not take much of an imaginative stretch to understand how the new revisionist approach could both illuminate certain social relationships while it clouds or covers up others. For example, resistance to planter culture often existed side by side with assimilation, cooperation, and ambivalence. This was shown earlier by the discussion of the many enslaved individuals who did not join

the 1791 insurgency. By stressing resistance, new revisionist scholars have tended to overlook many of the other interactions that occurred within slave society. In addition, since resistance is often constructed on a slave versus master binary, conflict, tension, and uneven cooperation between enslaved men and women often goes unnoticed. This is a charge that may also be leveled against Carolyn Fick as she emphasized resistance over other social interactions.<sup>124</sup>

Yet, Butler represents another extreme that may be equally problematic. By stressing complete cultural rupture, Butler totally ignored the importance of the past for the construction of what people do in their present. Tradition goes missing in his narrative. That is a stance that Mintz and Price never came close to holding. Yet, betwixt and between this opposition in approach can be found an series of important conceptual juxtapositions. Butler stressed the importance of event (middle passage) as shaping culture, while Frey and Wood stressed the importance of tradition and origin in shaping events. Similarly, Butler is situated at one extreme, emphasizing fast cultural change, while Frey and Wood can be situated at the other, emphasizing a more gradual cultural change. Lastly, Butler placed the emphasis on how an outside force (Christianity) impacted the inner workings of an African-American cultural system, while Frey and Wood championed the exact opposite, how African tradition shaped Christianity. Both Frey and Wood and Butler stressed the polar extremes of these binaries. Many new revisionist scholars have done the same in regards to African origins. Yet many

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124 This is a charge that Vincent Brown has called *distillation*, which he described as an overemphasis on such often used slave-studies tropes such as social death, slave resistance, and cultural retention. He argues that this over-reliance obscures the ever changing and contingent social action of slaves in an effort to distill their culture, politics, and society into cohesive constructions. See Vincent Brown, "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery," *The American Historical Review* vol. 114, no. 5 (December 2009), 1231-1249.

possibilities exist between these seemingly oppositional points. Because Mintz and Price's work often falls in between, neither Frey and Wood nor Butler embraced their work. In addition, both sets of scholars were unable to capture how culture could change at different speeds and in different ways depending on the context. This exercise may seem specialized and prompted by Lévi-Strauss, but it has a greater significance because it mirrors the manner by which historians of the Haitian Revolution have polarized political motives and religious practices. As shown by the earlier discussion about the lead up to insurgency, religious practices and political motives were more intertwined than scholars have thus far argued.

The work of Michael Gomez may be some of the most nuanced of the “new revisionist” school of scholarship. Gomez argued in *Exchanging our Country Marks* that over time African ethnicity (a New World survival) slowly changed into racial identification and labeling by the 1830s. Time and time again, Gomez, in this work, tried to answer many of the same questions that concerned Mintz and Price. He wrote that “black folk had to re-create their society, their collective inner life, drawing from any number of ethnic paradigms and informed by the present crisis.”<sup>125</sup> His early argument often paralleled the ideas of “underlying assumptions” and context that were at the center of the Mintz and Price model. For example, Gomez often stressed the similarity of cognitive orientations. He wrote, “the Congolese practice of *minkisi* mirrored the Bambara worldview and use of charms, as did Fon-Ewe-Yoruba voodoo.”<sup>126</sup> In addition, he argued early on that a slave realm and a slave-master realm were subject to differing

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125Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks*, 15.

126Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks*, 153. Here, Gomez looked at the use of fetishes to determine how many different African groups and New World slave communities used sacred material objects.

cultural proclivities based on access to power and that this dynamic created a “polycultural African American community.”<sup>127</sup> His arguments about a polycultural community, power relations, and cognitive orientation came were in many ways similar to the arguments of Mintz and Price. Therefore, much of what Gomez argued early in his work made it seem as if cultural dialogue and social power would be central to how he constructed cultural change.

But as his work unfolded, Gomez often argued that a specific African ethnic group's culture was the prime determinant of specific cultural practices in the New World. In Gomez's telling African culture and ethnicity were often portrayed as timeless and static. He conceived of them as antecedents. For instance, Gomez concluded that the “West Central African use of ring ceremonies was the main source for the development of the ring shout and the *minkisi* the basis for hoodoo.”<sup>128</sup> In a clever sleight of hand, Gomez often glossed over the process of cultural mixture as he advanced a polycultural system in order to pinpoint certain cultural origins in certain contexts. Similar to Frey and Wood, Gomez based his argument of culture on an assumption of “resistance to change” despite context. That sounds a lot like Herskovits in a new coat and nothing like the work of Glissant or Gilroy for example. In regards to the Bois-Caiman ceremony, scholars like Geggus and Law also followed a similar style of argument when they argued that either Dahomian or Congolese origins were the prime characteristics of blood-oath. In searching for origins, they have stressed tradition over the social uses of blood-oaths in Saint-Domingue. Still Gomez emphasized a timeless quality to culture much more

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<sup>127</sup>Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks*, 9.

<sup>128</sup>Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks*, 152.

forcefully than either Law or Geggus.<sup>129</sup> In the end, Gomez came to different conclusions concerning culture than many of the recent anthropologists previously mentioned, despite often alluding to similar theoretical concepts.

Just as Gomez intensified Herskovits' approach, James Sweet took the argument for African origins to a new level. A second wave of “new revisionist” scholarship emerged after the turn of the twenty-first century. Sweet's *Recreating Africa* is a representative example of that scholarship. The study's title is an apt description. He concluded that “it is no longer evident that we should start from a premise of creolization when analyzing slave culture in the diaspora. Rather we should assume that specific African cultural forms and systems of thought survived intact.”<sup>130</sup> Frey, Wood, Thornton and Gomez often argued that particular African practices, cognitions, or cultural pieces survived the middle passage. Sweet, on the other hand, argued that entire systems of African culture and the African institutions that accompanied that culture had survived in the context of Brazil. There is a big difference between Gomez's argument that cognitive orientations and certain cultural practices drove the formation of a new culture in the New World and Sweet's argument that African institutions survived the middle passage intact. In fact, Sweet challenged the arguments of both Mintz and Price and Frey and Wood in a single paragraph, two groups of scholars who I have argued are not theoretically similar in how they approached cultural change.<sup>131</sup> Sweet's work then can serve as one of the strongest examples of a historical scholarship that has stressed African

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129Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks*, 154-155. Gomez argued here that a “continuity of culture was a principal weapon” for the slave opposed to white or planter power and authority and that “to this end, the African antecedent formed a wellspring of cultural resistance.”

130Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 229.

131Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 228.

origins and cultural resistance as its fundamental assumptions. By doing so, cultural change and mixture has often been swept under the rug by the same scholarship.

Sweet's work stands as a keystone example of what Palmié described as the divergence of anthropology and history over how to approach the contours of African-American culture. Although new revisionist scholars have all stressed that African cultural survivals are fundamental to understanding New World slave societies, scholars within that school have often argued over the degree to which cultural survivals and retentions have impacted slave life. While anthropologists explored culture as contested, processual, and apt to change, scholars like Sweet argued more strongly than ever for a retained African culture in the Americas. Therefore, during the 1990s the distance between anthropological and historical thought began to widen as newer historians attempted to prove that African culture survived in all aspects of slave life in the Americas, while anthropologists saw social context as the starting point from which to understand African-American culture. Yet, the theory of Mintz and Price for along time allowed for the integration of both context (for example plantation power structures) and cultural tradition (for example cognitive orientations). William Roseberry, as well, wrote at length about breaking down these oppositions. To do that, he advocated treating culture as production and seeing tradition as part of that production. Let us now draw on the anti-binary spirit of William Roseberry to attempt to bridge context and tradition, anthropology and history in order to try to see slave culture in a much more nuanced and complex manner.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup>William Roseberry, *Anthropologies and Histories: Essays in Culture, History, and Political Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 26-27. Drawing on the work of Eric Wolf and Clifford Geertz, Roseberry attempted to bring together the timelessness he saw in anthropological conceptions of culture with contexts of politics and power he saw being advanced in history. Renato Rosaldo advocated a similar approach to culture in *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*

Despite over stressing resistance and under-stressing the role of context and power struggle, new revisionist scholars have contributed in many ways to our understanding of specific African derived practices in the New World. Frey and Wood, Gomez, and Sweet have all argued convincingly that Africa cultural practices, ideas, and cognitive orientations survived the journey across the Atlantic. In doing so, these scholars are at their best when they keep the scope of study small and specific. For example, John Thornton persuasively argued that insurgent slaves drew on extensive African military training during the Haitian Revolution. He then argued that that African military training helped toward the success of the insurgents and led to the ability of those insurgents to sustain the military campaign for a long duration.<sup>133</sup> Looking at how the Central African practice of *calundu* (a religious practice concerned with healing) was more than likely an African precedent of *calenda* (as both a dance and a danced form of religious practice in Saint-Domingue and Brazil), James Sweet in a succinct manner suggested that in this case a West-Central African origin for a New World form of dance makes much sense. Over time he showed that *calenda* culturally evolved from a strictly religious practice toward a more popular, secular dance in Brazil.<sup>134</sup> Many other examples can be drawn out of the works mentioned in the above discussion. Thus, while new revisionist theories of robust culture often contradict anthropological work on the subject, an unintended consequence of the new revisionism scholarship has been that historians have gradually uncovered much of what Mintz and Price called an “underlying grammar.”

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(Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

133John K. Thornton, “African Soldiers in the Haitian Revolution,” in *Origins of the Black Atlantic*, eds. Laurent Dubois and Julius S. Scott (New York: Routledge, 2010), 195-213.

134Sweet, “The Evolution of Ritual,” in *Diasporic Africa*, ed. Gomez.



