

Thomas Madiou, *Histoire d'Haïti* (Port-au-Prince: Imp de J. Courtois, 1847)

Tome 1

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Even before insurgent leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines declared Haiti's independence on January 1, 1804 a plethora of texts were circulating in the Americas and Europe on the revolution in the French colony of Saint Domingue. Over the next decades, Haitian authors took up the challenge of responding to these foreign publications writing their own history of the nation's founding. One of the seminal works of Haiti's emerging historiographic tradition is the eight volume *Histoire d'Haïti* by Thomas Madiou. Published in Port-au-Prince in two installments in 1847 and 1848, the volumes were the first definitive history of Haiti from 1492 to 1846. The translations are from the original publication which I selected because it is now freely available on Google books. Henri Deschamps, a Haitian publishing house, released a more recent reprint between 1988 and 1991 but only limited copies are still available for purchase or held by U.S. libraries. For individuals familiar with the Deschamps edition, the pagination of the 1847/48 Google edition is slightly different.

Born in Haiti in 1814 to a mixed race family, Madiou attended school in France from the age of 10. Upon returning to Haiti as an adult, he began publishing articles in Port-au-Prince newspapers only to realize the need for a complete history. Madiou set about reading available print sources and, more importantly, interviewing aging soldiers who fought in the revolution. Unfortunately, Madiou did not leave a list of names, so we do not know exactly with whom he spoke. David Geggus suggests the interviewees were principally mulatto officers and not rank and file soldiers who would have been former slaves and probably born in Africa.ⁱ Although Madiou's oral sources may not have come from a wide-spread of Haiti's population, his narrative is still more favorable towards the black masses and black revolutionary leaders. His history along with contemporary publications by fellow Haitians Beaubrun Ardouin and Joseph Saint-Rémy remain crucial sources for scholars today and an essential contribution to the Vodou Archive.

Below are translations of four excerpts which are some of the earliest writings by a Haitian author on spiritual practices during the Haitian Revolution. While scholars continue to debate the influence of religion in the revolution, most agree that "magico-religious beliefs helped to mobilize resistance and foster a revolutionary mentality."ⁱⁱ Madiou's excerpts illustrate the motivational influence of religion as well as the links between political and religious leadership and the symbolic power of talismans and charms. While they reveal details on slaves' and insurgents' spiritual beliefs, we must also read them with caution. Madiou's descriptions have been called melodramatic, primitive, and sensational.ⁱⁱⁱ He also omits any description of the Bwa Kayiman (Bois Caïman) ceremony which preceded the August 1791 slave revolt. We must keep this in mind as we read Madiou and realize that both the accounts and the silences are equally helpful in understanding the history of Haiti and Haitian Vodou.

“August 1791 insurgent camps in northern Saint Domingue,” pp.72-74

During this time, the rebel slaves organized themselves. Jean François took the title of Grand Admiral of France and Head General. Biassou, his lieutenant, took on that of Viceroy of the Conquered Lands.^{iv} They dominated the bands composed of Congos, Mandingos, Ibos, Senegalese, etc. as much by their superior intelligence as by superstition.^v They established a strict discipline among themselves and proved themselves to be as proud and cruel towards their followers as their masters had been to them.

Jean François became the leader. To inspire the insurgents' respect he surrounded himself with the greatest luxury amid the smoking ruins of the Northern plain. He wore a general's uniform decorated with cords, stripes, and a cross he had stripped from the clothing of dead white officers. He moved throughout the rows of rebel slaves either mounted on a lavishly equipped horse or seated in a carriage drawn by four horses—sometimes black, sometimes white. As for Biassou, he gathered around him a Council made up of sorcerers and magicians. His tent was filled with little cats of all colors, snakes (72), bones and an assortment of other objects, all symbols of African superstitions. During the night, great bonfires were lit in his camp. Naked women performed unsightly dances around them, making frightening contortions and chanting words that could only be understood in the deserts of Africa. When the excitement was approaching a climax, Biassou, followed by his sorcerers, presented himself to the crowd and cried out that the spirit of God had inspired him. He announced to the Africans that if they died in battle, they would come back to life among their former tribes in Africa. Then hideous cries carried far into the woods; the chants and somber drumbeats began again. Biassou, profiting

