Adding to the Discourse: An Argument for the African Diaspora’s Agency in Causing the Haitian Revolution
Noted Caribbean historian David Geggus has compared the Haitian Revolution to the dropping of the first nuclear bomb on Hiroshima in 1944. Not because of the destruction caused, but because these two moments are some of the few that he believes “are turning points in history… [their] meanings could be rationalized or repressed but never really forgotten.”¹ Even today, there remains no doubt that the Haitian Revolution is one of the most significant events in the history of the Atlantic World. Its relevancy being well established. However, there is a discourse in scholarship studying the Haitian Revolution on its primary cause. Many scholars argue that it was the French Revolution, and the spread of the Revolutionary ideas, that spur revolution on Saint-Domingue. Others argue that it was the continued erosion of the Code Noir on the rights of the free black population in Saint-Domingue.² While these, and the many other perspectives on the cause of the Haitian Revolution, give a level of agency to enslaved blacks, there is a perspective that is not often covered. Scholars often leave out the role of the African Diaspora in constructing or causing the Haitian Revolution. In an attempt to add to the discourse, this paper will present an argument of the relevancy of the African Diaspora in helping to cause and craft the Haitian Revolution. This paper’s goal is not to discount the other arguments, but rather to assert the agency of the African Diaspora in the Haitian Revolution.

Before a discussion about the ways the African Diaspora helped to spur the Haitian Revolution can be had, it is necessary to briefly place Haiti in its historical context. This is necessary as the African Diaspora could, and still can, be found all over the Atlantic world (and beyond), and the unique context of the Haitian situation must be framed. Haiti was first

“discovered” by Europeans when Christopher Columbus famously landed on the island of Hispaniola; this would lead to Spain having initial rule over the island. Spanish mismanagement of Hispaniola would lead to a situation where the French West Indian Company laid claim to the Western portion of the island in the mid to late seventeenth century. Under French hands, the Western portion of Hispaniola would become what the French called Saint-Domingue, and would develop into France’s most important colonial possession, and one of the more important colonies in all of the Caribbean.

Haiti (Saint-Domingue) in the decade leading up to the Haitian Revolution had developed into an economic powerhouse. In the 1780s, Saint-Domingue was exporting more goods than the United States.3 This is not surprising considering that Saint-Domingue had, in 1789, “over 8,000 plantations and 500,000 slaves.”4 This massive agricultural industry led to Saint-Domingue producing “almost half the world’s sugar, and a majority of the world’s coffee.”5 This gave Saint-Domingue prominence in trade in the region, with an estimated 1,500 ships visiting the colony annually for the purpose of trade during the period leading up to the Revolution.6 It is also important to note that while Saint-Domingue had 500,000 enslaved blacks, it had only 30,000 whites.7 Additionally, Saint-Domingue had a larger than normal free black population. Because of its economic prominence, Saint-Domingue was the jewel of French holdings in the Caribbean and elsewhere. This ensured that the slave rebellion would have to face military force from France once it began.

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5 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
The situation in Saint-Domingue is only one piece of the puzzle. To fully understand the unique situation regarding the African Diaspora on the island a global context must also be briefly overviewed. The Haitian Revolution occurred at a time when the slave trade was at its peak. According to the Voyages Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, the period from 1776 to 1800 saw more slaves pass through the Middle Passage than any other; the database also highlights that this was France’s most substantial period in the trade as well, with France sending 433,061 Africans through the Middle passage.\(^8\) A large portion of those slaves were going to Saint-Domingue; with the boom that occurred in the 1780s, there was a rapid increase in the amount of slaves purchased. The large number of Africans brought to Saint-Domingue will be important in understanding some contextual points of the diaspora, as it reasserts that there was a large, recent, African presence on Saint-Domingue. Also key for Saint-Domingue over colonies such as Jamaica (Britain), Brazil (Portugal), was the French Revolution.

The French Revolution provided a unique opportunity for French colonies over other colonial empires. It saw the home government severely weakened because of internal chaos, and a series of revolutionary ideas develop and spread. As discussed earlier, some scholars believe that the French Revolution was what spurred the Haitian Revolution. The French Revolution’s ideas about equality and natural rights, as seen in documents such as The Declaration of the Rights and of the Citizens, were prominent. These ideas, while important, cannot be given full credit for the Haitian Revolution. The French Revolution created an atmosphere of instability, which did help to allow for the Haitian Revolution, but it was not the cause of the Haitian Revolution. White planters debated and analyzed the ideas flowing out of France much more

than the slave population did. Most scholars would not say that the large new slave population in Saint-Domingue needed to be told they were equal to believe it.