What the new revisionist scholarship suggests to me is that the New World context may be the key to uncovering a way to bridge these two scholarly approaches. I come to this suggestion both because of the way that anthropologists have stressed context as key to cultural production and because of the high degree of variability seen in the work of scholars about how and to what extent slaves retained cultural. For example, Sweet's work on Brazil was premised on an argument that culture changed at a rather slow pace. That stance can be seen as a product of his underlying assumption that scholars should begin from an African perspective when analyzing the specifics of cultural life in Brazil. That may be true in the particular Brazilian instances studied by Sweet.<sup>135</sup> In contrast, Mintz and Price found that slaves in Saramaka creolized rapidly. While their essay did not preclude that a slow process of creolization occurred elsewhere, the specific examples used by the authors lead to a conclusion that emphasized relatively fast creolization in Saramaka. Because he thought that many historians and anthropologists had wrongly interpreted his work, Price in 2006 urged scholars to pay attention to context when determining the speed and contours of creolization.<sup>136</sup> Saramaka, he stressed, was merely the example used by the Mintz and Price essay. It was not the method. Rather, the method revolved around close analysis of a specific New World social context and seeing how culture was produced in that context. In light of the work of Price and Gilroy, I do not think that Sweet's suggestion to start from an assumption of African survivals has been sensitive enough to the social conflict and

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135 See Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 2. Sweet in this work attempted to study all of Brazil. He states that this study is concerned with beliefs, practices, and people rather than events. Yet in light of the work of Vincent Brown in "Social Death and Political Life," this may be one of the major failings of some of the historical scholarship, which elevates cultural trends, such as religious practices, out of the events where those trends can be observed.

136 Richard Price, "On the Miracle of Creolization," in *Afro-Atlantic Dialogues*, ed. Yelvington.

power struggles that were part of the New World context. At the same time, new revisionist historians such as Sweet, Frey, and Wood have made it clear that starting from the assumption of a cultural blank slate (such as Frazier, Patterson, and Butler) does not capture the true complexity of the African background to slave culture in the Americas. Over and over again, many of these scholars uncover African precedents similar to the cognitive orientations stressed by Mintz and Price. It is how they have seen those antecedents as timeless rather than as cultural production units that is being contested here. While new revisionist have advanced scholars understanding of African traditions, what needs to be attended to was how those traditions were actively maintained by enslaved people.<sup>137</sup>

Just like new revisionists have shown that culture could be retained through studies of slave resistance, social conflict, as an analytical tool, may be crucial to understanding cultural maintenance and change. Conflict featured significantly in Jason R. Young's work *Rituals of Resistance*. Young argued that “slave cultural resistance was not only defensive in nature, as it helped slaves shield themselves from some of the horrid conditions of enslavement, but also offensive, enabling them to attack directly the ideological underpinnings of slavery.” He called this duality of cultural resistance a “salve” and “sword” approach.<sup>138</sup> In the specific context of the Kongo and Lowcountry South Carolina, Young was able to show how religion served both purposes for the enslaved. Similar to Young, Walter Rucker highlighted the interaction of culture and resistance in his work *The River Flows On: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity*

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<sup>137</sup>Palmié, *Cooking of History*, 7.

<sup>138</sup>Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 12.

*Formation in Early America*. Rucker argued that specific African cultural practices and ideas served as “shaping principals in several examples of North American slave resistance,” which ultimately served to create “African American culture” from “a series of cultural negotiations between African ethnic enclaves.” Drawing on six specific cases of slave revolt and resistance, Rucker argued that “the current study expands on this important conclusion [transformation to an African-American identity and culture] by looking at resistance as a liminal realm encompassing cultural bridges—conjure, animal tricksters, martial dances, burial customs, and beliefs associated with ironworking—that promoted collective action and collaboration between African ethnic groups.”<sup>139</sup> The work of both scholars has placed resistance in dialogue with social conflict and African-American culture. In the process they have shown that both processes lead to cultural and social change. The work of Young and Rucker suggests that during times of heightened social trauma, for example the lead in to the 1791 insurgency, specifics of culture and how people interact with, choose, and maintain that culture becomes exposed by that social trauma.

While at times they stress African retention, the work of Young and Rucker stands as representative of a turn in the historiography away from earlier studies concerned mainly with the survival of African practices toward approached that stress process and cultural dialogue. Young called this dialogue, note the similarity to Gilroy, an “African Atlantic religious complex” where “Africa [must] not always precede ritual belief or practice in the New World but may also stand along side the slave cultures of

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139Walter C. Rucker, *The River Flows On: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 6-9.

the Americas.”<sup>140</sup> Young's work is thus a revision of earlier historians who overly stress African origins. In the field of anthropology, Roseberry leveled a similar critique against Clifford Geertz and Marvin Harris. He remarked that “both treat culture as product but not as production.”<sup>141</sup> Roseberry here gets at a central theme in much of the recent anthropological work. Many recent anthropologists argue that culture is both action (cultural production) and enaction (a product, a culture, or from the symbolic perspective interpretation) intertwined. The dialogue between these two is stressed over either separately. It is easy to see how this approach can bridge many of the polarities that were exposed as central to both the new revisionist scholarship as well as the retention and cultural change debate. Young and Rucker have begun to bring this approach into the historical study of African-American culture. It is an approach that has not been followed by the major works on the Haitian Revolution to date.

More recently, Stephan Palmié takes this more fluid conception of culture one step further. He argues that people should be studied “as if there were culture.” The important word is “if.” Culture for him is best seen as an analytic or heuristic tool employed by people. Rather than culture as concrete practices or cognition, in Palmié's understanding there exist only “slices of life put under cultural, social, economic, linguistic descriptions.” In other words, people on the ground often do not think about themselves in terms of culture but rather in terms of their own lives. Thus, for scholars like Palmié, what culture in practice amounts to is a process of “constant maintenance work” by communities and individuals since culture is always engaged in a perpetual and

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<sup>140</sup>Young, *Rituals of Resistance*, 122.

<sup>141</sup>Roseberry, *Anthropologies and Histories*, 26.

unintended process of entropy and change.<sup>142</sup> Key to Palmié's argument is how in response to social forces people actively maintain, use, and change practices, beliefs, cognitive bents, and morality. Thus, resistance to cultural change in this understanding is an active process. Because of that, Palmié, like Roseberry, finds that culture is often intertwined with political motives and social needs. Therefore, it is not culture that resists change but rather the active work of people and groups that decide when and how culture endures, changes, and is replaced. That process alters even well-maintained culture as politics and society change.

One recent historian has begun to examine that process in detail. Drawing on what he called "mortuary politics," Vincent Brown suggests that "examining the politics of practical behavior... calls attention to people's strategies for using cultural practices to fulfill a variety of pressing needs in difficult and dangerous circumstances." African-ness, for Brown, does not tell us enough "about how in specific contexts particular cultural configurations shaped political experience and action."<sup>143</sup> For Brown power struggles among slaves and between slaves and masters in colonial Jamaica were both shaped by and shaped slave culture. This approach parallels the recent work of Françoise Vergès, J. Lorand Matory, and Palmié who have all stressed that conflict between individuals within a given group often gave shape to and formed the culture of that group.<sup>144</sup> Yet Brown, unlike Palmié, often shied away from integrating concepts of African origins into *The Reaper's Garden*. While Brown highlighted the strategic use of culture for social ends, he

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<sup>142</sup>Palmié, *Cooking of History*, 7.

<sup>143</sup>Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 7-8.

<sup>144</sup>See J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Palmié, *Cooking of History*; Françoise Vergès, "Indian-Oceanic Creolizations: Processes and Practices of Creolization on Réunion Island," in *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory*, ed. Charles Stewart (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007).

often glossed over the ways that certain groups could use specific African cultural ideas and practices for their own political and social ends. In other words, Brown largely ignored what Palmié would call constant maintenance work.<sup>145</sup> In response, I believe a more nuanced understandings of culture and African origins may emerge when new revisionist work on African origins is placed in dialogue with social conflict within the slave sector and between the enslaved and the socially dominant. The way that people chose to change and maintain culture in the face of pressing social and political need can go a long way toward our understanding of society.

The lead up to the Bois-Caiman ceremony, as shown earlier, stands as an example of this process. Over the course of the week between Lenormand and the Bois-Caiman ceremony, elite slaves, who often came from and valued different cultural practices than non-elite slaves, had to appeal to those culturally different people. They did this actively at the Bois-Caiman ceremony. It is not coincidence that blood-oath was chosen as the center piece of that ceremony. Leaders surely understood that the blood-oath ritual at the center of the ceremony was a useful tool that could be used to bring these non-elite enslaved men and women into the fold of insurgency. Yet, studies of the Bois-Caiman often fall back on African origins as they divorced the political motives of the leadership group from the practical needs of that group to cultural appeal to a broader group of potential insurgents. In contrast, I argued above that these needs were in fact intertwined and that the Bois-Caiman ceremony was central to this process. I have drawn much from the work of Roseberry, Palmié, and Brown in constructing that narrative. Now, I will turn to a discussion of a few of the specific cultural practices found at the Bois-Caiman

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<sup>145</sup>Palmié, *Cooking of History*, 7.

ceremony in order to show how African derived practices were used strategically during the early insurgency and how using those practices came together to forge an evolving creole culture out of the events of the early Haitian Revolution.

### **A King, a Queen and a Blood-Oath**

Earlier, I argued that the Bois-Caiman made visible the ways in which a political decision to rebel was intertwined with religious practices, especially blood-oath. Following Robin Laws argument, the earlier analysis in this study showed how the Bois-Caiman ceremony makes sense as a moment of organization which brought many non-elite enslaved men and women into the insurgency right before the outbreak of violence. The blood-oath ritual at the center to the ceremony acted as one of the mechanisms of that organization. As just shown, recent work by anthropologists and historians can help to better interpret this moment. The work of Kenneth Bilby is an apt example. Working among maroon communities in Jamaica and Guiana, Kenneth Bilby has argued that blood-oath still holds much power in the lives of some Afro-Caribbean communities. He attributed to blood-oath a greater political and social significance than the historical accounts of the Bois-Caiman have to date suggested. As part of his fieldwork, Bilby underwent an “attenuated version of an oath of incorporation.” After the rite Bilby could, from then on, “participate actively and was entrusted with a wide variety of information not normally divulged to outsiders.”<sup>146</sup> What he found from his own experience and from his historical research is that blood-oath served as a mechanism that built new communities. He argued that the building of these new communities through blood-oath had two major characteristics. First, blood-oath in the Americas has historically created

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<sup>146</sup>Bilby, “Swearing by the Past,” in *Origins of the Black Atlantic*, ed. Dubois and Scott, 247-248.

“political and military alliances” both within the slave or maroon community and between those communities and Europeans.<sup>147</sup> Thus, rather than as a means to sacralize a separate political decision, blood-oath became part of and intertwined with those decisions in Bilby's telling. It was inseparable from political decisions.