from these moments of elation, ordered his troops to attack the enemy, surprising them in the middle of the night. The insurgents, without tactics and ignorant of the art of war, rushed to the canons and seized them and turn them against the whites. Often, to their surprise, the rebels found that the cannons did not fire after they had loaded them: they put the canon ball in before the powder. Soon, however, they learned the military techniques and formed troops that rivaled those of Europe.

Jean François and Biassou left their camp and marched against Cap Français. After several successful attacks, they were beaten back. Boukman was taken prisoner during the retreat. The insurgents regrouped not far from the town.^{vi} Boukman had his head cut off and his body burned in view of Jean François's camp. His bloody head, carried to Cap, was displayed on a pike in the central square. He had earned from his followers such admiration that they regretted his death and mourned him for several months. Father Sulpice, the insurgent army's chaplain, was a European who Jean-François had saved from the massacres and decorated with honors and riches.

Jeannot proclaimed himself the avenger of Ogé and Chavanne.^{vii} Under the orders of Jean-François, he commanded, the eastern sections of the Northern province, and indulged in horrible cruelties. Like Biassou, he was under the influence of sorcerers; and through his great ferocity, he struck fear into his troops. As with most rude and fanatical men, sometimes he showed the greatest courage, at other times the most shameful weakness. We witnessed his courage at the battle of Cap as he led his battalions with the intrepidity of heroes; but in other encounters he was the first to flee. His flag was a white infant's body carried on the end of a pike planted at the entrance of his camp; his tent was circled with lances topped with the heads of whites. In front of their mothers and fathers, he raped multiple young white girls, his prisoners,

and then cut their throats. (74) As for Jean-François, he had convinced Father Sulpice to urge the white female prisoners who came to confessions to deliver themselves to the leaders of his troops. He kept the most beautiful for himself in a harem. Once these unfortunates were no longer attractive to these barbarians, they were given to the black and colored women who made them their servants and beat them. In the middle of his half-naked troops armed with daggers, pikes, lances, and several guns, Jeannot sparkled with stripes and jewels. Every day he had several white prisoners brought before him: some were sawed between two planks; others, who he found too tall, had their feet cut off; when he found the unfortunates who were too short, he made them grow by six inches, he said, by dislocating their legs and thighs. Often, after viewing these executions, he was thirsty. He cut the head off a white, received the blood in a vase, and mixed it with tafia and drank it. On branches of all the trees in his camp were hooks from which prisoners hung by their chins.

Jean François, the commander in chief, learning of the atrocities of Jeannot was horrified. He ordered him to stop committing such crimes, but in vain. So he marched against Jeannot and engaged him in battle near Vallière. In the middle of the action, Jeannot's troops, who had grown tired of his tyranny, abandoned him. Jean François took him prisoner and condemned him to death. This man, so cruel that the sight of blood thrilled him, was scared as his final judgment approached. He made all sorts of degrading offers to avoid death; he even asked Jean-François to accept him as a slave. All his prayers were futile. When he arrived at the execution site, he pleaded with his bound hands for the priest of Marmelade, who accompanied him during his final hours, to ask Jean-François for his pardon. The only response the priest gave was that there was nothing left for him to do but to present himself before God. Terror seized Jeannot; he attacked the priest forcefully and did not want to release him; a struggle ensued between them;

and it took some effort to remove the breathless priest from his clutches. He wept and was shot point blank. It is claimed that Jean-François did not execute Jeannot because of his cruelty, but rather because he began to dislike his authority. He continued to live in harmony with Biassou, who slowly burned his prisoners and took out their eyes with bullet casings. But it should also be said that Biassou was as powerful as him. Jean-François was the least cruel leader of the first insurrection in the North. (74)

