

The Black Jacobins, an Introduction to the Haitian Revolution

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ABSTRACT

Toussaint L'Ouverture looms large in Black emancipatory thought as the general who freed Haitians from slavery and Haiti from French suzerainty. But he was no early adopter, taking his time to join the revolution, and was unfortunately off the scene before independence was declared in 1804. So, who were the men and women who began the revolution and saw it to fruition? The historian CLR James notes in his ground-breaking book on the Haitian revolution, The Black Jacobins, that Toussaint was 'no Negro freak', so as to say that his generation of Haitian leaders was bursting with talent. In this lecture, we'll explore the Haitian revolutionary guard beyond Toussaint, the generals, soldiers and 'brigands' that maintained disequilibrium for over a decade, seeing off the Spanish, the British and ultimately the French. Dispelling along the way the myth of the exceptionalism of Black excellence, we'll meet in the Haiti of the 18th century an exceptional class of Black military leaders.

Keywords: CLR James, Haiti, Haitian Revolution, Makandal, Boukman, Padre Jean

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This is an extract of the transcript of a lecture given on 7 September 2021 online at the African History Project.

In history there are these before and after moments, episodes in time that come to be regarded as moments of era-defining change. Most African and Caribbean nations will talk of the time before and after independence, while nearly all nations can speak about the time before and after the second world war. Such events are called era-defining because of the processes of evolution that they initiate; the lives they touch can never be the same again. What follows such events are one or two decades of national crises of identity in which people question the validity of the nation, the validity of the world order and even the validity of their place in the space-time continuum.

If this is the case, that such era-defining events cause a deep reflection on self and state, then there has perhaps been no greater event in modern history than that initiated in 1791 on an island in the Caribbean which was then the jewel of the French crown being as it was the most profitable piece of land the world had ever known.

The island of Hispaniola floats in the Caribbean Sea. As far as islands go, it's a pretty big one. When thinking of far-off Caribbean islands, our prejudices tend to make us think of them as small places where small things happen. But when it comes Hispaniola, nothing could be further from the truth. The French only controlled the western part of the island, but that was enough. Packed to the brim with enslaved labourers, no single

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territory contributed a bigger portion to world trade than did Haiti at its height. It is no surprise then that nothing has played a bigger part in the re-mapping of the world order than the revolution that was launched on 22 August 1791 in the northern reaches of that “big-small” island. That’s a very big statement to make I know especially as some of you joining us today may not have heard that much, if anything at all, about the Haitian revolution. But if you are here, it’s probably because you know that there is a lot you haven’t been told or some of what you have been told may not have been told fully.

Back to Haiti - Floating to one side of the Atlantic Ocean, its plantations went up in flames that August; its social structures came tumbling down, and its Black men and woman rode the wave of their revolution further than any other people in the history of human civilisation. There is no other account in history of a chattel slave class of people organising themselves to overthrow the dominant race and in just a decade crown an emperor from among their own ranks. When one takes into account that at the time of the insurrection, two thirds of Black Haitians had been born in Africa, and therefore the group lacked a unifying language, religion, culture, or history, we begin to realise the immensity of what happened. That they were able to overthrow the government of one of the world’s strongest nations and with their victory dismantle all notions of racial superiority makes their actions all the more worthy of study and deep contemplation. What they achieved had never happened before, and it hasn’t happened since.

This is a story about the enslaved men and women of Haiti who rose up and stayed risen to rid themselves of slavery and establish the first Black republic outside Africa in 1804. We will look at the particular styles of leadership exhibited by these men and women that allowed them to succeed. We will consider the role played by religion and elementary notions of Black consciousness in the victory, as well as the ingenuity of the military tactics used to overcome the multiple belligerent forces they encountered both from within and without.

This lecture is intended to whet your appetite for Haitian and wider Caribbean history. There won’t be time to dive into the details of the slave trade, the journey from Africa to the Caribbean or slave life. Each of these topics would fill a lecture of its own. This lecture will jump right into the resistance and focus on bringing to life the people that dismantled that system. But I will say this, though it is perhaps needless to say, the slavery in Haiti was of the most barbaric kind and all the things you have heard about that happened, happened on that island. The systematic rape of Black women for over two hundred years, the systematic murders, the systematic psychological and physical abuses, the disregard for life, family, body and mind, the dehumanisation of hundreds of thousands of people, the denial of healthcare, education, freedom of movement, conscience or association, the maimings, the slow burnings, the hangings, the impalings, the whippings, the chokings, the suicides, the infanticides, the poisonings. Everything that you have heard is true, and all of it was happening in Haiti in August 1791, where we join the Haitian story.

I want to take you to the northern part of Haiti, to Cap Ayisien, which until 1770 was the capital of the country and known simply as Le Cap. Considered the Paris of the Antilles, its paved streets and beautiful buildings were built by Africans turned Haitians over a period of one hundred years. It is true that the men and women who built Cap Ayisien were not free; they were the products of the auction blocks that stood prominently in the town, lining the way to the custom houses and docks that weighed and shipped the produce tilled by other gangs of enslaved peoples. But it was, as it continues to be, a beautiful town.