If an understanding of blood-oath informed by Bilby is extended to the Bois-Caiman ceremony, then it becomes clearer that a sacred alliance had been formed at the ceremony, which worked to extend the invitation to rebel to a broader group of men and women. As argued above, the socially dangerous knowledge of the rebellion more than likely required ritualized means to be safely disseminated. Bilby, first hand, found out that Afro-Caribbean communities used blood-oath as a door to this sort of secret knowledge.<sup>148</sup> Yet Bilby's analysis also exposes how that knowledge should be viewed as both a political decision and part of the religious world at the same time in these societies. From this example can be seen how more recent understandings of culture and blood-oath in particular can help to re-orient the way that scholars interpret events like the Bois-Caiman ceremony. Whereas much of the historical scholarship has drawn apart the political from the sacred, and in turn emphasized the Lenormand meeting over the Bois-Caiman ceremony, an interpretation informed by Bilby's work would see these as muddled together and much more linked than has previously been argued. In that way, Bilby's work bolsters my earlier argument that the blood-oath at the Bois-Caiman ceremony was fundamental to the organization of the insurgency, which by extension would make that ceremony just as crucial to the formation of the insurgency as the

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<sup>147</sup>Kenneth Bilby, “Swearing by the Past,” in *Origins of the Black Atlantic*, ed. Dubois and Scott, 252.

<sup>148</sup>This has also been noted by one historian studying black resistance. See Rucker, *The River Flows On*.



Lenormand meeting. This brief interpretation shows how a re-analysis that integrates recent anthropological tools can be helpful for understanding the 1791 insurgency.

The second characteristic exposed by Bilby, and the one that will be explored in more detail in this section, was that blood-oath served as a mechanism that brought together a cultural and social assemblage. He found that “Ndjukas continued to rely on essentially the same method [blood-oath] of forging and renewing sacred bonds as their ancestors had used during the early years to build a new society out of fragmentary elements.”<sup>149</sup> This concept fits well with the work already done here. For example, my argument that elite slaves brought non-elite and African slaves into the insurgency at the Bois-Caiman ceremony can, by extension, be seen as part of a social process of assembling a new community out of fragmentary pieces. Blood-oath can be interpreted as one of the mechanisms that aided that process. Since an earlier section of this study spent much time on the social movement toward rebellion, the question that needs to be answered now is: how were the religious practices visible at the Bois-Caiman ceremony in the process of being assembled in the years leading up to the insurgency? Many of the eighteenth-century sources provide small fragmentary cultural moments that when viewed over time have much to say about the power of religious practices in Saint-Domingue. In particular, blood-oath, dance, and religious leadership are all visible in the sources before the insurgency and all come to occupy central spaces at significant moments in the early insurgency. As shown earlier, many of the major historians who wrote about the coming of the Haitian Revolution have de-emphasized the significance of these religious practices to the formation of the revolution. In light of the broader

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149Bilby, “Swearing by the Past,” in *Origins of the Black Atlantic*, ed. Dubois and Scott, 252.

scholarship on Afro-Caribbean culture, the socio-cultural impact of blood-oath, dance, and religious leadership to the insurgency needs to be re-visited. To do that, I will draw upon recent anthropological and historical understandings of Afro-Caribbean culture to re-examine how these three cultural threads fit into the social assemblage called the 1791 insurgency.<sup>150</sup>

In the mid to late 1790s, a lawyer by the name of Médéric-Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry wrote a description of Saint-Domingue while living in Philadelphia. As an old-regime sympathizer, he had previously fled from the French Revolution when the Terror began. In his *Description Topographique*, Moreau intended to re-capture the social and environmental state of Saint-Domingue before the 1791 insurgency. According to Dubois, “harboring hope that the colonial world might be rebuilt, the exile was also calling up specters of the past.”<sup>151</sup> One of those specters was a ceremony and dance held by enslaved men and women that Moreau called *vaudou*. In Moreau's account this ceremony would have taken place before 1789, although the specifics of timing are elusive. Moreau's description of this event holds much significance in the scholarship. Using it as an example, scholars have argued about whether or not this account marked the first recorded instance of Vodou in the colony or even if Vodou existed at all in the

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150Following the recent trend of anthropologists and some historians toward explanations based on assemblage and the use of cultural practices rather than on origins, this section is going to de-emphasize, yet pay credit to, the African origins of certain practices in order to try to come to an understanding of how specific cultural practices were being employed by people in Saint-Domingue. For examples of some approaches that stress assemblage and place an emphasis on the uses of culture in the Americas, see Suzanne Preston Blier, “Vodun: West African Roots of Vodou,” in Donald J. Consentino, *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995); Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*; Richard Price, *Travels with Tooy: History, Memory, and the African American Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Dana Rush, *Vodun in Coastal Bénin: Unfinished, Open-Ended, Global* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2013); Laurie A. Wilkie, *Creating Freedom: Material Culture and African American Identity at Oakley Plantation, Louisiana 1840-1950* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000); Young, *Rituals of Resistance*.

151Dubois, *Avengers*, 11. Here Dubois provides an in depth discussion of Moreau and the background to his work.

eighteenth century.<sup>152</sup> That said, the recent consensus has largely been that Vodou as a religion emerged in the nineteenth century. Therefore, it makes more sense to leave the term Vodou aside for now in order to interpret Moreau's account as a moment of *vaudou* dance, which can then be used as a gateway into the cultural practices that would have been part of an emerging Afro-Caribbean religious complex. I will start with a short description of the *vaudou* dance ceremony.

Brought together by a king and queen, participants gathered “once the night has spread its shadow, in a place that is closed off and safe from all worldly eyes.”<sup>153</sup> Once gathered, participants, now dressed in red, swore an initial oath of secrecy. The oath is followed by an exaltation of a snake kept in a box at the center of the gathering. In turn, each participant, according to Moreau, requested something from the king and queen, such as money or for the favors of a man or woman. Now possessed by the serpent, the queen acting as an oracle answered the requests, sometimes favorably and sometimes unfavorably. After the requests were answered, Moreau described the participants as assembling in a circle and in turn each then gave an offering of whatever they could afford. At this point, Moreau wrote that “a vessel filled with the still-hot blood of a goat is used to bind the lips of the observers, who promise to suffer death rather than divulge anything or even to put to death anyone who forgets what he has committed himself to.”<sup>154</sup> The blood-oath given, new members of the community were initiated at this point.

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152Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 59; David Geggus, “Haitian Voodoo in the Eighteenth Century;” Mintz and Trouillot, “The Social History of Haitian Vodou,” in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Consentino.

153Moreau, *Description Topographique*, in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, ed. Dubois and Garrigus, 60. It is curious how Moreau knew so much about these meeting if they were so secretive.

154Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description Topographique*, in *A Civilization the Perished*, trans. and ed. Spencer, 4.

Once the new initiates had been incorporated, Moreau wrote that the king now became possessed and the *vaudou* dance and the drinking began.<sup>155</sup>

Moreau's description of the *vaudou* dance ceremony exhibits all three cultural threads mentioned earlier: blood-oath, dance, and the king and queen as religious leaders. Within his account all three are intertwined. For example, the king and queen led the blood-oath, which immediately preceded the the initiation of new members. Since the new members were now part of the *vaudou* community, they and the other participants, led by the king and queen, all danced together. Because of the detail of Moreau's description and the way that he describes this ceremony, it can be used as an entryway into seeing how these three cultural threads were also intertwined in the religious lives of enslaved men and women in Saint-Domingue. First each thread will be traced separately including a discussion of the *vaudou* dance ceremony and other relevant moments from the late eighteenth century. In each discussion recent work on African-American culture will be used in order to draw out how to best interpret these cultural threads in the case of Saint-Domingue. Then those separate threads will be re-assembled in a discussion of the Bois-Caiman ceremony and early insurgency.

### *The King and The Queen*

Moreau opened his account of *vaudou* dance by noting that a king and queen led the ceremony. He mentioned that the king and queen were chosen and occupied the roles of priest and priestess. These elevated ceremonial positions can be seen in the dress they wore and in the formalities offered to them.<sup>156</sup> In Moreau's description the king and queen

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<sup>155</sup>This entire synopsis of the *vaudou* dance ceremony has been taken from Moreau, *Description Topographique*, in *A Civilization the Perished*, trans. and ed. Spencer, 1-6.

<sup>156</sup>See Sara E. Johnson, *The Fear of French Negroes: Transcolonial Collaboration in the Revolutionary Americas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 126-27. This is especially important in the

both dressed more elegantly than the other participants. The queen wore an elaborate belt and both the king and queen wore many red kerchiefs on their bodies. Participants, in turn, called the queen, mama, and the king, papa. To go along with this dress, both the king and the queen had religiously important roles. Both were possessed by the gods at certain points in the ceremony and neither seemed to have an overall position of authority over the other. While they shared ceremonial responsibilities, each did have certain roles that they occupied. For example, the queen served as the oracle who passed judgment on the requests made by participants. In contrast, the king was responsible for the initiation rites after the blood-oath. Unfortunately, Moreau did not write about the specific roles each played when it came to blood-oath. Therefore, while it is clear from his description that the king and queen had ceremonial roles that set them apart from other participants, it is also clear in his description that both the king and the queen shared the responsibilities of the ceremony.<sup>157</sup>

Despite the king and queen sharing roles at the *vaudou* dance ceremony, each has much to tell us about the ways in which African Americans saw gender and leadership roles. The trope of the king, as a spiritual leader, was not exclusive to Saint-Domingue in the eighteenth century.<sup>158</sup> For example, James Sweet wrote about an eighteenth-century Pinkster festival in Albany, New York. An enslaved man named Charley, brought from Angola, there “acted as the king in rituals that included drumming and dancing in the middle of a ring of other dancers.”<sup>159</sup> Sweet argued that this episode

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context of Saint-Domingue as fashion played quite a role within all sectors of society there. As Sara Johnson said, “Fashion became a battleground.” The fact that the king and queen were dressed differently from other participants, thus, holds much weight in the context of Saint-Domingue.  
157Moreau, *Description Topographique*, in *A Civilization the Perished*, trans. and ed. Spencer, 1-5.  
158Nor was the trope of the queen. See Johnson, *The Fear of French Negroes*, 131.  
159Sweet, “The Evolution of Ritual,” in *Diasporic Africa*, ed. Gomez, 75.

showed how “the Kongolese adopted many of the symbols of Portuguese kingship.” By extension in the Americas, Charley became “the personification of both the king and the elder... Charley represented the most powerful spiritual force in his community.”<sup>160</sup>

Sweet's work suggests two things. First, that the king as a ritual leader was West-Central African in origin, and more specifically Kongolese. This will become important later when discussing assemblage. Second, Sweet argued that the king held the greatest spiritual power within the community. Yet this seems to now hold up in the case of Saint-Domingue. At the *vaudoux* dance ceremony the king and the queen shared much of the responsibility. Whereas in Sweet's case their seems to be a patriarchal stress in power, in Saint-Domingue religious power at least within the enslaved population seems to be held by both men and women.

