On the African background to the slave insurrection in Saint-Domingue (Haïti) in 1791: The Bois Caiman ceremony and the Dahomian ‘blood pact’

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By a recent decision of UNESCO, 23 August has been designated as the ‘International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition’. This choice of date alludes to the beginning of the insurrection of slaves in the French Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue (modern Haïti), in the night of 22-23 August 1791 (though this actually began before midnight, and so strictly on 22 rather than 23 August). This insurrection led directly to the formal abolition of slavery by the French authorities on Saint-Domingue on 29 August 1793, which was retrospectively endorsed (and, at the same time, generalized to France’s other Caribbean colonies) by the ruling Convention in Paris on 4 February 1794. Although Napoleon subsequently re-legalized slavery in French colonies in 1802, this attempt to re-establish the institution was not effective in Saint-Domingue, serving only to provoke the proclamation of that colony’s independence, as the Republic of Haïti, in 1804. Although the abolition of slavery by France in 1793-4 was in part a reflection of the radicalism of the then dominant Jacobins (and more particularly, of their willingness to challenge rights of property), at a more basic level it was no more
than a recognition of realities on the ground in Saint-Domingue, where slavery as a functioning institution had already been destroyed by the slave insurrection which began on the night of 22-23 August 1791. Saint-Domingue was thus not only the first major slave-owning territory in which slavery was abolished, but also the pre-eminent instance where this liberation was unambiguously effected by the actions of the slaves themselves.

This action of the slaves of Saint-Domingue in claiming their freedom has commonly been explained in terms of the impact of the Revolution in France, through both the influence of its slogans of liberty and its destabilization of the ruling structures in Saint-Domingue itself. However, it has also been widely recognised, at least in general terms, that there is an African, as well as a metropolitan French background to the Saint-Domingue slave insurrection. The insurrection of 1791 was, after all, predominantly, an affair of Africans. Although the highest level of the leadership of the insurrection, including Toussaint l’Ouverture, were Creoles, some leaders at a subordinate or local level were African-born (for example, Haolou, one of the insurgent leaders in the West); and more critically, the mass of the slaves who followed them were predominantly born in Africa. Recent research on Saint-Domingue plantation records indicates that at the time of the revolution of 1791, between 60-70% of slaves were African-born. Indeed, tension between the Creole leadership and the predominantly African rank-and-file was an important sub-text in the development of the Haïtian revolution. It is not argued, it should be stressed, that African-born slaves were more likely than Creoles to rebel, a proposition which the pattern of the Haïtian insurrection does not in fact support: the rebellion was centred in the sugar plantations on the coastal plains rather than in the coffee plantations in the hills, although the latter contained a higher proportion of African-born slaves (largely because coffee cultivation had developed more recently), and the area where the rebellion began, the northern plain, was in fact that
with the highest proportion of Creoles, indeed ‘probably the only part of Saint Domingue where creole men outnumbered African men’. Rather, the point is that that in order effectively to mobilize the mass of slaves, leaders would have to appeal to or manipulate African cultural traditions.

‘African-born’ slaves, of course, came, not from a generic ‘Africa’, but from specific African societies, with distinct cultural and religious traditions. Conventional theories of ‘creolization’ stress the dissolution of particularistic African ethnic identities and cultures in the conditions of the New World; but although this perspective clearly has some validity with respect to long-term developments, it tends to obscure the degree to which, in the shorter term, slaves in the Americas maintained ethnic identities based upon their origins in Africa. Even in the case of the USA, where it is usually supposed that conditions were especially unfavourable to the persistence of African cultural identities, the most recent analysis stresses the length of time which it took for a generic black or African-American identity, transcending particularistic African ethnicities, to emerge. It is clear, in fact, that African-born slaves, if not their descendants, commonly retained an identification with their African communities of origin, and organized much of their religious, social and recreational activities along ethnic lines. This phenomenon is best documented for the cases of Brazil and Cuba in the nineteenth century; but it was clearly general throughout the Caribbean during the eighteenth century. To cite just one example, the autobiography of the ex-slave Olaudah Equiano notes that in Kingston, Jamaica, in the 1770s, in slaves’ Sunday gatherings: ‘Here each different nation of Africa meet and dance after the manner of their own country’. In Saint-Domingue likewise, African religion was clearly also organized in ethnic cults; indeed, down to the present the loa (deities) of the Haïtian vaoudou religion are classified into nanchons (nations) which are understood to represent their areas of origin in Africa.
This is not, of course, to suggest that the ‘nations’ recognised by slaves in the Americas were simply reproductions of identities which existed in Africa. On the contrary, they involved the transformation and redefinition of identities; this much, at least, may be said to be common ground in the sometimes polemical debate between partisans of cultural ‘continuities’ from Africa and of ‘creolization’ in the Americas as the appropriate model for understanding slave cultures. In particular, the redefinition of identities in the Americas often involved the aggregation of previously distinct (albeit culturally and linguistically related) peoples into larger ‘nations’, whose names in America were sometimes neologisms but more commonly ethnonyms or toponyms which had a restricted application in Africa but were given a more inclusive sense in the New World. The term ‘Congo’, for example, was commonly used in the Americas to refer not only to those who came from the African kingdom of Kongo, but also to include neighbouring groups who spoke more or less closely related languages, such as Loango, Mayombe, Mondonge (Teke), and Yaka. A similar process of ethnic aggregation occurred in the case of the peoples nowadays known as Yoruba, who in Africa down to the nineteenth century were fragmented among several independent and mutually hostile states, recognising no common ethnicity, but who in the Americas came to be classified, and ultimately at least to classify themselves, as a single ‘nation’, generally called ‘Nago’ (but ‘Lucumi’ in Spanish America, including Cuba). Likewise, speakers of the languages nowadays classified as Gbe (or, by earlier usage, Aja-Ewe), who in Africa had no political unity and employed no common ethnonym, became aggregated in the trans-Atlantic diaspora into one ‘nation’, called most commonly ‘Rada’, ‘Arada’ or ‘Arara’ (all variants of the name of Allada, the most powerful state in the region prior to the rise of Dahomey in the early eighteenth century), but ‘Jeje’ in Brazil and ‘Papa [Popo]’ in English and Danish Caribbean colonies. In the Danish West Indies in the eighteenth century, the ‘Papa’ nation was thus defined as including the ‘Apeschi [Kpessi, in modern Togo]’, ‘Arrada [Allada]’, ‘Attolli [Tori, between Allada and the sea]’, and ‘Affong [Fon, i.e. Dahomians]’; and in Cuba in
the nineteenth century, the ‘Arara’ included the Mahi and Savalou to the north, as well as the Dahomians.

