

# Resurrecting the National Spirit: Hector Hyppolite and Haitian Vodou

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Haiti has one of the longest colonial histories in the world. The Caribbean islands were the first part of the Americas to be colonised by Europe in 1492, and the region's colonial control extended into the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> In 1804, Haiti achieved independence from the French in the first successful slave revolt in history. However, by that time the Haitian elite recognised French culture as supposedly symbolic of modernity, while the Haitian Revolution and vernacular practices became signifiers of political backwardness rooted in African superstition.<sup>2</sup> The extent of the occupier's animosity toward Vodou was only possible with the active complicity of the bourgeoisie that traditionally nourished a profound contempt for popular culture.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a double hierarchy was established between not only coloniser and colonised, but also the francophone Haitian intellectual and the peasant, whose cultural and religious practices were seen as antithetical to 'the modern.' For the Haitian intelligentsia, 'othering' vernacular traditions inherited from the African slaves was a way to avoid being 'othered' themselves. Always underlying their early efforts to forge a national ideology was a concern with Western opinion, a need to prove the new nation's worthiness and potential.<sup>4</sup>

A turning point came when the US marines invaded Haiti in 1915 and began a nineteen-year occupation.<sup>5</sup> The Haitian elite came to empathise with the suffering peasantry and were eager to claim an authentic "Haitian soul." Their concern shifted from a preoccupation with internal class and colour conflicts to a determination to establish a Haitian national identity that countered foreign cultural encroachment.<sup>6</sup> By looking to Africa and away from France, they demarcated Vodou as a worthy subject that has the potential to unite Haitians of all classes against occupiers. In this way, Haitian national identity was not only located in vernacular culture, but also acknowledged to be contemporary: neither threateningly primitive nor a nostalgic African source of inspiration, folk culture came to be seen as itself modern.

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<sup>1</sup> Verle Poupeye, *Caribbean Art* (London: Thames&Hudson,1998), p.13

<sup>2</sup> Laurent Dubois, 'The Citizen's Trance,' in *Kafou: Haiti, Art and Vodou*, ed.by Alex Farquharson (Nottingham: Nottingham Contemporary,2012), pp107-108

<sup>3</sup> Laënnec Hurbon, 'American Fantasy and Haitian Vodou', in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. by Donald J. Cosentino, (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History,1998), p.190

<sup>4</sup> Asselin Charles, 'Ainsi Parla L'Oncle and the Construction of the Haitian Ideology,' <http://www.haitithenandnowhtn.com/search/label/Thus%20Spoke%20the%20Uncle> [Accessed: 1 April 2018]

<sup>5</sup> Sidney Mintz, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 'The Social History of Haitian Vodou' in *Sacred Arts*, p.141

<sup>6</sup> Michael Largey, *Vodou Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,2006), p.23

The search for a new meaningful expression after the humiliating US occupation led to the establishment of the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince in May 1944.<sup>7</sup> An art school and gallery, the centre provided artists with materials and an exhibition space for their works. It united isolated talents into an art movement: there were suddenly over a thousand new artists in Port-au-Prince, all of them untrained in the academic or studio tradition.<sup>8</sup> Increasingly, the Centre d'Art became a hub around which contact points with the wider modern art world could be established. However, Asquith argues that this engendered the perception that Modernism was something 'imported' to Haiti, and Haitian artists in general were divorced from Modernism.<sup>9</sup> There was a dichotomy set up at the Centre – both pedagogically and commercially– between the 'naïve' and the modernist artist.

Hector Hyppolite, a houngan (Vodou priest) before joining the Centre, was approached in 1945 by Peters and Thoby-Marcelin because of the eye-catching panels and name signs he had painted for a small bar in the village of Mount-Rouis.<sup>10</sup> Most of Hyppolite's oeuvre centres around religious themes. It is crucial to establish that artists like Hyppolite should not be regarded as 'modern' solely on account of their relations to Western modernity: the dynamism of their art is to be found in the constantly innovating language of Vodou. Farquharson argues that the hybrid practices related to the religion place it in the Modernist discourse – even more so than the art of the educated elite, who were more directly involved with the lessons of modernism. He states: 'this paradox begins to resolve itself when one understands Haitian Vodou itself as a form of modernity, or counter-modernity.'<sup>11</sup> Vodou is the product of acculturative processes, integrating not only the plurality of West-African religions (brought over by the slaves taken from countries with highly idiosyncratic socio-cultural and religious systems), but absorbing non-African religious influences as well.<sup>12</sup> McAlister states that part of the aesthetic of Vodou art is that it 'takes what it can use visually and theologically and constantly re-creates itself with fresh material.'<sup>13</sup> The opposite of static and unchanging, such art is constantly in flux, responding