The fact that the queen held much spiritual power at the *vaudoux* dance ceremony runs parallel to the forms of power that women held within Caribbean slave society. Women were often excluded from many of the elite occupations afforded to Creole male slaves on the plantations, except for domestic work. At the same time, they worked the fields much like men.<sup>161</sup> Yet enslaved women were often employed as healers and midwives in the small hospitals commonly found on plantations. These women could also be local religious healers. Karol Weaver wrote about one woman named Kingué who practiced divination, sold talismans (fetishes) and herbal remedies.<sup>162</sup> In this example and in the example of the *vaudoux* dance ceremony women acted as healers, oracles, and diviners. They also occupied these same leadership roles in Africa. For example, Jean

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<sup>160</sup>Sweet, “The Evolution of Ritual,” in *Diasporic Africa*, ed. Gomez, 76.

<sup>161</sup>Justin Girard de Chantrans, *Voyage d'un Suisse dans différentes colonies d'Amérique* (Paris, 1785), in *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*, ed. Geggus, 9.

<sup>162</sup>Weaver, *Medical Revolutionaries*, 114.

Barbot, and adventurer and slaver who traveled to West Africa at the turn of the eighteenth century, wrote that “they [small temples] maintain [a woman] to serve as a priestess,” who acts as an oracle much like the priestess at the *vaudou* dance ceremony.<sup>163</sup> According to Diane Batts Morrow, “women—in Dahomean society in particular and throughout West African society in general—exerted significant agency in their cultures.”<sup>164</sup> Whereas men's role as the king seems likely to be an extension of Kongolese tradition, women's role as the queen resonates well with the traditional social power afforded to women in West Africa.

Therefore, the king and queen sharing religious leadership responsibilities at the *vaudou* dance ceremony both makes sense and runs against specific African traditions. The differences rest in the needs of everyday slave life and the fractured communities that characterized enslaved society in Saint-Domingue. Both of these African traditions had to work through the structure of slave society in Saint-Domingue and in addition had to come into confrontation with each other at the dances and ceremonies on the island. Luis Nicolau Parés may put this process best when he wrote about Brazilian Candomblé that “one finds the persistence of certain values and practices together with the resignification or creation of others. There is, therefore, something that is permanent alongside something else that changes.”<sup>165</sup> The roles of men and women as religious leaders in different parts of Africa persisted. What changed was that in the African context

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163 Paul Hair, Adam Jones, and Robin Law, ed, *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, 1678-1712*, volume 2 (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1992); Paul Hazoumé, *Le pacte de sang au Dahomey* (Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1938), 638-39.

164 Diane Batts Morrow, “Embracing the Religious Profession: The Antebellum Mission of the Oblate Sisters of Providence,” in *Diasporic Africa: A Reader*, ed. Michael A. Gomez (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 107.

165 Luis Nicolau Parés, *The Formation of Candomblé: Vodun History and Ritual in Brazil*, trans. Richard Vernon (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), xv.

those leadership responsibilities were often segregated, with men leading different ceremonies in different places than women. In the context of Saint-Domingue, men and women shared the responsibility of and had access to religious leadership roles as kings and queens. As such, these responsibilities were often intertwined together within certain events like the *vaudou* dance ceremony. The idea of a Dahomean priestess became conceptualized as the queen, while the idea of a Kongolese priest became conceptualized as the king. The *vaudou* dance ceremony stands as an example of how in the 1780s enslaved people in Saint-Domingue had begun to cobble together West and West-Central African traditions within certain religious moments.

### *Blood-Oath*

Before a person could be initiated into the *vaudou* community, Moreau noted that the king and queen administered first an “oath of secrecy” then, after answering requests, all involved drank a blood-oath.<sup>166</sup> Blood-oath generally refers to a ritual in which participants drank either the blood of an animal or a human in order to bind an agreement. In the *vaudou* dance example participants drank the blood of a goat. After the blood-oath, new members were initiated into the *vaudou* community in Moreau's account. Bilby's argument about the use of blood-oath in the American context was examined in the intro to this section. He argued that blood-oath served as a means to assemble new communities from fragmentary pieces. I called this the social process of blood-oath. Bilby's understanding of blood-oath, which has much to offer for the interpretation of blood-oath in the Saint-Domingue context, stands in contrast to many historians' arguments. As stated earlier, many historians have argued that the ceremonies

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<sup>166</sup>Moreau, *Description Topographique*, in *A Civilization that Perished*, ed. Spencer, 4-5.



that accompanied blood-oath rituals in Saint-Domingue can be attributed to a specific African tradition, either West-African or West-Central African. They stress origins and in the process also stress the African uses of the ritual, which often involved sealing trade agreements or elite alliances. Yet in Saint-Domingue, there were no true “elites” among the enslaved as all enslaved individuals were social subordinates. In contrast, recent anthropological work has stressed the way that enslaved people employed blood-oath in the American context. The discussion here will follow the anthropological trend in order to understand that blood-oath before the Bois-Caiman ceremony likely had many functions in Saint-Domingue, one of which was to prepare and initiate people into specific religious collectives. Moreau's account of *vaudou* dance has much to say about this.

The *vaudou* dance ceremony can be a window into the uncertainty of scholars over the African origins of blood-oath. Robin Law argued that blood oath in Saint-Domingue has often been attributed a West-Central African origin by scholars because a pig had been sacrificed at the Bois-Caiman ceremony and that blood-oath, including at the *vaudou* dance ceremony, has been interpreted as violent and therefore part of the petro cult of vodou. In contrast, Law argued that “ritual oaths by the drinking of blood do not seem to be reported as a feature of religious practice in the Congo area.”<sup>167</sup> Law argued that blood-oath in Saint-Domingue can be attributed to West-Africa, and specifically Dahomey. He came to this conclusion by looking at the late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century travel accounts of Jean Barbot, William Bosman, and Willem

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<sup>167</sup>Law, “On the African Background,” 8.

Snelgrave in conjunction with the ethnographic work of Paul Hazoumé.<sup>168</sup> Kenneth Bilby, as well, argued that blood-oath in Jamaica and in Guiana often had many West-African characteristics, specifically by the descendants of the Akan.<sup>169</sup> There is no doubt that a tradition of blood-oath stemming from West-Africa made its way into Saint-Domingue in the eighteenth century.

Law did make a strong case that blood-oath had a Dahomean origin, yet the work of Anita Jacobson-Widding suggests that blood-oath in Saint-Domingue could also have a West-Central African cultural precedent. Widding noted that in an Eastern Kongo crowning ceremony “on the *nsona* day (market-day).... The blood of a he-goat is mixed with palm-oil and *nkula*-red on a plate. The members of the clan who are present dip their fingers in this mixture and daub their bellies, mouths, and elbows... the blood of the he-goat has first been sacrificed to the ancestors.” The blood ceremony in this instance marked a crucial point in the crowning ceremony of a new chief.<sup>170</sup> In both the *vaudou* dance ceremony and the coronation ceremony described by Jacobson-Widding a goat was sacrificed. In each case, immediately after the blood-oath participants ritually transformed by that blood-oath were initiated into the community both as new members and in the Kongo as a chief. Comparing both ceremonies reveals many similarities in practice between the two, including gift giving and dance. Therefore, Jacobson-Widdings

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168 Willem Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea: Divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1967); Hair, Jones, and Law, *Barbot on Guinea*; Hazoumé, *Le pacte de sang*; William Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea* (London, 1734).

169 Bilby, “Swearing by the Past,” in *Origins of the Black Atlantic*, ed. Dubois and Scott, 253.

170 Anita Jacobson-Widding, *Red—White—Black as a Mode of Thought: A Study of Triadic Classification by Colours in the Ritual Symbolism and Cognitive Thought of the Peoples of the Lower Congo* (Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1979), 279.

work strongly suggests that West-Central Africa also held a strong tradition of blood-oath.

Without delving to far into the exercise of “proving” African origins, the work of Jacobson-Widding leads to two key takeaways about blood-oath. First, reading Jacobson-Widding's account in conjunction with Law's argument about West-African blood-oath and the accounts of Bosman and Barbot strongly suggests that the practice of blood-oath was culturally intelligible to people in both West and West-Central Africans to some degree. Knowledge of these practices would have traveled across the Atlantic as enslaved men and women traveled across the Atlantic. Since “West-Central Africa supplied nearly half... the Bight of Benin (West Africa) over a quarter” of all slaves imported from the 1720s to the 1790s, that means that around seventy five percent of enslaved Africans, without counting their Creole descendants, had a chance of arriving with an understanding of blood-oath when they reached Saint-Domingue.<sup>171</sup> That does not mean that all enslaved individuals in Saint-Domingue were familiar with the practice. Yet many could have been, which made cross-ethnic understandings possible. That possibility is significant. By extending that possibility, the *vaudou* dance ceremony shows that the practice of blood-oath did translate. Since West and West-Central Africans both had a tradition of blood-oath and the role of the king and queen makes sense in both traditions, there is strong reason to believe that at the *vaudou* dance ceremony both West and West-Central Africans participated and drew on different yet similar traditions, despite Moreau calling the ceremony West-African. Just like the leadership roles of the king and queen

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<sup>171</sup>Law, “On the African Background,” 4.

can be seen as assembled from different African traditions, the blood-oath at the *vaudou* dance ceremony can best be interpreted as a cultural assemblage.

Second, the work of Jacobson-Widdings suggests that it makes much sense to pay attention to the transmission of esoteric knowledge when examining cases of blood-oath. In Jacobson-Widding's account after the man who was about to become chief took a blood-oath, the larger community then granted him access to the sacred knowledge held by chiefs. This knowledge, in turn, made him a chief when he was "installed in his hut and given the [sacred] shrine."<sup>172</sup> Jacobson-Widding's account is from an African context. That begs the question of whether the same interpretation of blood-oath should be stressed in the American context? Kenneth Bilby's experience in Jamaica can help. This is what Bilby had to say: "what I had experienced... was an attenuated version of an oath of incorporation. I had been symbolically transformed by this rite from a categorical enemy into a conditional friend. From then on, I was allowed to remain unmolested during possessions... I was now asked to participate actively and was entrusted with a wide variety of information not normally divulged to outsiders."<sup>173</sup> While in the African context, blood-oath changed the role of an insider, the chief, in the American context it made an outsider an insider. In both cases, the recipient of the oath was given access to formerly secret knowledge. It thus seems that blood-oath often served as a gatekeeper, which controlled access to a set of esoteric knowledge.<sup>174</sup> The serious consequences for breaking that oath are a testament to the powerful place that blood-oath held in the lives of Africans and African-Americans. The sources often described death as the punishment

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<sup>172</sup>Jacobson-Widding, *Red—White—Black*, 279.