By 1791, the year that we are most concerned with, the capital had moved south to Port-au-Prince, where it still sits, but Le Cap remained an important town on the island. It is fitting then perhaps that it is in the shadows of so majestic an example of the products of enslaved labour that the uprising against the state should have grown its deepest roots.

I say its *deepest* roots and not its *first* roots because there had been many uprisings before. The eminent Trinidadian historian CLR James writes on this:

“Contrary to the lies that have been spread so pertinaciously about Negro docility, the revolts at the port of embarkation and on board were incessant, so that the slaves had to be chained, right hand to right leg, left hand to left leg, and attached in rows to long irons bars.”

(The Black Jacobins, p.6)

And the rebellions didn’t stop once they arrived in Haiti. There are two famous pre-1791 rebellions I want to tell you about quickly before we move on to our main episode.

I. Padre Jean

The first was led by a man named Padre Jean, who in 1676 attempted to overthrow the owner of the plantation where he was enslaved. He didn’t manage it, but he managed to free many slaves and made it off the island with a group of other enslaved people. They landed on the island of Tortuga and lived as free as Black people could live in the Caribbean at that time. That was until 1679 when he was assassinated by the French. The fact that no attempt was made to re-enslave him, but instead to murder him, is testament to the fact that men like Padre Jean represented a threat the measure of which far exceeded the financial loss of their escape to those who claimed to possess them. In his ability to realise his liberty, he threatened the conception of enslavement. He represented an idea that had to be removed. His life, all the money he could make for his enslaver, the children he could perhaps conceive into slavery, all of that was nothing compared to the damage he had done to the fabric of society, being to show that Black people had agency and ability and could ultimately overcome the bondage they were so tightly being kept in.

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II. Mackandal

The second rebellion got a little bit further. This one took place in 1757, around 34 years before the rebellion that is the subject of this lecture. This earlier rebellion was led by the one François Mackandal and in its methods, it is clear to see how influential it was on the future rebellion.

Mackandal is one of my favourite historical figures. We don’t know a great deal about him but from what we do know, his personality seeped right through.

The first thing we know is that he was a maroon and that tells us a lot. The maroons were Africans who had escaped bondage and lived in independent communities in the hinterland. They existed across the Caribbean and mainland Americas and played an

important part not only in emancipation processes, but in post emancipation state building.

We will talk about the maroons in a little more detail a little later on but for now what is important to note in relation to Mackandal is that as a maroon, he was a man that did things his own way. Living independently in the forests of Haiti, he saw no value in the slave state as constituted and knew that the Black people then enslaved could self-govern because, as a Maroon, he was living it.

By studying Mackandal and what he almost achieved, we begin to reveal the calibre of resistance that was being nurtured in Haiti at this time.

Mackandal was born in Guinea in West Africa again emphasising that resistance was waged at every point. By this time slavery had been entrenched in Haitian society but it was not entrenched in all the people. Mackandal had been born free but by the time of his rebellion may have been enslaved for 20 years, so for him slavery was only 20 years old – he was not trapped by the limitations of a century's old institution. For him, his enslavement was an aberration.

We get a great description of him from James who remarks that: Mackandal had 'superior strength and vigour', was 'fearless', and had 'fortitude of spirit', 'he himself ranged from plantation to plantation to make converts, stimulate his followers and perfect his great plan', and '...Mackandal aimed at delivering his people by means of poison. For six years he built up his organisation, he and his followers poisoning not only white [people] but disobedient members of their own band. Then he arranged that on a particular day the water of every house in the capital of the province was to be poisoned, and the general attack made on the white [people] while they were in the convulsions and anguish of death. He had lists of all members of his party in each slave gang; appointed captains, lieutenants and other officers; arranged for bands of Negroes to leave the town and spread over the plains to massacre the white [population]' [James, 16-17].

The first thing to note about Mackandal, which really gave Haitians the tradition of rebellion that would eventually see them over the line, was his level of organisation. Mackandal wasn't a hothead, he wasn't an out of control revolutionary and he did not command a lawless band of men and women.

If you've heard anything about the Haitian Revolution, you've probably heard about the deaths that took place after 1804 when the Republic was constituted in which a large number of the island's white population was killed. Black Haitians are of course traditionally represented as an out of control, blood hungry mob with almost animalistic characteristics, killing everything in sight. Without a doubt they killed a large number of people who had been responsible for enslaving them, who were deeply resentful about their newfound freedom, who were reluctant to accept this freedom and who continued to plot with inside and outside agents to re-enslave the Black population. But one thing we can learn from Mackandal's rebellion in 1757 is that the later characterisation of lawlessness is almost certainly a mischaracterisation. Haitians were successful in their revolution because they were under control. It was this discipline as a group, their recognition of the authority of their leader and their loyalty to their leaders that delivered them victory. In Mackandal's rebellion we see a coordinated campaign. Though it failed, with Mackandal being betrayed, captured and burnt alive, it is remarkable that his plot got as far as it did and was just days away from implementation when it was discovered. This is testament to the man's leadership, the loyalty he enjoyed and the organisation he effected.