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<sup>7</sup> Poupeye, p.66

<sup>8</sup> Edith Efron, 'The "New Movement" in Haiti', *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol.4, No.1 (January, 1955), p.24

<sup>9</sup> Wendy Asquith, 'Beyond Immobilised Identities' in *Kafou*, p.40

<sup>10</sup> Poupeye, p.81

<sup>11</sup> Alex Farquharson, 'Kafou-At the Crossroads,' in *Kafou*, p.9

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.p.17

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth McAlister, 'A Sorcerer's Bottle', in *Sacred Arts*, [p.16](#)

not only to the changing experiences of modernity, but also to the dynamic realities of the religion that informs it.

Hyppolite counters the generally reductive narrative of the “intuitive artist” by directly engaging with what Farquarson calls ‘Vodou history,’<sup>14</sup> the dynamic interaction of Vodou and Haiti’s history. In *Papa Zaka Papa Ogou* (Fig.1) he depicts historical figures merging with members of the Vodou pantheon. By articulating such a premeditated political message, Hyppolite refuses to be presented as naïve, instinctive painter. The painting shows the two Iwas defeating demons. As Cosentino confirms, Iwas are ‘always au courant, (they) cut their cloth to fit the fashion of the times.’<sup>15</sup> Ogou, for example, was initially the patron saint of fire, then of guns and weaponry, but after the Revolution, became connected with Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the first president of the Haitian Republic.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Zaka and Ogou are here dressed in period military uniform, ostensibly representing the leaders of the Revolution. Thus, the Iwas are transformed into authentic historical figures, they are no longer timeless deities, but are in a dialogue with modern times. Furthermore, the association with the Iwa affects the prestige of the two soldiers: the narrative of the painting allows the Iwa to retrospectively take possession of historical figures, thus aesthetically linking Dessalines and his comrades to divinities. The men, who fought for the Revolution more than a century before Hyppolite, are not only shown to be god-sent, but also directly executing the will of the Iwas. Hyppolite frames the Revolution as a battle of biblical proportions between ultimate forces of good and evil.

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<sup>14</sup> Farquarson, p.13

<sup>15</sup> Donald J. Cosentino, ‘Introduction’, in *Sacred Arts*, p.26

<sup>16</sup> Terri Geis, ‘Myth, History and Repetition: André Breton and Vodou in Haiti,’ *South Central Review*, Vol.32, No.1, Spring 2015, p.66



Figure 1: Hector Hyppolite: *Papa Zaka Papa Ogou* (1947)

The naturalistic figurative manner in which Hyppolite painted *Papa Zaka Papa Ogou* differs greatly from the then fashionable abstract tendencies of the Centre. In fact, this painting bears particular resemblance to some of the works of Richard Evans, a British painter. His full-length portrait of Henri Christophe, one of the four generals who led the Haitian revolution to victory, was part of a series of portraits commissioned by George V depicting foreign leaders who had affronted Napoleon.<sup>17</sup> (Fig.2) Hyppolite – knowingly or not– seems to have borrowed elements from Western celebratory paintings of this kind. Ogou’s posture, with one hand in his pocket, the other holding a long sabre, as well as his visage depicted in half profile, are uncannily reminiscent of that of Henri Christophe. Although Hyppolite often renders his landscapes in thick brushstrokes, here this gestural technique is markedly similar, both in its colour scheme and composition, to Evans’.

<sup>17</sup> Gérald Alexis, ‘The Caribbean in the Hour of Haiti’, in *Kafou*, p.110

However, it is worth noting that Henri Christophe was profoundly anti-Vodou, and rather advocated the appropriation of Enlightenment manners and philosophies.<sup>18</sup> As a champion of the Revolution and conqueror of the French, his British endorsement was still contingent on his appropriation of Western cultural paradigms. Perhaps, then, the stylistic similarities between these two paintings were intended as a tongue in cheek reference to the endurance of Vodou and the relevant dangers of aspiring to be something other than Haitian.



*Figure 2: Richard Evans: Portrait of Henri Christophe (1816)*

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<sup>18</sup> Farquharson, p.16