“Romaine la Prophétesse,” pp.97-98

During this period Léogane was ravaged by a Spanish *grif*^{viii} called Romaine Rivière, who had taken the title of Prophet, describing himself as the Godson of the Virgin Mary. He signed his name Romaine la Prophétesse. He ruled slave troops through superstition, leading them to revolt in the mountains. He said mass, delivered the whites to all sorts of torture and believed that in doing so he was following the orders of the Virgin. Léogane, though they recognized the authority of the Croix-des-Bouquets confederation, was nevertheless submitted to his fury.^{ix} Labuissonnière, captain general of the men of color from Léogane, preferred to ally with Romaine rather than recognize the authority of Port-au-Prince, where Praloto reigned.^x But Romaine’s bands exercised such cruelty in Léogane, pillaging, raping, murdering, that the free people of color demanded that Commissioner St. Léger to send 500 line troops to protect them.^{xi} St. Léger did not receive the support from Port-au-Prince, which formally (97) refused to protect mulattoes. He turned instead to Bauvais and Pinchinat, who sent a battalion of free men of color from Croix-des-Bouquets to Léogane to wait for the Civil Commissioner there. St Léger left Port-au-Prince on 5 March on the frigate “la Galatée.” Only a few days after his arrival, Romaine the Prophétesse and Courlonge, his Lieutenant, came in the middle of the night March 11th to

attack the town. They entered, pillaged, and took canons and munitions. But the battalion of free men protected St Léger, attacked the rebels with gusto, took back the canons, and ran them out of town. The next day the sailors of “la Galatée” and the men of color from Grand-Goâve and Petit-Goâve came to the support of the people of Léogane, and drove the rebels back to the mountains. St. Léger profited from his success by placing a man of color named Sinclar in command of a division that reached Trou-Coffi, Romaine’s headquarters, dispersed his band and almost took Romaine prisoner. From that point on Léogane was free from the furies of this imposter. (98)

“Hyacinthe Ducoudray,” pp.100-101

The free people of color named Hyacinthe Ducoudray, a young, brave, and intelligent black to the position of captain general of the slave gangs. They named another black, Garion Santo, major general. On the 28 March demonstrations hostile to the whites exploded on the plantations. During the night of 30 to 31 March, the slaves rose up, but in good order: not one planter was killed, not one house burned. They marched in the number of 15,000 on Croix-des-Bouquets, Hyacinthe at their head, commanded by men of color who joined their ranks. They were armed with knives, hoes, branding irons, and fronds. At three in the morning, they attacked the troop lines the whites had formed around the village with prodigious determination. Inspired by their sorcerers, the blacks ran to their deaths with joy because they believed they would come back to life in Africa. Hyacinthe ran throughout the rows of slaves armed with a bull’s tail, saying it could send back bullets. While his troops held the white dragoons in check, he was attacked from another side by the National Guard. But the young colonists of Port-au-Prince who made up this corps, though brave, proud, and well-armed could not resist the impetuosity of the insurgents. They lost their position, when Philibert^{xiii} with his Africans came to restart the battle. They

fought one other with equal fury. The regiments of Artois and Normandy pushed back the entire line of blacks, who rushed wildly into the bayonets, with sustained infantry fire. In intervals, the dragoons made brilliant charges into the town; but they were quickly overcome by insurgents who grabbed their horses with rage, slashed them, and pulled them down. The bloodiest scenes took place in the zones occupied by Praloto's artillery. The blacks marched audaciously to the canons; but they were blown to pieces by the deadly fire; they weakened a little until (100) Hyacinthe renewed their ardor with his words, shaking the bull's tail: "Forward! Forward! The bullets are dust." At the same time, facing death, he launched himself--at the head of the troops--into the middle of the bullets and grapeshot. Insurgents grabbed the cannons, and embraced them. They were killed without ever letting go. Others dug their arms into the canons to stop the balls, and addressing their comrades in arms cried: "Come, come we've got them!" The canons fired and body parts scattered everywhere. After six hours of such combat, the army of Port-au-Prince was forced to surrender to their superior numbers; it disbanded and retreated after burning their food stores and blowing up the powder house at Croix-des-Bouquets. The whites lit everything on fire, returning to Port-au-Prince in the greatest confusion. They lost more than 100 soldiers, while the rebels counted at least 1200 men dead. The men of color found all the town's weapons spiked. Hyacinthe, master of Croix-des-Bouquets, allowed no liberties. What a difference there was between this uprising of slaves of the West, led by free people of color, and that of the Northern slaves, run by themselves. On one side there was order, respect for property, not one murder; on the other disorder, pillage, and horrible vengeance. Among the insurgents who stood out were Halaou, Bébécoulard, Bélisaire, a man of color. They became famous leaders. They organized their troops African style: their heads decorated with rooster and