The Haitian Revolution occurred in August 1791, nearly two years after the French Revolution began. The Haitian Revolution saw its fair share of action; beginning in the Northern portion of Saint-Domingue, the rebellion quickly spread. Within two weeks of the rebellion slaves had “rose up in 23 of the 27 parishes in the northern province.” By November of that same year, approximately 80,000 of the 170,000 slaves in the Northern provinces had already joined in the rebellion and claimed their freedom. The rebellion was not be tamed by a distracted France, and matters for France only got worse once France was again at war with Britain and Spain. This forced France to look towards the rebellion as a possible source of assistance, and resulted in the 1794 decree abolishing slavery in the French colonies. France used this decree to make an alliance with the rebellion to fight against the Spanish in Hispaniola. The alliance resulted in the rebellion and the French forcing out Spain from Hispaniola by 1795. At this point Toussaint Louverture, a key figure in the rebellion, found himself in a leadership position, and had the most political backing by those in Haiti. This would lead to France to putting him in an official position of power, as well. The situation would come to a head when Toussaint wrote and published a new constitution for Saint-Domingue, making himself leader of

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the state for life in 1801. This led to his capture and the resumption of the conflict between the Haitian Rebels, under the leadership of Dessalines, and France. Ultimately, the rebels would be victorious and independence would come on January 1st, 1804.

The Haitian Revolution was the only slave revolt to result in independence for a colony; this gives Haiti a unique distinction, historically, and in the period that it occurred. When the Haitian Revolution occurred, it sent shock waves through the Atlantic World. Specifically it awoke the African diaspora in the Atlantic World that black liberation was indeed possible. This had two effects: first, it gave those enslaved in the African Diaspora a rallying cry, a mark of success; and second, it terrified the white planter class. Those in turn, also had many effects. From causing some planters to seek out slaves who were not born in Africa (believing those from Africa to be more wild), to causing slave owners in both Cuba and South Carolina to not want to purchase slaves who they believed had been exposed to “revolutionary ideas.” While not directly related to this paper’s argument, this demonstrates the importance of the Haitian Revolution to the African Diaspora. It also demonstrates how unique the Haitian Revolution was, which is why this paper will now look at the unique mix of conditions seen in Haiti (or Saint-Domingue prior to independence) as a result of how the African diaspora was constructed in Saint-Domingue.

The various parts of the African Diaspora in Haiti were not unique, however the combination of diasporic elements in Haiti were. Other colonies, such as Jamaica, had Vodou (to a lesser extent), other colonies had maroons, other colonies had slave owners who preferred

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16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 5.
cultural and ethnic uniformity among their slaves, and Saint-Domingue was not the only colony that felt the effects of the French Revolution. However, Saint-Domingue had what I believe was a perfect storm; all of these aspects were exceedingly strong in Saint-Domingue. All of these factors, with the exception of the French Revolution, were factors that let an extremely strong African Diaspora form. This gives credence to the argument that this diaspora was a major factor in causing the Haitian Revolution.

Now that the context is set, and the argument is framed, it is time to dive into the details on why this paper is asserting this. A key factor was the composition of slaves in Saint-Domingue. The composition of slaves in Saint-Domingue featured a preference for two notable groups: those from Nagos ( “of the Yoruba ‘nation’”), and the Congo. The culture of the society that the slaves came from had a major role in the construction of the culture in a specific diaspora.¹⁸ For instance, Nagos have been observed to be involved with other acts of disobedience, including the 1857 African Porters’ Strike in Bahia.¹⁹ Those from the Congo had a very specific reason for their importance in helping to cause the Haitian Revolution. Importation of slaves from the Congo, specifically the Kingdom of Kongo, was high in the 1780s because of a series of civil wars that created a large amount of prisoners available for sale.²⁰ This brought thousands of former soldiers into Saint-Domingue. They not only had military training, but there was familiarity between many of them, creating a group that when the Haitian Revolution began could offer valuable support and ability. Because these soldiers would have still been new to Saint-Domingue, they also would have had a strong connection back to the homeland.