In Saint Domingue, despite the multiplicity of African ethnicities represented among its slave population, certain particular African groups were disproportionately numerous. Although slaves were drawn from all regions of Africa, from Senegambia to Mozambique, two regions of supply were overwhelmingly predominant: West-Central Africa (Angola) and the ‘Slave Coast’ (Bight of Benin). Over the entire period from the 1720s to the 1790s, West-Central Africa supplied nearly half (45%) of the slaves whose ethnicities are recorded, the Bight of Benin over a quarter (28%). Within each of these two regions, moreover, a particular ethnicity of slaves predominated: those shipped from West-Central Africa were overwhelmingly ‘Congo’; while of those shipped from the Bight of Benin, around half (52%) came from Gbe-speaking groups, generally called ‘Radas’ (or ‘Aradas’). This numerical dominance of Congos and ‘Radas’ is evidently reflected in the structure of the vaudou religion, whose principal deities are organized into the two complementary/opposed groups called ‘Rada’ and ‘Petro’, of which the latter seem to be mainly of Congo origin.

Cultural influence is not, however, directly or simply correlated with demographic strength, since although Congos were around three times as numerous as the Radas in the Saint-Domingue slave population, it is the Rada rather than the Petro cults which are hegemonic within the vaudou system (the term ‘vaudou’ itself being, of course, of ‘Rada’ origin). The explanation for this apparent paradox is as yet unclear, although one factor may have been that the Radas were relatively more numerous in the earlier part of the eighteenth century (the balance between them and the Congos shifting towards the latter during the course of the century), so that Rada elements were entrenched in Saint-Domingue slave culture at an early stage; another may have been that the proportion of females among ‘Rada’ slaves
was relatively higher, thereby facilitating the process of cultural transmission. In addition, it should be remembered that many of the slaves taken from Congo were already Christian, rather than followers of their ‘traditional religion’.

**The African background to the insurrection of 1791**

The African background is relevant to the success of the slave insurrection of 1791 in various ways. In the first place, as John Thornton has argued in a recent (1991) article, it is likely that the military effectiveness of the insurgent slaves reflected their previous experience of military service in Africa. Although Thornton based this argument more on grounds of *a priori* probability than direct documentation, he was able to cite one explicit statement, by the rebel leaders Jean-François and Biassou shortly after the uprising, that their African-born followers had been ‘ac-customed to war’ in their homelands.

