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Prof. Angela Marino

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Rituals and The Fight Against Colonialism

As Cabral says, culture is the fruit of history, always reflecting the material and spiritual reality of society. (BlackPast np) As the world's first independent black nation, the themes of resistance and revolution have become an irreplaceable and enduring part of Haitian performing arts. The study of a country's performing arts is important for understanding the development of the country's culture, history, and religion, and the promotion and contribution of a country's performing arts in fighting for national identity and sorting out national self-confidence is also worthy of in-depth exploration and study. In this regard, the revolutionary-themed performances in Haiti have their own special characteristics. Because of the close relationship between the Haitian revolution and vodou, Haitian revolution-themed performances always revolve around rituals, legends, and characters that inspire morale, rather than the battles themselves. They tend to portray culture, beliefs and revolutionary ideas fused into something mysteriously complex and symbolic, and to mix the process of chewing on the history of the struggle with strong spiritual aspirations. Under the performances in a long term, the connection between this performance theme and the deeply embedded roots of culture and faith is constantly entwined and strengthened, becoming an important source of national and ethnic strength. It is moreover an influence on the development of Haitian culture and art after the revolution and even in modern times.

First, Haiti was under French colonial rule when Catholic priests came from their home countries with religious teachings that preached that slaves were created by God to serve the white man and that slaves had no power whatsoever against their masters. Thousands of black African slaves were sold to San Domingo every year (James 5), which made the majority of the local population black slaves. The Haitian people have been enslaved and abused for a long time but have remained true to their traditional beliefs and have never stopped fighting for true freedom. Vodou, as a traditional faith, gave the Haitian people great faith and strength at this time. The insurgent slaves believed that they would be invulnerable to the sword because of the amulets they wore or the rituals they participated in, and that if they died in battle, their souls would be sent back to their haunted homeland of Africa by the gods (David 78). Although many researchers of Haitian history believe that this religious belief from Africa had some kind of psychological effect on the Haitian revolutionaries, the effect was fierce. One of the most sought-after slogans among Haitian revolutionaries is, with vodou and be victorious; with vodou and live forever. (Gorry np)

This fight for true freedom did not formally begin in 1791, but began before that, when local blacks began to suffer injustice. (Ankhobia 0:06) There are several reasons why slave owners in Haiti and other Caribbean regions seemed more callous and crueler than in the American South at the time. One of them is the Caribbean because it is an island, developed transportation, slaves are easy to transport so the price is low; slave owners simply do not care about the death of a slave, just buy a new one is. This, coupled with the introduction of a series of laws and regulations, made the Haitian black slaves, "colored", white people are full of contradictions and hatred between. Despite the injustice they suffered by day, at night they would participate in vodou celebrations, singing and dancing to traditional favorite vodou songs, encouraging each other and holding on to the dream of cherishing freedom against the colonizers. (James 18) As mentioned earlier the black slaves were devoutly devoted to vodou, so the ritual, as a performance, played a key role at this time. These rituals before 1791 strengthen their faith, and the collective rituals are a source of comfort to each other. The foundation for their future revolutionary actions was solidly laid and their belief in each other confirmed.

Such rituals are performed not only to strengthen and unite the will of the people by chanting ancient myths and songs, but also to inspire rebellion by recounting the stories of real vodou-related figures. And often these real events, although there may be unverifiable parts of their existence, are the most inspiring, driving the revolutionary process and making everyone more eager for liberation and freedom. As Ti Noel, by way of prayer, often recited an old song he had heard from Mackandal: "Santiago, I am a child of war: Santiago, can't you see I am a child of war?" (Carpentier 58), which discusses Mackandal, a famous legendary figure in the Haitian revolutionary movement. In the mid- to late-eighteenth century, Haiti was a fiercely contradictory country that could erupt at any moment like a volcano full of rage, and several key historical events were highly intertwined with vodou rituals. In 1758, Mackandal, a highly respected vodou priest, completed his operations using knowledge of vodou’s garde-corps or body-guard, which is modernly known as herbalism and traditional healing. According to historical records, more than 6,000 white people died from poisoning during Mackandal's operations until his eventual arrest. (Michel 87) According to legend, after his arrest, he managed to escape by turning into a flying creature when the colonists tied him to a fire (Weaver 91). This has led Haitian revolutionaries and artists alike to take a different approach to the legend, presenting works and statements on the subject to encourage radical black slaves to unite and fight against colonialism.

The subject matter of modern Haitian artists' work still strongly reflects their traditional conceptual culture and is often based on an expressive religious and historical context. Such is the case with Jean-Michel Basquiat, an American artist of Haitian descent, whose work is often represented by dark colors, with the iconic skull or skeleton often appearing. And his best and most painted works are of the head, which is reminiscent of his cultural appropriation of the traditional African masks. At the same time, I think it also hints at his Haitian origins by painting the most symbolic skulls of vodou. In his famous work Warrior, for example, the figure's face and torso are decorated in the shape of a skull to symbolize the famous religious culture of vodou in Haiti, and the combat weapon held by the figure symbolizes the revolution. (Basquiat np) Although this modern example of culture and art is not theater or performance art, painting as one of the cultural productions clearly reflect Cabral's statement that culture is the fruit of history and that the development of modern Haitian art is inextricably linked to history, especially the revolution.

In conclusion, the importance of Haitian performing arts in the Haitian revolution is unquestionable. It brought with it the ideals of freedom and revolution and the drive to turn them into reality, and, in close conjunction with Haitian vodou, has spiritually guided Haitians, and even other races of African descent, to never give up the pursuit of their faith's playground and the land of their souls. As one of the revolutionary performances, rituals bring the Haitian people spiritual activism, revolutionary rituals, healing justice, spiritual uprising, and other effects. With the combination with religious traditions and rituals, it is the special existence of Haitian revolutionary thematic art that is formed. The symbolic fusion of culture, faith and revolutionary ideas became an important source of strength for the Haitian state and nation and played an inescapable role in the development of culture and a solid foundation for Haiti after the revolution.

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