¹⁹ Ibid., 358-359.
Further insight into the formation of ethnic and cultural hegemony can be gained through the writings of a former coffee planter of Saint-Domingue. Intermixed with racist and offensive assertions, the primary source offers insight into the process planters went through when purchasing slaves. The planter first recommended, “A gang ought to be, as much as possible, composed of the same nation.”\textsuperscript{21} He also recommended slaves from the Congo, claiming they are relatively docile. Perhaps this is an indication that those in Saint-Domingue were not expecting to bring thousands of former soldiers to their colony, and instead to obtain a “docile” population.

In sum, when planters such as this tried to achieve cultural and ethnic uniformity with their slaves, and the slave trading pattern of Saint-Domingue tended to bring slaves from the Congo and from what is modern day Nigeria (where the Nagos came from), it allowed for slaves to continue a stronger connection back to their African homeland through increased social and cultural support in the colony.

For many slaves, the connection back to the homeland was even stronger for those who had escaped enslavement and made their way into a maroon community. Saint Domingo featured a strong maroon community because of the geography of the island. The island features a series of valleys and mountain ranges (See figure 1.1), with most of the maroon communities forming within the mountain ranges where slave owners had a difficult time locating

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\textsuperscript{21} P.J. Labourie, \textit{The Coffee Planter of Saint-Domingue}, (London 1798), 165-166.
and reaching them. This led to several maroon communities forming and maintaining a life away from the abuses of slave owners.\textsuperscript{22} Saint-Domingue was notorious for having a lively maroon community, which included one maroon community that existed for over a century.\textsuperscript{23} Maroon communities offered Africans a place where they could again be Africans. Communities would often incorporate styling’s of African villages, and offer a place where African culture could flourish; particularly the maroons religious life. As stated by Leslie G. Desmangles, “because of the physical isolation of the maroon republics” Vodou practice was frequent, “which inspired blacks to resist European domination.”\textsuperscript{24} The continued practice of African culture that this isolation afforded kept the connection back to the African homeland strong. These maroon communities at the heart of the African Diaspora played a major part in the fighting once the slave rebellion began to take shape.\textsuperscript{25} Through the high percentage of like ethnic groups, and the isolation of a decent size of Africans away from the reach of slave owners, a strong diasporic connection back to the homeland empowered escaped slaves, and was crucial to the beginning of the Haitian Revolution.

Perhaps nothing else was as vital in igniting the situation that would begin the Haitian Revolution as Vodou. Vodou was crucial to slave culture at the time of the Haitian Revolution, and remains a key part of Haitian culture today. Vodou is based on African religion, specifically Vodon (found in West African), and intermixed with Roman Catholic theology as a result of the forced conversion of many slaves, and the greater leniency of whites if they identified

\textsuperscript{24} Leslie G. Desmangles, “The Maroon Republics and Religious Diversity in Colonial Haiti,” \textit{Anthropos} 85, no. 4 (1990): 481.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
Catholicism in slave religious practices. Additionally, while Ina Fandrich believes it is given too much credit by some, she does state that “Yoruba beliefs and practices did have an undeniable impact on these two sister traditions [Haitian and New Orleans Vodou].” This relates back to the population of Negos in Saint-Domingue, and the importance of having similar groups within Saint-Domingue.

Vodou’s importance to the Haitian Revolution is greater than simply being a method to demonstrate a high level of cultural and ethnic uniformity. Vodou helped to organize the Haitian Revolution, inspire the Revolution, plan the Revolution, and served as a means to unify and bring together slave populations to act against their European oppressors. In order to demonstrate this I will synthesis key points from primary source documents relating to the practice of Vodou on Haiti during the late 18th century. I will also look at analysis that has been carried out by historians and anthropologists to bring a scholarly assessment to the practices of Vodou and the Haitian Revolution.