<sup>173</sup>Bilby, "Swearing by the Past," in *Origins of the Black Atlantic*, ed. Dubois and Scott, 247-248.

<sup>174</sup>In addition, Andrew Apter has argued that in Vodou and Yoruba religious practices esoteric knowledge often held a powerful place. See, Apter, "On African Origins: Creolization and *Connaissance*."

for a broken blood-oath.<sup>175</sup> Therefore, the work of Jacobson-Widding and the work of Bilby strongly suggest that scholars can interpret blood-oath in a way that emphasizes the ritual as a necessary component for the distribution of esoteric knowledge.

The initiation rites that followed the blood-oath at the *vaudou* dance ceremony are strong evidence that this interpretation holds much weight in the context of Saint-Domingue. Moreau wrote about an initiation ritual within his description of *vaudou* dance. This ritual occurred right after all participants, members and new initiates, had drunk the blood-oath. The following is Moreau's account of initiation.

If there is an initiate-to-be, the King traces a circle with some black substance and places the recruit in it. In the novice's hand is put a packet made up of herbs, animal hair, bits of horn, and other things just as disgusting. Striking the candidate lightly on the head with a little wooden blade, he intones an African song which all those around the circle take up in chorus. Then the member-elect starts to tremble and to do a *dance*, which is called 'Come up, Vaoudoux'... [after the trance, a dance, and a tap on the head] He [the initiate] is led to the altar to take the *oath* and from this moment belongs to the sect.<sup>176</sup>

In the case of the *vaudou* dance ceremony, the blood-oath marked the point when existing members of the sacred community re-affirmed their place in that community. At the same time, the blood-oath prepared new initiates for the coming initiation, which participants sealed by another oath. Although, Moreau did not elaborate on the form of that oath. During the initiation, new members became possessed for the first time and are finally allowed to dance the *vaudou* dance, suggesting that they had been given access to that set of esoteric knowledge. The general series of ritual events at the *vaudou* dance ceremony closely followed Jacobson-Widding's and Bilby's interpretations of blood-oath elsewhere. Thus, beside bringing people into the community, blood-oath also acted as the

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175See, for example, Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description*, 149; Law, "On the African Background," 9.

176Moreau, *Description Topographique*, in *A Civilization that Perished*, ed. Spencer, 4-5. The emphasis here is mine.

necessary preparation for making outsiders insiders and giving them access to the esoteric knowledge of the community.

The *vaudou* dance ceremony, when looked at through the lens of recent anthropological work, shows that blood-oath in the context of Saint-Domingue served several purposes. First, blood-oath was a way for people to integrate other people into a community. This closely fits with the earlier arguments in this paper that stressed that a social assemblage was characteristic of the lead up to insurgency. Next, blood-oath itself can be seen as assembled from diverse traditions. This strengthens interpretations that stress its ability to assemble communities from the often heterogeneous groups found in the Saint-Domingue plantation context. Once outsiders had been made insiders through blood-oath, these new members would then be given access to sets of esoteric knowledge that they had previously been excluded from. Thus, at ceremonies like the *vaudou* dance ceremony, blood-oath served as a necessary mechanism by which to prepare those people to receive that knowledge. As evidenced by the *vaudou* dance ceremony, blood-oath held complimentary and overlapping ritual uses in the Saint-Domingue context as it affirmed an existing community, prepared new initiates, gave consequences, and opened the door to esoteric knowledge.

### Dance

After participants at the *vaudou* dance ceremony took the blood-oath and new members were initiated into the *vaudou* community, the king and queen began the *vaudou* dance from which the ceremony took its name. Already assembled in a circle, Moreau described all involved as writhing in trance, the “Queen” most of all since she

interacted with the snake in its cage. “The delirium keeps rising,” wrote Moreau, which was “augmented still more by the use of intoxicating drinks” that the dancers “do not spare.” As they drank and danced, some participants fainted, while others were whipped into a fury. According to Moreau, all trembled nervously as “they spin around ceaselessly.”<sup>177</sup> In his description, the value of dance for entertainment is apparent. While he painted a picture of a wild and uncontrolled dance in this section, Moreau also drew out one of the major characteristics of many Afro-Caribbean dances in the eighteenth century. He understood that dances like the *vaudou* dance often expressed religion. In a pamphlet that he wrote solely on the many dances performed in Saint-Domingue, Moreau noted this connection explicitly. He wrote that “there have been no religions which have not adopted characteristic dances to preserve and expand their faith, or to maintain the notion of their ancient origins.”<sup>178</sup> It is the relationship between dance and religion that will be examined in this segment. But unlike Moreau, the argument here is that like the *vaudou* dance ceremony, specific dances were also part of a cultural system assembled from various African traditions.

Beside *vaudou* dance, enslaved men and women in Saint-Domingue commonly danced another dance called calenda. It proved to be a popular dance not just in Saint-Domingue, but all over the Atlantic world. In Saint-Domingue, Moreau described calenda as being formed by a circle of men and women who gathered in a large open field, sometimes far from the plantations they worked on. Out of the circle of clapping and signing participants, “a dancer and his partner, or a number of pairs of dancers, advance

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<sup>177</sup>Moreau, *Description Topographique*, in *A Civilization that Perished*, ed. Spencer, 4-5.

<sup>178</sup>Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Dance* (1796), translated by Lily and Baird Hastings (New York: Dance Horizons, 1975), 9.

to the center and begin to dance” while they are accompanied by a banza (a guitar like instrument) and two drums. As they dance, “the danseuses and dancers spell each other” and “enjoy the dances so thoroughly it is hard to bring them to a conclusion.”<sup>179</sup> Recently, James Sweet has argued that calenda in Brazil, Saint-Domingue, and the United States often went hand in hand with religious practice. He argued that *Kilundu*, a generic Central African term for spirit possession, was often referred to as *calenda* in French or *calendu* in Portuguese. Those terms “became the preferred way of describing the ceremonies and dances that preceded possession and divination.”<sup>180</sup> While Moreau did link both *vaudou* dance and a dance called *Don Pedro* to spirit possession and divination, he did not explicitly link calenda to these practices.<sup>181</sup> Yet, Sweet's argument rests not on any explicit historical evidence but on the cultural form of the dance itself. He noted that calenda can be characterized by Central-African musical instruments (two drums in particular) and in counter-clockwise circular dancing.<sup>182</sup> Both feature in Moreau's description of calenda as well as his description of *vaudou* dance.

The link between calenda and religious practice can be made more explicit if we consider the writings of a man named Jean-Paul Pillet. Shortly after King Louis's flight to Varennes, Jean-Paul Pillet fled the French Revolution. Instead of running to the east like the King, Pillet fled to his family's plantation “situated between Cap Français and Fort Dauphin near a pretty little river and in view of the ocean.” He arrived there around the twentieth of August, 1791. The day before the Bois-Caiman ceremony and two days before the outbreak of the insurgency. Soon after Pillet arrived the enslaved men and

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179Moreau, *Dance*, trans. Hastings, 53-55.

180Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 144; Sweet, “The Evolution of Ritual,” in *Diasporic Africa: A Reader*, ed. Gomez.

181Moreau, *Dance*, trans. Hastings, 58-59.

182Sweet, “Evolution of Ritual,” in *Diasporic Africa*, ed. Gomez, 77.



women on his family's plantation dressed in their Sunday best and “having obtained permission to have a *Calinda*... assembled on the greensward in front of our house.” On one hand, Pillet called this calenda a “beautiful production.” On the other, it is apparent from Pillet's description that underneath the public portrayal of dance in Saint-Domingue lay deeper Afro-Caribbean religious cultural threads that he had trouble understanding. The author also described these moments as “bizarre demonstrations.” These demonstrations, in Pillet's poetic words, included “a band of Congo Vestris, Whirled to frenzy, as of yore, the possessed ones did cavort... bizarrely jumped, sat on their heels, rolled their eyes, swayed their heads.” Assembled in a circle, as the men and women danced to the sound of drums and a banza, “some kind of buffoon... from time to time, launches into the middle of the circle and makes sounds and contortions.” Embedded within this description of calenda, Pillet noticed that many of the dancers led by a “Coryphées of old” became entranced as they beat complex rhythms on multiple drums, ecstatically danced in a circle, and sang in call and response.<sup>183</sup> In short, all the religious elements Sweet saw as characteristic of calenda were part of the practice of calenda in Saint-Domingue.

While there is little doubt that calenda had religious components and uses, the sources do suggest that calenda in Saint-Domingue was being partially employed by enslaved men and women for many different purposes. Calenda, according to one late eighteenth-century observer, sometimes served as a funerary dance. The naturalist Michel Etienne Descourtilz wrote, “on ceremonial days for pleasure, *calenda* for example which

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<sup>183</sup>Jean-Paul Pillet, “Mon Odyssée: l'Épopée d'un Colon de Saint Domingue,” in *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Insurrection*, ed. Jeremy Popkin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 69-73.

is a funerary night dance for the pleasure of which a nègre will travel all night to get there.”<sup>184</sup> Neither Moreau nor Descourtilz, who wrote about a practice called *Les Vaudoux*, linked *vaudoux* to the commemoration of the dead. That omission is noteworthy as both Moreau and Descourtilz explicitly described *vaudoux* as a religious practice. In addition, religious practices that helped to mediate death would have been common due to the prevalence of death among slaves. Still, Descourtilz did suggest that men and women in Saint-Domingue performed calenda in conjunction with funeral services. Due to the hardships of slave life, slaves held many late night funerals. This interpretation holds up in the greater literature about calenda in the Americas. For example, Luis Nicolau Parés argued that enslaved men and women danced calenda at eighteenth-century Brazilian funerals.<sup>185</sup> But, enslaved men and women in the sources from Saint-Domingue often danced calenda in settings that had nothing to do with a funeral. Pillet's description is a telling example of both the entertainment and religious value of calenda. Therefore, the many examples in this section show that enslaved men and women danced *vaudoux* and calenda for multiple purposes including entertainment, religious reasons (possession and divination), and in the case of calenda in order to commemorate the dead. While calenda was not strictly a funerary dance, that it was danced by enslaved people at funerals shows that calenda had religious uses outside of the more studied practices of divination and spirit possession. Just like blood-oath, dance in Saint-Domingue held multiple, overlapping uses in the cultural practice of enslaved people.