peacock feathers, they had themselves carried about to celebrate the victory. They had the power of life and death over their followers.

With this victory, the supremacy of the freemen of color in the West was assured. They held Hyacinthe Ducoudray, a young man full of humanity, under their influence. He asked Father Thomas, priest of Croix-de-Bouquets, to bless his army. He established his headquarters on the Santo plantation. There he gathered all the white commanders and told them that he had become their leader and that they had to obey him. He would force the cultivators to work and plant provision; the first who fled would be shot. (101)

“Halaou meets Sonthonax,” pp.181-82

The insurgents of Cul-de-Sac had at their head an African named Halaou, of a giant size and herculean force.

He ruled over his bands by superstition, always holding a white rooster under his arm which he believed transmitted to him the wishes of the heavens. He marched followed by drums, conch¹ players, trumpets, and sorcerers or ‘popes’ who sang that he was invincible and that canons were only bamboo and the dust of gunpowder. His guards wore bulls’ tails that were said to turn back bullets. Halaou, curious to see Sonthonax who had become the “Good God” of the newly freed slaves, left one obscure night from the plantation Meilleur.^{xiii} At daybreak, he arrived at the trenches surrounding Port-Republican at the head of 12,000 blacks.

All of a sudden his infernal music blasted. All the citizens edged near the trenches to see the frightful bands. The Commissioner went forward to Halaou, embraced him, and whispered in

¹ Large shells having an interior shape of still.

his ear. He invited him to bring his troops in the city. The newly emancipated filled Port-Republican. If not for the presence of Pinchinat and Monbrun at the head of the legion at the Western front, the *anciens libres* would have been slaughtered.^{xiv} Sonthonax led Halaou to the national palace where he served him a magnificent feast. It would be impossible to describe the joy, pride, and enthusiasm of the bands of Congos, Ibos, Dahomeans, and Senegalese, when they saw their supreme leader almost naked, covered in fetishes, holding his white rooster at his side, seated near the French representative covered in tricolor ribbons. If we believe our legends, Sonthonax, after the meal, encouraged Halaou to return to Croix-des-Bouquets to kill General Bauvais, portraying him as (181) an enemy of blacks' liberty. Halaou left the city early and returned to Croix-des-Bouquets, where Bauvais was surrounded by a detachment of the Western Legion. The town was flooded with battalions of newly freed slaves. Facing this imminent danger, Bauvais felt his courage grow. He invited Halaou to come drink with him; and Halaou came to sit at his table. The blacks and men of color from the Western Legion's detachment quickly encircled the house, and guards placed themselves at the doors and windows. These brave soldiers were willing to die with their leader. An unsuspecting Halaou found himself as a hostage: for Bauvais to die, he would have to die as well. The horrible cries of the newly freed filled the air, demanding that their leader be freed. But, they dared not act against the *anciens libres* who, in their behavior, announced that they held the life of Halaou in their hands and that they were resolved to die. Until that moment, Bauvais had not clearly understood the goal of this dreadful movement.