A crucial source to Haitian Revolution period Vodou practices, are the descriptions completed by Frenchman Moraeu de Saint-Mery. Saint Mery compiled a rather extensive, albeit, uninformed description of Vodou and other aspects of Haitian culture, which has now been translated into English and can be analyzed. To begin, Saint-Mery opens his discussion of Vodou by calling it an African Dance. He then goes on to explain that Vodou originates from the “Arada tribe,” and is the worship of an “all-powerful, supernatural being.” He described this

26 Ibid
supernatural being as taking the form in Vodou ritual as an Adder (A non-poisonous snake), which is communicated through the king and queen of the Vodou Association.\textsuperscript{29} The use of a king and queen with Vodou associations is a key point. Kings and queens effectively give secret Vodou associations a structure and hierarchy. Having clear leaders allowed these groups to be mobilized with more efficiency. It also demonstrates a clear connection back to African social and political structures, reinforcing the argument of the importance in the African Diaspora in helping to spur the Haitian Revolution. It is also necessary to keep in mind that the king and queen of these groups were believed to be carrying out the will of the supernatural being. This divinity is important, as when Boukman Dutty and Cecile Fatiman called for the rebellion to begin, those in their Vodou association would have likely believed it to be a divine calling and believed that god wanted them to act.”

Saint-Mery also describes the process by which a new member is admitted. A key piece in his description is when he calls the Vodou association “a big Vodou family” and how the elder members led by the king and queen determined if a new member was allowed in.\textsuperscript{30} He follows this description of the initiation practice by calling it a “system of domination” that Africans “may have brought from Africa and to which Creole customs have added certain variations.”\textsuperscript{31} Saint-Mery continues to paint a picture of the practices that occurred during these rituals and celebrations. From his narrative of these events, it is easy to see the African influence in dance,

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, A Civilization That Perished: The Last Years of White Colonial Rule in Haiti, translated, abridged, and edited by Ivor D. Spencer, 2.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
music, language, and religion. This narrative, while racist and offensive in tone, demonstrates how deep African culture permeated into Saint-Domingue.\textsuperscript{32}

In this description, Saint-Mery hits on a key point without realizing it. Saint-Mery outlines the various desires slaves were asking the Vodou adder for, speaking mostly to common issues such as heartache. He also mentions in a very nonchalant manner that “most slaves ask for the ability to direct the thoughts of their masters.”\textsuperscript{33} Given that this account was taken before the Haitian Revolution had broken out, it demonstrates the discontent within Vodou associations of the slave system. With slaves praying for the ability to control their masters to reduce the harshness of the conditions of servitude, it can be extrapolated that a movement was growing within these Vodou associations to fight against the slave system. All that was waiting was a charismatic and passionate leader such as Boukmon Dutty to light the fire that was just waiting to be burned, and one such as Toussaint to carry it on.

Saint-Mery closes his discussion with another narrative of rituals and ceremonies performed during the secret meeting of this Vodou association. Among the practices were the slaughtering of animals, the use of goat blood, the use of idols, and African song and dance.\textsuperscript{34} The result of this description is an observed, indisputably strong connection back to the homeland through the preservation of culture, and collective association of Africans. The formation of secret associations revolving around Vodou is perhaps the greatest way the Africa Diaspora assisted in spurring the Revolution. Away from their masters, slaves were allowed to act and speak in a manner not allowed in front of white eyes. This helped to create not only a

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 2-3.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{34} Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, \textit{A Civilization That Perished: The Last Years of White Colonial Rule in Haiti}, translated, abridged, and edited by Ivor D. Spencer, 5-6.
culture that connected back to Africa at a more dramatic rate than in other colonies, but it also allowed for action to be planned and for the roots of the Haitian Revolution to grow.

Concerning the general composition of the slave population, Saint-Mery states that those born in Africa were approximately two thirds of the slaves in Saint-Domingue, while one third were born in the colony. In his portrayal of the actions of slaves, he touches on some issues that could relate back to Vodou, and its prevalence. These include the perceived over-superstitious behaviors of slaves, their affinity for “god-mothers,” and the keeping of stone and wood animal idols. Saint-Mery describes these actions as “overseas practices” again referencing the connection back to Africa. Saint-Mery also leaves us with a nice example of the diffusion of Africa language into the Western world when he explains how the saying “if I had only known” came from Africans about to be punished for their actions.