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<sup>184</sup>Michel Etienne Descourtilz, *Voyage d'un Naturaliste En Haiti, 1799-1803* (Paris: Plon, 1935), 122.

<sup>185</sup>Parés, *The Formation of Candomblé*, 82-83. Dance was also a characteristic of African-American funeral services in South Carolina, see Young, *Rituals of Resistance*, 168-69.

Despite the small difference in social use between *vaudou* and calenda, what can be drawn from a comparison of Pillet's description of calenda to the *vaudou* dance ceremony is how closely the forms of practice that constituted each matched. In both cases, participants dressed in their best, were led by leaders, arranged themselves in a circle, were in various states of possession, and danced to drums and a banza. Just like Sweet analyzed the form of dance to show its relation to West-Central African religion, these structural similarities strongly suggest that both *vaudou* dance and calenda were more than likely part of the same cultural system or two overlapping cultural systems in Saint-Domingue. Either way, the similarity of calenda to *vaudou* dance suggests that calenda, like *vaudou*, was not strictly a West-Central African tradition like Sweet argued. Rather when seen as part of an emerging cultural system in Saint-Domingue, these two dances make more sense as being part of a larger religious assemblage.

The best evidence that calenda was part of a larger cultural assemblage comes from Descourtilz. He wrote about a small incident that involved an Ibo man who desired to join an Arada dance already in session. The man offered all his money, his alcohol, and even a couple of chickens to a group of Arada dancers. Arada was a common term for people from the Bight of Benin area of West Africa. Despite repeated attempts by the Ibo man, in the end he was denied entry into the dance circle.<sup>186</sup> Carolyn Fick has interpreted this instance as showing the rigidity of ethnicity in Saint-Domingue.<sup>187</sup> In her telling, this example proved that ethnic groups on the island kept to their own cultural milieus. Social rejection driven by ethnic difference is certainly part of the interaction in this instance. That is only half of the interpretation. The actions of the Ibo man also serve

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<sup>186</sup>Descourtilz, *Voyage d'un Naturaliste*, 125-126.

<sup>187</sup>Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 41.

as an example of how people from different ethnic groups went to great lengths to join in the cultural practices of others. When the Ibo man gave many of his possessions to join in this dance, he was attempting to bridge ethnic boundaries in order to share in the cultural practices of others. While that effort was not successful in this case, that effort most certainly would have met with success in many other cases around Saint-Domingue. What Descourtiz provides, then, is an example of an attempted cultural assemblage that failed due to social constraints. It shows how people actively tried to change and to maintain culture, much as Palmié and Roseberry argued.

Even more revealing, Descourtiz described the Arada dance in session as a calenda. That the dance in question was a calenda leads to two other interpretations. Calenda, as has been shown, often had religious components. If the Arada dancers were dancing calenda in a religious manner in this instance, and there is nothing to suggest that they were not, then the the Ibo man's desire to join this dance circle can serve as an example of how religious practices could cut across ethnic boundaries. Despite how different ethnic origin, the Ibo man desperately desired to join in this dance circle, which suggests that he also desired to practice the religious components that often formed a part of calenda. In addition, James Sweet has argued that calenda had a West-Central African origin and was mainly Kongolese in cultural content.<sup>188</sup> But the men and women dancing a calenda in this case were described by Descourtiz as West African and specifically from the Bight of Benin area. Why would West-Africans be dancing a West-Central African dance? Either Descourtiz got the ethnic profile of the dancers wrong, which is a possibility. Or, this example shows how cultural practices in Saint-Domingue did not

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<sup>188</sup>Sweet, "The Evolution of Ritual," in *Diasporic Africa*, ed. Gomez.

respect ethnic boundaries as rigidly as some scholars have argued. If anything, the evidence presented before on blood-oath and religious leadership upholds this interpretation. In that way, this example shows the complex process of assemblage at work in Saint-Domingue. West African men and women were dancing a West-Central African dance, while rejecting the desires of another West-African man to join in on those practices. The dance described by Descourtilz shows the great complexity of ethnicity and culture in Saint-Domingue before the start of the Haitian Revolution, which suggests that there existed a degree of social fluidity among slaves and a that a transition was in process in matters of individual and collective identity.

The above discussion has shown that dance and religion were intertwined in the cultural world of slaves in eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue. That has not been disputed by the larger scholarly literature. Carolyn Fick argued the same thing twenty five years ago. But, beside Fick's study dance has largely been left out of the scholarly literature on Saint-Domingue before the revolution. Dance has often occupied the sidebar of curiosity in these studies. Yet, the discussion of dance here has shown the great difficulty of and the complexity by which enslaved people assembled a Creole cultural system out of different traditions. The way in which they assembled culture often did not respect lines of African ethnicity. Those lines were often collaborative while at the same time they were restrictive. The Descourtilz example especially shows this process at work. Blood-oath and religious leadership also uphold that same argument. That argument has often been expressed in the work of anthropologists like Sidney Mintz, Richard Price, and Stephan Palmié, as well as historians like Vincent Brown. The analysis of the *vaudou* dance ceremony given here has shown the cultural *mélange* that

these scholars have argued was characteristic of Afro-Caribbean culture in the eighteenth-century. Unfortunately, that stress on mixture has often gone missing when scholars like Carolyn Fick, David Patrick Geggus, and Robin Law stressed African origins. Instead this study has emphasized the varied cultural practices that enslaved men and women assembled in Saint-Domingue in order to live their everyday social lives. As that process occurred, ethnic cultural boundaries can be seen as both restrictive and collaborative. Now, I am going to turn to a new discussion of the Bois-Caiman ceremony that integrates some of the likely interpretations of cultural practices that have been posited in the last three sub-sections.

#### *The Bois-Caiman Ceremony: Assembling Culture*

The Bois-Caiman has primarily been characterized by scholars as a moment of religious sacralization of an already made decision to rebel, which by extension fits the divide that those same scholars have drawn between politics and religion. Still, all the major scholars who have studied the Bois-Caiman ceremony have interpreted it as a moment of Afro-Caribbean religion. Many of the most detailed studies of religious practices at the Bois-Caiman have primarily focused on the African origins of those practices. Robin Law's excellent analysis of the Dahomian dimension of blood-oath is a telling example. Although in my analysis I followed Law's suggestion that the Bois-Caiman held great organizational potential, Law did not discuss the ceremony as part of the revolution at any length. Rather, he analyzed the ceremony as a separate event. Because of the stress on African origins found in the longer studies and the lack of religious explanations in the ones that integrated the ceremony into the coming of the

1791 insurgency, the earlier discussion about the lead in to the insurrection was designed to situate the Bois-Caiman, as a religious moment, squarely within the series of events that immediately led to the 1791 insurgency. By the end of that section, I argued that at the Bois-Caiman ceremony, blood-oath and the decision to rebel were intertwined as the ceremony brought African and non-elite Creole slaves into the fold of insurgency, many who had previously been unaware of the uprising. This was done by a group of elite slaves who had first set the date of rebellion at the Lenormand de Mézy meeting and who over the following week struggled to both integrate others into the rebellion and to keep the rebellion from being found out.

The last three subsections, by drawing on recent work by anthropologists and historians, have advanced some highly probable interpretations of a few of the cultural threads relevant to the Bois-Caiman ceremony and the early insurgency. While religious leadership and blood-oath are both directly visible in the sources that have described the Bois-Caiman ceremony, dance is not and as such will play a more supporting role, although calenda did make an appearance at a key moment early in the insurgency. Because these practices were so visible in the sources and because of their centrality to the formation of the insurgency, the new interpretations posited above can help to understand how enslaved people employed Afro-Caribbean culture during a time of social tension and conflict. Thus, while the earlier discussion of the Bois-Caiman ceremony showed that political motives were part of the ceremony, this discussion will show how Afro-Caribbean religious practices held many overlapping meanings for those involved in the ceremony.

While none of the early sources that describe the Bois-Caiman ceremony mention the presence of a king and queen, they do suggest that religious leaders were present. Two of the accounts, that of Dumesle and Ardouin, described a priest as leading the ceremony. In Dumesle's account, this priest led the service and gave a speech commanding those present to join the insurgency.<sup>189</sup> According to Ardouin, the leader who gave the speeches was the Creole insurgent leader Boukman Dutty. In Ardouin's account, Boukman specifically acted as the presiding priest and he led much of the ceremony. These two accounts also mentioned the presence of a priestess. Ardouin described the a priestess in his account as holding a central role in the blood-oath ritual. According to Ardouin, she “plunged a knife in the entrails of a black pig.”<sup>190</sup> Dumesle, as well, described a priestess as playing a central role in the Bois-Caiman ceremony. He noted that “a young virgin acting as the oracle of Pythia consulted the palpitating entrails of the victim [the sacrificed pig].”<sup>191</sup> It is noteworthy that in both accounts the priestess had a central role in the conduct of the blood-oath. If Boukman was at the ceremony, who was this priestess? Carolyn Fick has convincingly argued that the priestess mentioned by Ardouin was a mulatto woman by the name of Cécile Fatiman.<sup>192</sup> As a mulatto, Fatiman would have been a Creole by default, although she may not have been enslaved at the time. Therefore, a priestess, most likely Cécile Fatiman, conducted the blood-oath ritual, while Boukman, as the priest, managed other parts of the ceremony. At the *vaudou* dance ceremony a priest and a priestess held key roles in the conduct of the rituals, just

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189Dumesle, *Voyage dans le nord d'Hayti*, 85-90. Dumesle described two ceremonies in this section, the first was led by a priest and he sacrificed a black cow. At the second a pig was sacrificed. This second ceremony was led by a priestess.

190Ardouin, *Études*, 229.

191Dumesle, *Voyage dans le nord d'Hayti*, 89. My translation. Pythia was the classic oracle found at Delphi.

192Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 93, 265.



like Boukman and Fatiman. In both examples, the priest and priestess shared responsibility. Thus, it is no big leap to say that the priest and the priestess at the Bois-Caiman ceremony occupied the same ceremonial roles as the king and queen at the *vaudou* dance ceremony. In that way, it make much sense to say that Boukman was the king and Fatiman the queen of the Bois-Caiman ceremony.