During this time, all Port-au-Prince was talking about was Sonthonax's order to kill general Bauvais. Pinchinat and Monbrun sent two officers from the Western Legion to Croix-des-Bouquets with an order to kill Halaou as long as they arrived before the crime was

accomplished. Marc Borno, an officer of the legion's dragoons, sent a detachment of troops from among his ranks. Many infantrymen volunteered to march to the town. When the two officers sent by Pinchinat arrived at Croix-des-Bouquets, they entered the house occupied by Bauvais; a sergeant followed them in. Shocked by the audacity of the sergeant breaking rank, General Bauvais rose to shoot him; but the sergeant got Halaou first with one bullet. Thus all was forgiven. The soldiers of the Western Legion rushed the insurgents and a bloody combat ensued. The newly freed formed a considerable mass, and were brutally shot down almost at point blank. They cried Halaou! Halaou!, but the bullets they shook to turn back the bullets were blown away. The newly freed, poorly armed and losing entire rows of troops, abandoned Croix-des-Bouquets, where the roads were already full of corpses. The greatest terror and fierceness were deployed at Trois Rigoles near the town. Finally, Halaou's bands, terrified by the death of their leader, who they believed was invincible, and the disappearance of the white rooster that passed—in their eyes—for a celestial spirit, fled off in all directions and scattered themselves in the mountains at the edge of Cul-de-Sac plain. Bauvais remained master of Croix-des-Bouquets. Shortly after this affair, in Port-Republican, the anciens libres refused to recognize the authority of Sonthonax. (182)

ⁱ David P. Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 228 endnote 13.

ⁱⁱ Geggus, 80.

ⁱⁱⁱ Colin (Joan) Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 29; Geggus, 83 and 228.

^{iv} Jean François and Georges Biassou were leaders of the August 1791 slave revolt in northern Saint Domingue. As the passage from Madiou illustrates over the course of the first months of fighting they became the most important insurgent leaders. Jean François and Biassou debated peace negotiations with the French in exchange for the emancipation for themselves and some of their followers. At the same time, they also developed informal contacts with the Spanish, who controlled the eastern side of the island. And, in 1793 when Spain declared war against

France, Jean-François and Biassou joined Spanish forces to fight French Republican troops in Saint Domingue. Both men and portions of their troops, renamed the Black Auxiliaries of Charles IV, remained with the Spanish, while other insurgents such as Toussaint Louverture returned to support the French in 1794. A year later, Biassou and Jean-François left Santo Domingo with Spanish troops for Cuba; however, Cuban officials feared the presence of the black auxiliaries would incite slave uprisings and did not allow any of the troops to disembark in Havana. Instead, Biassou and his followers sailed to St. Augustine, Florida where he died in 1801. Jean-François took his family and followers to Spain where he passed the final years of his life.

^v By the late 1780s, the French colony of Saint Domingue had over 8,000 plantations (sugar, coffee, and indigo) and approximately 450,000 slaves. Among the slave population were numerous West and Central African ethnic or nation groups. Madiou names several here: Congos, Mandingo, Senegalese, and Ibo. In all cases the name did not necessarily represent the national origins of the slave. Rather, European and African slave traders assigned captives a nation often based on place of purchase, and this became their “identity” upon arrival in the Americas. While these practices limit our ability to locate the exact origin of Saint Domingue’s slaves, their names illustrate a great diversity and are important for thinking about how various religious traditions influenced what became Haitian Vodou. Congos referred to captives purchased along the coast of present day Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo and made up the largest single nation group among slaves. Mandingos included slaves from the Niger River valley, while Senegalese referred to captives from the coast of present-day Senegal. Ibo indicated slaves from the Bight of Biafra in present-day Nigeria.

^{vi} Boukman Dutty, like Biassou and Jean-François, was a leader in the August 1791 uprising. Boukman was a slave driver and later coachman, but also a religious leader. This earned him respect from fellow slaves. Boukman is believed to have led the Bwa Kayiman (Bois Caïman) ceremony on 21 August 1791, which served to mobilize support for the revolt—planned by slaves like Boukman who held leadership positions on plantations in the plains around Cap François—among predominantly African slaves. In Madiou the ceremony is absent and scholars have heatedly debated the exact details of the event. Nevertheless, the ceremony and Boukman demonstrate the role religion had in the revolt and mobilizing slaves.