One of the most telling influences of Vodou on the Haitian Revolution is how it began. In order to understand how it began, the influence of Boukman Dutty has to be understood. Boukman Dutty was a slave born in Jamaica, and was sold by his British master to a plantation owner in Northern Haiti. Boukman was already involved in Vodou practices, and would continue them once in Haiti. This led him to become a leader of a secret Vodou association along with Cecile Fatiman (They operated as “king and “queen” of the group). Boukman would be the early leader of the slave rebellion and began it with a powerful Vodou ceremony called the

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35 Ibid., 39.
36 Ibid., 44-43
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 45.
Bois-Caiman. Occurring on August 14th 1791 (8 days before the Revolution), the Bois-Caiman attracted hundreds of slaves, with the outcome being a vow to rise up in the name of liberty and fight to the death until it was achieved.\textsuperscript{41} Boukman’s death shortly after the Bois-Caiman further inspired slaves to rise up, causing the slave rebellion to turn into a revolution. The Bois-Caiman demonstrated the strength of the African Diaspora by showing the collective political and social connections slaves had to each other, and how their African beliefs inspired them to seek change. Boukman, being from Jamaica and being able to ignite the Haitian Revolution, also speaks to the collectiveness seen all over the African Diaspora. Ultimately, the fact that the slave rebellion began with a Vodou practice, in a secret association, demonstrates the effect African culture, the desire to preserve African beliefs and traditions, the desire to live a life with a strong connection back to the homeland, and the desire to want to live a life without being held in oppression had in helping to spur the Haitian Revolution.

Many scholars acknowledge the role Vodou had in helping to unite the slave population and inspire insurrection in Saint-Domingue. Even more so, some scholars give agency to the African Diaspora without directly stating it. For instance, David Geggus states that the slave “uprising drew strength from the rapid growth of the slave population in the 1780s, and the long-term evolution of the creole language and Vodou religion that knit together the diverse cultures that composed it.”\textsuperscript{42} In a sense, Geggus is implying that Vodou and the Creole culture allowed for a more unified slave population. If this belief is combined with the maroon communities, and the high population of Nagos and former Congo soldiers that made their way to Saint-Domingue in the 1780s, the perfect storm of disasporic conditions is created. According to Claudine

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.

Muchel, Vodou also gave agency to women in Haiti through placing them in a position of spiritual and moral leadership. There is no doubt of Vodou’s influence, but often forgotten is Vodou’s place in maintaining a connection back to the homeland.

In closing, one cannot discount the effect of the Enlightenment in causing the Haitian Revolution, or the situation of freed blacks losing their rights under the *Code Noir*; however both of these arguments for what was the primary catalyst behind the Haitian Revolution leave out the primary agency of slaves, and the importance of the connection back to the homeland. As I have demonstrated through the ethnic similarities, the volatile composition of slaves being brought to Saint-Domingue shortly before the revolution, the importance of maroon communities in maintaining an place where African culture could exist without repression, and the strongest Vodou community in the world, which saw African beliefs take center stage, the connection back to the homeland was exceedingly strong in Haiti. Not only with regards to maintaining a strong African culture in Haiti/Saint-Domingue, but also in helping to unite and organize slaves and maroons. Vodou played a crucial role because of the need to form secret associations to practice it. This time away from the eyes of masters not only allowed the diasporic connections to the homeland to flourish, but to intertwine them with radical hopes towards freedom. While maroon communities, the ethnic and military composition of slaves, and even the practice of Vodou are not unique to Haiti, Haiti featured to perfect mix or “perfect storm”. The influx of slaves in the 1780s, the growth and stability of many maroon communities, and the most expansive and divot composition of secret Vodou Associations in the world at the time all created a strong connection.

43 Claudine Muchel, “Women’s Moral and Spiritual Leadership in Haitian Codou: The Voice of Mama Lola and Karen McCarthy Brown,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 61-62. Muchel is arguing a more contemporary assessment of Vodou, with her analysis looking at the situation in the 20th century, but the structure of he argument when relating to the leadership position of women is applicable to Vodou during the period of the Haitian Revolution.
back to Africa, and intertwined it with the hope for freedom. Ultimately, while the
Enlightenment and the actions of freed blacks before the initial slave uprising cannot be
discounted, neither can how the unique position of the African Diaspora influenced, and was a
key factor in helping to inspire, the Haitian Revolution.

Works Cited