But how was Mackandal able to achieve such high levels of organisation in a slave state where Black people did not have freedom of movement or association, were largely not literate, did not have access to transportation and were watched at every turn?

And to understand this, we need to learn a little bit about the role played by the Haitian religion. Like most things that speak to the ingenuity of Black Haitians, the Haitian religion has been demonised in official accounts, academic literature and pop culture for over two hundred years. The wilful ignorance that underpins most discussions about Haitian Vodou has caused many people to dismiss the central role played by Haitian Vodou in the success of the revolution.

James alludes to Mackandal's employment of Vodou ideals when he says that Mackandal invited loyalty due to his claims to predict the future, to have received revelations from God, and to be immortal [James, 17]

These allusions to supernaturalism were extremely important in binding members of the Black population together. Vodou takes on an even more important role in the 1791 revolution. In many ways, the Haitian revolution was a religious crusade in that the protagonists, the Black people of Haiti, felt that in their endeavour they were doing God's work, ridding the world of the evil that had befallen them. But there was something deeper than that. In its reliance on the motifs of Vodou as a counterweight to Christianity and white hegemony, the Haitian revolution was an endeavour in Black consciousness. What we see is an understanding that slavery is not ultimately maintained through shackles and whips but exists on the psychological level. Even in today's world, if we look at communities in which slavery or slave-like caste or employment systems persist, there are very few chains. People are kept in place by psychological means. Padre Jean, the rebellion leader from the 1600s we spoke about earlier, his primary objective was to break the physical chains. He made it off the island, but once they were ready, they found and assassinated him. Mackandal had no intention of going anywhere. He planned to remain in Haiti and rule it. He understood that to achieve this he had to do more than just break physical chains, not least because there weren't many. People who were able to leave their plantations and travel five or ten miles by foot to attend meetings to organise a rebellion over a six-year period are not sleeping constantly in chains. This is because the chains have been dematerialised and infused into the system, the chains have been infused into the psychology. So, what Mackandal and those who start the later revolution in 1791 realise is, they have to break the psychology, and the Haitian religion is central to that.

[Anthony Bogues, "What was the significance of Vodou to the Haitian Revolution": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZ9GBSqcA-0>]

III. Boukman

And now we fast forward to 1791, the fateful year, and back to Le Cap, the former capital city I spoke about at the beginning. All of those things that we saw in 1757 with Mackandal are back but this time with a lot more sophistication. The Black population around Le Cap is highly organised, patient and led by a man, Dutty Boukman, who doesn't just make reference to a divine motivation but is actually a High Priest in the Vodou faith.

On the level of organisation and the role played by Vodou, James writes this:

[James, 69-70]

What James is telling us here is that the 1791 revolution did not spring out of chaos. Black Haitians were deliberately and consciously learning from and building on the lessons received from Mackandal and his co-revolutionaries in 1757, and they had surely built on the lessons of Padre Jean before them.

Let's focus a little bit more on Boukman and the religious, political and military leadership that he provided. He, like Mackandal before him, was described as a giant, a man of superior physical strength. But his physical strength was matched by his intelligence. Tradition has it that he was called Boukman because he was literate, with some believing that he had been a Muslim and able to read the Koran. This lends credence to the tradition that he was born in West Africa but we don't know that for sure. What we do know is that he had come to Haiti from Jamaica and became a *commandeur* and coachman on the plantation where he was enslaved. Therefore, he had many characteristics that endeared him to the leadership of his community. As a coachman, his close proximity to the political discussions of the plantation owner and his peers, meant he had a superior understanding of the political and social structures on the island.

In addition, as already mentioned, he was a Vodou priest but there was something else that made him stand out in his leadership of this revolution. Remember when I said before that I would come back to tell you more about the Maroons, here's why. Boukman was a Maroon, like Mackandal before him.

[Anthony Bogue, "Who were the marrons:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3yKrVZUGOo>]

It is easy to see why Maroons presented such a problem to the slave state and why the leaders of the early rebellions came from their ranks.

To give us a little more context I am going to read a little from an essay by Richard Price from *The Slavery Reader*, which outlines wonderfully who the Maroons were and their relationships with the wider community.

[Richard Price 608 – 609]

The role played by the maroons in the liberation of Haiti from the grips of slavery cannot be underestimated. The most important thing to recognise perhaps is that maroons were an independent body of people. Where their groups were large enough, they operated semi-autonomous states with their own system of governance and justice. Their main priority was the preservation of their independent nations and most of the time that meant a rejection of the slave state, as re-enslavement remained the biggest threat to their populations. But enslavement was not always their biggest fear – being that a maroon, already psychologically broken out of the enslavement and with a proven track record of escape and survival, was a very risky individual to attempt to re-integrate into the slave population. This meant that maroons participated in some campaigns and not others, they at times were on the side opposed to the slave state and at times on the other.

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