^{vii} Vincent Ogé and Jean-Baptiste Chavanne were leaders of a 1790 uprising in northern Saint Domingue. They came from the wealthier, educated, and property owning group of *gens de couleur* (free people of color). Frustrated by repeated failed efforts to pass legislation in Paris for equality among men of property in Saint Domingue, Ogé returned to Saint Domingue. In the fall of 1790, with Chavanne, he organized free men of color to revolt against white colonists. Chavanne had also argued for the inclusion of slaves, and some did fight with the men; however, Ogé rejected using slaves or offering freedom. Initially successful at repelling planters’ troops, the men later fled through the mountains to the Spanish-side of the island. Here, the Spanish governor arrested them and sent Ogé, Chavanne and twenty-two other men back to the French to await a trial in Cap François. As leaders of the revolt, Ogé and Chavannes faced a horrific public execution that colonial officials hoped would serve as an example to any other radical revolutionaries. Jeannot’s call to avenge their deaths connects the two uprisings in northern Saint Domingue, even though Ogé and Chavanne’s did not attempt to gain slaves freedom. For insurgent leader Jeannot, the two freemen of color served as an example of how to employ violence against white colonists.

^{viii} Grif is one of many terms developed by the French to classify slaves and afro-descendants on a shifting scale of blackness. A grif referred to individuals who were of mixed African and European descent as well as African and Indian.

^{ix} The Croix-des-Bouquets confederation refers to a series of concordats signed between free men of color and white planters from the Port-au-Prince region. The concordats were supposed to guarantee the political rights of free men of color; however, conflicts frequently erupted between the groups. During the negotiations it is important to note that the freemen of color brigades had support from a group of insurgent slaves called the Swiss. They promised the slaves freedom in exchange for their military service. Unfortunately, they were unable to fulfill their promises and the Swiss returned to their plantations or, for those slaves who refused to labor again, exile along the Caribbean coast of present-day Nicaragua.

^x Jacques Prélôt/Praloto/Pralotto was a Genoese sailor and gunner stationed in Port-au-Prince. He became the artillery leader and participated in campaigns against the freemen of color in 1791-2.

^{xi} Edmond Saint-Léger was one of the first Civil Commissioners sent by the French revolutionary government. He attempted to appease both the freemen of color and white colonists. Unsuccessful at bridging color divisions, he did help end the siege of Port-au-Prince with the assistance of freemen of color.

^{xii} Leader of a slave insurgent band, whites of Port-au-Prince recruited him to help fight the free people of color in 1792.

^{xiii} Léger Félicité Sonthonax was a member of the Second Civil Commission sent by the French National Assembly to Saint Domingue in 1792. Sonthonax and the other two commissioners, Etienne Polverel and Jean Antoine Ailhaud, had the task of upholding the Assembly's decree granting political rights to all free people of color. Less than a year later, Sonthonax issued decrees offering slaves and slave insurgents who joined to fight for the French Republic freedom, and later full abolition of slavery. Facing domestic and international enemies (by 1793 England and Spain had declared war with France), Sonthonax saw emancipation as a means to garner support for the French Republic. The meeting with insurgent leader Halaou occurred in 1794 after these proclamations, thus explaining the reverence newly freed slaves showed towards Sonthonax.

^{xiv} Anciens libres refers to free people of color and blacks who were free before Sonthonax and Poverel's 1793 emancipation decrees. Many of these individuals had also achieved equal political rights with white French men in 1791. Similar in size to the white population, there were approximately 30,000 free people of color on the eve of the revolution. They included established mulatto families who owned land and slaves and newly freed African slaves. These elite free people of color dominated the colonial militia and could equal the white planters in education and wealth. In this final excerpt, the mulatto commanding officers of the Western Legion were all anciens libres. The distinction between anciens libres and slaves freed in 1793 created divisions that impacted the revolution and the development of independent Haiti.