Some scholars have doubted Boukman's leadership at the ceremony. Kate Ramsey has cautioned scholars that even if Boukman was present at the Bois-Caiman ceremony he had little involvement because the ceremony was led by a woman.<sup>193</sup> The blood-oath may have been led by the priestess, but in both the Ardouin and Dumesle accounts the priest has much importance in other aspects of the ceremony. Following my earlier argument, it makes more sense to follow an interpretation that the king and queen, Boukman and Fatiman, shared responsibilities than to say that since the priestess led the blood-oath, she led the entire ceremony. Sources like Ardouin's when read in conjunction with what we know about Afro-Caribbean religious practices support the reading advanced here. In addition, Geggus doubts that Boukman even attended the Bois-Caiman ceremony. His charge stems from the Dumesle account. In his account, Dumesle described two ceremonies. A priest led the first ceremony where a black cow was sacrificed, while a priestess led the second ceremony where a pig was sacrificed.<sup>194</sup> Beside suggesting that two ceremonies featuring blood-oath were conducted before the insurgency, the Dumesle account only said that a priestess conducted a divination rite from the entrails of a pig.<sup>195</sup> The account does not preclude the presence of a priest nor

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193Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law*, 44-45.

194Geggus, "The Bois-Caiman Ceremony," in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 89-90.

195Dumesle, *Voyage dans le nord d'Hayti*, 89.

did Dumesle describe either ceremony in great detail. In addition, Carolyn Fick has made a strong argument that Boukman did lead the Bois-Caiman ceremony.<sup>196</sup> In addition, the Ardouin account directly names Boukman as the priest present at the Bois-Caiman ceremony. That should not be discounted since most scholars agree that Boukman was a religious leader.<sup>197</sup>

Further, an interpretation that follows the logic of a shared responsibility between the king and queen combined with Boukman's role in the series of events that led to the insurgency strongly suggests that Boukman had to be present at the ceremony. In both Ardouin's and Dumesle's accounts, the priest and the priestess closely resembled the king and queen figures from the *vaudou* dance ceremony described by Moreau. Since the Bois-Caiman ceremony shared other similarities to the *vaudou* dance ceremony (blood-oath in particular) there is no reason to assume that the priest and priestess or religious leadership in general functioned differently at the Bois-Caiman than at the *vaudou* dance ceremony. Therefore, if a priestess occupied the role of queen, then more than likely a priest would have played the role of the king and would have had an important role at the Bois-Caiman ceremony. Thus, it makes more sense that a priest and priestess led the ceremony. That still does not place Boukman at the ceremony, but the series of events that led to the Bois-Caiman strongly suggest that he was. Geggus in his argument that Boukman was not at the Bois-Caiman argued that Boukman likely did attend the Lenormand meeting.<sup>198</sup> Boukman was an elite, Creole slave and as one of the primary

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196Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 92-94.

197Scholars in general see Boukman as a religious leader in the early insurgency. See for example Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 92; Dubois, *Avengers*, 99-100. Geggus, on the other hand, has expressed some reservations over Boukman as a religious leader. See Geggus, "Marronage, Vodou, and the Slave Revolt of 1791," in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 77-78.

198Geggus, "The Bois-Caiman Ceremony," in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 89-90.

leaders of the insurgency it makes sense that he attended that meeting. Likewise, scholars generally agree that Boukman led the initial insurgency the day after the Bois-Caiman. Thus Boukman attended both of the other major moments in the week before the insurgency. Why would he not also go to the Bois-Caiman ceremony? It was held on a Sunday and he started the insurgency the next day near where the ceremony was held. The series of events that led to insurgency and Boukman's central place in them makes it very unlikely that he did not attend the Bois-Caiman ceremony. Thus, I would argue that Boukman did attend the Bois-Caiman and further that he was one of the religious leaders at the ceremony. Boukman was the king.

One additional piece of interpretive evidence from the anthropological literature can help to strengthen the claim I have just made. As discussed earlier, Jacobson-Widding described a Kongolese blood-oath ceremony that served the purpose of crowning a new chief. Both the king and participants took a blood-oath at the ceremony. When they did, participants at that ceremony did not swear to some abstract idea of community, but rather they specifically swore allegiance to the new chief. The account of Ardouin is again very revealing when read in conjunction with Jacobson-Widding's work.<sup>199</sup> Ardouin wrote that “the assistants swore after him [Boukman], in the same manner, to follow and to obey his will.”<sup>200</sup> In his account, participants at the Bois-Caiman ceremony were not swearing a secrecy oath, nor to rebel. But rather they swore to follow Boukman, much like men and women in Central-Africa swore to follow their new chief. In addition, at the *vaudou* dance ceremony, the oath of secrecy came before the blood-oath, which suggests that blood-oath in Saint-Domingue had a purpose beyond secrecy.

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199 Jacobson-Widding, *Red—White—Black*, 279

200 Ardouin, *Études*, 229. My translation.

Therefore, if Boukman was the person who the group of enslaved men and women swore allegiance to at the Bois-Caiman and if it was him who they then followed in rebellion the very next day, then Boukman should be seen as the central figure of the early insurgency. At the very least, there is strong evidence that he played a crucial leadership role in the week before the insurgency. This interpretation of the coming of the insurgency makes the first days of the insurgency much more about Boukman than scholars have yet argued. Yet, I would argue that an interpretation that takes seriously the role of the king and queen in conjunction with the insights provided by Jacobson-Widding gives much weight to an interpretation that stresses Boukman as the leading figure of the early insurgency.

A couple of other moments from the early insurgency lend even more credence to this controversial interpretation. In November of 1791, one chronicler of the insurgency noted that a priest named Father Cachetan “crowned the Negro Jean-François and the Negresse Charlotte [Jean-François's wife] king and queen of the Africans, and leaders of the revolt.”<sup>201</sup> Jean-François, like Boukman, was another major Creole leader of the early insurgency. In contrast to my argument that Boukman was central to the early insurgency, scholars have often portrayed Jean-François as the leading figure in the early insurgency. Curiously, the crowning of Jean-François as king and Charlotte as queen came shortly after the death of Boukman. Dubois wrote that “in mid-November Boukman was surrounded by a troop of cavalry and gunned down during a battle... decapitated, his body burned... and his head displayed on a stake in the main plaza of Le Cap.”<sup>202</sup> Could

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201“La Révolution de Saint-Domingue, contenant tout ce qui s'est passé dans le colonie française depuis le commencement de la Révolution jusqu'au départ de l'auteur pour la France, le 8 septembre 1792,” in *Facing Racial Revolution*, ed. Popkin, 57-58.

202Dubois, *Avengers*, 124.

the timing of these events be coincidental? Those in the insurgent camps certainly feared for the worse. After Boukman's death, the same chronicler noted that many insurgents were at a loss when they said “Boukman is killed, what will become of us.”<sup>203</sup> Maybe their concerns stemmed from the manner that Jean-François chose to become king. Jean-François drew his sacred power from a French priest. In contrast, it has been shown that Boukman likely situated his role as king in the emerging culture of Afro-Caribbean religious practices in Saint-Domingue. What can be said with some certainty is that the timing of Jean-François's crowning as king is curious and suggests that someone else within the insurgency held to role of king before him. That someone was more than likely Boukman.

Apart from his role at the Bois-Caiman ceremony, Boukman's link to the Afro-Caribbean religious system is apparent in how some insurgents reacted to his death. The white intellectual Monsieur Gros had been captured shortly after the fighting in the north began. He eventually carved a spot for himself in Jean-François's camp as the Creole leader's secretary. While there he wrote an account of the camps. Gros wrote that black men and women in the Dondon camp, after learning of Boukman's death, “caused a dance or *Calinda* to be held for three days, during which they displayed the whole of their exploits, reproaching us [white prisoners].”<sup>204</sup> The length of the calenda and the exuberance by which the men and women in the camps danced it shows the connection that they had developed with Boukman. He had obviously been held in high esteem by a portion of insurgents. As well, it is noteworthy that insurgents danced a calenda when they commemorated his death. As shown earlier, calenda had a strong religious

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<sup>203</sup>“La Révolution de Saint-Domingue,” in Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 57-58.

<sup>204</sup>Gros, “An Historick Recital,” in *Facing Racial Revolution*, ed. Popkin, 134.

dimension to it. Sometimes it was danced at funerals in Saint-Domingue. Boukman's death undoubtedly touched those in the insurgency. By dancing a calenda, insurgents both paid homage to Boukman as a religious leader with a religious dance while also following a Saint-Domingue custom of dancing calenda in commemoration. So, when these men and women danced a calenda they did so because of both the religious leadership of Boukman and in commemoration of the allegiance they had sworn to him.

Now that the religious leadership of Boukman can be argued with a greater degree of certainty, it is necessary to turn to a discussion of the blood-oath ritual at the Bois-Caiman ceremony. All the early accounts of the Bois-Caiman ceremony described the killing of a black pig by a priestess. Afterwards, each participant drank the blood of the pig.<sup>205</sup> As mentioned earlier, most scholars writing about the Bois-Caiman ceremony have emphasized the African origins of the Bois-Caiman blood-oath ritual over and interpretation of its social uses. In that quest, Robin Law's argument for a Dahomian origin seems the most likely.<sup>206</sup> Yet as shown in the discussion of blood-oath above, the African origins of blood-oath in Saint-Domingue can best be viewed as an assemblage of West and West-Central practices. When interpreted as an assemblage, the blood-oath at the Bois-Caiman ceremony can be seen as holding a greater degree of intelligibility among the enslaved since the meanings behind the blood-oath would have been accessible to a wide range of enslaved individuals familiar with certain West or West-Central African traditions. That accessibility made blood-oath a good choice for the

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205Ardouin, *Études*, 229; Dalmas, *Histoire de la révolution*, in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, ed. Dubois and Garrigus, 90; Dumesle, *Voyage dans le nord d'Hayti*, 89. Dalmas did not mention who led the blood-oath ceremony.

206Law, "On the African Background."

incorporation of the many non-elite and African slaves who I had earlier argued were brought into the insurgency at the Bois-Caiman ceremony.

It had been argued earlier that the blood-oath at the Bois-Caiman was the moment that elite slaves chose to reveal the insurgency to a broader range of non-elite and African slaves. I had used the timing of the false-starts in order to show this. Before the ceremony only elite slaves had conducted a false start, yet after the ceremony many non-elite slaves immediately began to burn the La Gosette plantation. That argument based on timing is supported by the work of Kenneth Bilby. His fieldwork and an analysis of the *vaudou* dance ceremony both revealed that the revealing of esoteric knowledge often came after ritual preparation through blood-oath. In conjunction with the timing of the false-starts, that interpretation seems very likely in the case of the Bois-Caiman ceremony. More than likely the blood-oath there served as an initiation, which then gave access to the formerly withheld knowledge that a rebellion had been planned. What is striking is that none of the accounts of the Bois-Caiman ceremony mention what happened to those who decided they did not want to rebel. Maybe participants were chosen beforehand or maybe those who did not agree just went along with the ceremony and disappeared before the next morning. Regardless, it is clear from the timing and through cultural evidence that at the Bois-Caiman the decision to rebel was disseminated to a broader group of enslaved men and women.

Blood oath also served as a way to more safely disseminate the decision to rebel. Evidenced by the detailed timing set by elite slaves at the Lenormand meeting, a chaotic and uncontrolled rebellion seems to have not been the goal of the insurgent leaders. In fact, they set a rather far off date and seemed to control knowledge of the coming

insurgency rather tightly. To their credit, only one false start was recorded before the Bois-Caiman ceremony and there an elite slave, who could have attended the Lenormand meeting, rebelled. Thus, it seems that the insurgent leaders desired order. Part of that order was regulation of the knowledge to rebel. As the *vaudou* dance ceremony showed, blood-oath was a good practice to use in order to regulate knowledge. Only participants who took blood-oath there could dance the *vaudou* dance and partake in spirit possession. In addition, since takers often understood that death, even if supernatural, was the punishment for breaking the oath, the practice of blood-oath gave some control to those who wished to reveal particularly dangerous knowledge. They could, after all, kill those who broke the oath. In that way, when enslaved individuals swore allegiance to Boukman rather than to a general idea of rebellion, the dissemination of knowledge about the coming insurgency was potentially more controllable.<sup>207</sup> Since he started the insurgency the next day, blood-oath thus became a method to control those who joined him.

An interpretation of the Bois-Caiman ceremony that takes into account the *vaudou* dance ceremony will invariably stress blood-oath ritual as necessary for the creation of a new community. At the *vaudou* dance ceremony and in Bilby's understanding of the practice, blood-oath ritual was a crucial step to the ritual process that formed new communities from fragmentary pieces. Because blood-oath in Saint-Domingue formed out of a cultural assemblage, it functioned despite ethnic or social boundaries. This created a social exchange that can be seen reflected in the diverse cultural practices and leadership at the ceremony. Rather than a circular relationship, this

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<sup>207</sup>Ardouin, *Études*, 229.



process should be seen as ongoing, much like Palmié argued. The Bois-Caiman should not be interpreted differently. At the ceremony, a heterogeneous group, in this case an elite slave leadership and a non-elite and often African masses, banded together despite holding many ethnic differences and being constrained by social boundaries. Blood-oath served as a mechanism to transcend those boundaries. It made outsiders into insiders. After that transformation, a new community of insurgents had been formed. By extension, since men and women began to dance and drink at the *vaudoux* ceremony after the blood-oath and the initiation. That suggests that after the blood-oath at the Bois-Caiman ceremony participants more than likely danced, perhaps a calenda led by Boukman, and they more than likely ate and drank. After the excitement of the ceremony and with lifted spirits from drink, some of the participants prematurely attacked the La Gosette plantation and the waves of violence that would rock Saint-Domingue for the next thirteen years began.

This discussion of the Bois-Caiman ceremony has taken into account interpretations drawn from recent anthropological and historical work, which has led to conclusions about the role of the Bois-Caiman ceremony that are much different from other historians' arguments. Geggus, as shown earlier, has argued that the Lenormand meeting should be viewed as the key organizational moment for the insurgency. Yet, the ability of blood oath to organize people despite ethnic and social differences should change how scholars view the coming of the insurgency. If as Dubois argued, “what made their insurrection so powerful... [was] the capacity of the conspirators to organize across plantations, bringing together slaves separated by significant distances and

working under the watchful eyes of overseers and masters,”<sup>208</sup> then the re-interpretation of blood-oath here has revealed that to a greater degree than previously argued the Bois-Caiman ceremony and Boukman Duty were necessary for assembling those conspirators across plantation lines. Since it was the blood-oath at the Bois-Caiman that provided the cultural mechanism by which both mobilization and the transmission of knowledge of the rebellion proceeded, the Bois-Caiman ceremony, not the Lenormand meeting, should be viewed as the key moment in the lead up to the insurgency. While it still holds great importance, the decision to rebel made by elite slaves at the Lenormand meeting would have floundered if it were not for the religious mobilization of the Bois-Caiman ceremony.

### **Conclusion**

The day after the Bois-Caiman ceremony, the insurgency broke out on many of the plantations surrounding the one owned by Jean-Paul Pillet's family. Once again, Pillet fled his home against his will. This time he moved his family to safety in Cap Français. Once there, Pillet decided to help fight the insurgency. He joined the rather sparse militia tasked with the job of fighting the rebelling slaves. In a telling section of his narrative, Pillet described how he pursued one insurgent. That man claimed that he “was present at my [Pillet's] birth, and carried me in his arms.”<sup>209</sup> As the insurgent and Pillet chased each other, they bantered back and forth. One moment they would attempt to reconnect with each other, while in the next moment they attempted to kill one another. The insurgent, in Pillet's telling, blamed this bipolar, violence tinged dialogue on the devil continually

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208Dubois, *Avengers*, 99.

209Pillet, “Mon Odyssée,” in *Facing Racial Revolution*, ed. Popkin, 78.

entering into his body and guiding his less friendly actions.<sup>210</sup> In his description and by invoking the devil, Pillet described the resistance of this insurgent in a way that invoked spirit possession. Previously he had described a similar scene of spirit possession at the calenda held right after his arrival. Eventually, Pillet won the contest and he subdued the insurgent. A firing squad executed the defeated man, who remained defiant till his death. After the execution, Pillet noted that “we found in one of his pockets pamphlets printed in France, filled with commonplaces about the Rights of Man and the Sacred Insurrection.... on his chest he had a little sack full of hair, herbs, bits of bone, which they call a fetish.”<sup>211</sup>

The materials found on this man's body as well as his actions evoke the same intertwined relationship between religious practices and political motives that I earlier argued were characteristic of the lead up to the insurgency. This moment came early in the insurrection at a time when the memory of the Bois-Caiman ceremony and the leadership of Boukman would still have been fresh in the minds of many insurgents. Before leaving the Bois-Caiman, according to Dalmas, each participant took from the sacrificed pig some black hairs, which they placed great value on owning.<sup>212</sup> Maybe some of the hairs found in the fetish on this man's body were those taken from the pig that kicked off the insurgency on August 21, 1791. Scholars will never truly know, yet the actions of the man and the reverence that Bois-Caiman participants afforded those hairs

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210Jean-Paul Pillet, *Mon Odyssée: l'Épopée d'un Colon de Saint Domingue*, eds. Anja Bandau and Jeremy D. Popkin (Paris: Société française d'étude du dix-huitième siècle, 2015), 94. This section was originally written in Creole. The French reads “Hum! maître, je sais ce qui s'est passé. C'est le diable qui est entré dans mon corps. Je suis un bon nègre, mais que voulez-vous, le diable est trop malin.” A reasonable translation reads: Master, I know what has passed. It is the devil who is in my body. I am a good nègre [black or slave], but despite what you want, the devil is too strong.

211Pillet, “Mon Odyssée,” in *Facing Racial Revolution*, ed. Popkin, 79.

212Dalmas, *Histoire de la révolution*, in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, ed. Dubois and Garrigus, 90.

suggests that this is a reasonable assumption. The sack of hair, herbs, and bone and the possession that this man exhibited does tell us that for many insurgents the Afro-Caribbean practices characteristic of the *vaudou* dance ceremony, calenda, and the Bois-Caiman ceremony held much value in their lives. That this man combined that Afro-Caribbean religious system with the highly politicized Rights of Man is strong proof that the Bois-Caiman ceremony participants would have done the same. By tracing the events that led to the start of the 1791, the first section of this study argued that, in Saint-Domingue, enslaved people intertwined religious practices and political motives. The insurgent above stands as a symbol of that interconnectedness. It has been historians who have separated politics from religious practices.

The materials found on this man's body also exhibit another feature of the cultural life of enslaved individuals that has been argued here. By combing the Rights of Man with the African derived material practice of the fetish, this man's belongings show the process of cultural assemblage at work. In order to understand that process, the work of many recent anthropologists and historians has been laboriously worked through. That scholarly history has led to an analysis of the Bois-Caiman ceremony that has placed much emphasis on how an assemblage of culture was strategically used by insurgents as they organized the insurgency. Without the work of scholars such as Stephan Palmié, William Roseberry, Kenneth Bilby, and Vincent Brown the interpretations this study has advanced would not have been possible. Through a cultural analysis of the *vaudou* dance ceremony described by Moreau de Saint-Méry, I have been able draw out interpretations of blood-oath, religious leadership, and dance informed by recent anthropological works that help us to more fully understand the Bois-Caiman ceremony.

Key to those interpretations was that enslaved men and women in Saint-Domingue assembled an Afro-Caribbean religious life from disparate, yet mutually understandable, African practices that came together in new ways that often did not respect ethnic differences nor social boundaries. This held true for blood-oath, calenda, religious leadership, the *voudoux* dance ceremony, the Bois-Caiman ceremony and even the insurgents themselves.

Since much of the major historical works about the Bois-Caiman ceremony were written before these key studies on African-American culture, my analysis in conjunction with the recent approaches to culture advocated here have led to new conclusions about the place that the ceremony occupied in the insurgency. Geggus has argued, for example, that despite contributing many leaders and helping to mobilize resistance “whether vodou played a critical role, however, either as an institution or source of inspiration, particularly in the northern uprising itself, remains to be proven.”<sup>213</sup> The above discussion has not proven that Vodou specifically played a key role in the coming of the Haitian Revolution, but it has shown that Afro-Caribbean religious practices such as blood-oath and dance along with religious leaders have played a critical role to the mobilization and organization of the 1791 insurgency. The blood-oath ritual at the heart of the Bois-Caiman ceremony was particularly crucial to that process since it served as the mechanism by which an elite leadership brought non-elite and African slaves into the insurgency. The insurgent chased by Pillet may have been one of those very people who attended the Bois-Caiman ceremony and who then fought alongside Boukman Dutty the following day. By bringing insurgents together through religious practice, re-negotiating

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213Geggus, “Marronage, Vodou, and the Slave Revolt of 1791,” in *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 80.

a new start date, disseminating the decision to rebel, and lending religious power to the insurgency, the Bois-Caiman ceremony proved to be a key moment in the outbreak of the 1791 insurgency. It was only through an interdisciplinary and sustained cultural analysis that I could come to this conclusion. I think it can now be said with some confidence that the role of religion in slave resistance is no longer such a murky area.

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