That attitudes and beliefs derived from Africa also played a role in the insurrection seems likewise hardly in question. The classic study of Haïtian history by Thomas Madiou records traditions of the rising, which make clear that different insurgent leaders appealed variously to Christianity and to African religions, or sometimes to a combination of both. Thus the original leader of the insurrection in the North, Jean-François, employed a Catholic priest as his regimental chaplain, but his two principal lieutenants, Biassou and Jeannot, surrounded themselves with priests of African cults (‘sorcerers’ and ‘magicians’, in Madiou’s own loaded terminology). In the West, one insurgent leader in 1792-3, Romaine Rivière, claimed to be the godson of the Virgin Mary, but another, Hyacinthe Ducoudray, although he obliged a Catholic priest to bless his army, also employed ‘sorcerers’ who promised his soldiers that if killed they would be re-born in Africa; while the African-born Haolou depended on ‘sorcerers or papas [i.e. vaudou priests]’; and later, in the
It is questionable, however, whether, as is sometimes suggested, it was African religion which provided the means through which the insurgent slaves achieved a common organization, because it is likely that ‘voodoo’ as it existed in the revolutionary period still represented a series of essentially separate ethnic cults, rather than a synthetic system which could have transcended ethnic divisions: this seems not only probable on a priori grounds (given the division into separate ‘nations’ which characterizes the organization of ‘voodoo’ cults even to the present), but has been argued on the basis of the (admittedly fragmentary) contemporary record in a recent study by David Geggus. African religions probably served to secure the solidarity and loyalty of individual war-bands, rather than unity at the level of the insurrection as a whole. There is, indeed, some suggestion in Madiou’s account that the insurgents were organized into ethnic regiments: thus Jean-François and Biassou in 1791 are described as commanding ‘bands composed of Congoes, Mandingues [Mandinka], Ibo [Igbo], Senegalese, etc.’, and Haolou in 1794 ‘bands of Congos, Ibo, Dahomets, Senegalese’; and more explicitly, Lamour Derance’s forces in 1802 were ‘grouped by tribes ... bands of Congoes, Aradas, Ibo, Nagos, Mandingues, Hausas [emphasis added]’. Consideration of the African ideological background to the Haitian revolution should therefore arguably seek to identify particular ethnic traditions which may have played a role.

In recent literature, the main attempt to link the insurrection of 1791 to a specific African ideological tradition has been by John Thornton, in a recent (1993) article which argued that the civil wars which occurred in the kingdom of Kongo, from which many slaves were brought to Saint-Domingue, between 1779-88 might have moulded the insurgents’ perceptions of the character and limits of royal authority, as much as the contemporary Revolution in France. In the specific terms
in which it is presented, this argument is largely speculative; there is no doubt that some of the slaves interpreted the revolutionary situation in the light of their Kongo experience, but (as Thornton’s own account shows) the point in the progress of the insurrection where this connection is most explicit is the period immediately following the execution of the king in France, when, ironically, these African parallelisms led them to support the monarchy (and the Roman Catholic Church) against the Revolution. During 1792-3, when a sort of monarchist international comprising Spain and Britain was intervening in support of the French counter-revolution, Madiou reports that there was a popular belief among the insurgent slaves that the King of Kongo was also part of the anti-Republican coalition; and the rebel leader Macaya, in rejecting Republican overtures in 1793, declared himself ‘the subject of three kings, the King of Kongo, master of all the blacks, the King of France who represents my father, and the King of Spain who represents my mother’.

The Bois Caiman ceremony
The focus of the present essay is a better known, though (for different reasons) no less problematic instance of African influence in the events of 1791, one specific episode in the preparations for the insurrection, the ceremony held by some of the slaves plotting rebellion in the North in the Bois Caiman, probably during the night of 21 August 1791. According to the received story, the ceremony was presided over by one of the prospective leaders of the rebellion, Boukman, and involved the slaughter of a black pig, and the drinking of its blood by those assembled, who then swore obedience to Boukman. The conventional view of the importance of the vaudou religion in the organization of the slave insurrection, in fact, rests heavily upon this particular instance.
It has to be admitted, as recently pointed out by David Geggus, that the evidence for the Bois Caiman ceremony, and for its role in the slave insurrection, is not very good. It is not mentioned in any strictly contemporary account, and among retrospective accounts those which seem to be based upon first-hand testimony do not corroborate some of the details which subsequently became canonical - including notably the presence/leadership of Boukman. However, the evidence that the ceremony involved the sacrifice of a pig and the drinking of its blood is compelling; and the assertion in more recent tradition that this ritual represented an oath of allegiance or commitment to a common purpose is persuasive.

This use of a ritual involving the drinking of a magical potion, consisting of or including blood, in the organization of a slave insurrection was by no means unique to the case of Haïti. A recent study of slavery in British colonies by Jim Walvin refers generally to religious rituals associated with slave revolts: ‘administering fetishes, the swearing of secret oaths sealed with a drink mixed from rum, earth and cock’s blood, the killing of animals’. In the British West Indies in the eighteenth century, contemporary accounts refer to the use by slaves of a form of ‘oath of secrecy or purgation’ which was administered to wives on suspicion of infidelity, and which involved the drinking of blood:

Human blood, and earth taken from the grave of some near relation, are mixed with water, and given to the party to be sworn, who is compelled to drink the mixture, with a horrid imprecation, that it may cause the belly to burst, and the bones to rot, if the truth be not spoken.

Oaths of this sort were certainly employed at least occasionally in the organization of slave insurrections, as well as for domestic purposes. For example, in the con-
spiry led by the African-born slave Tackey in Antigua in 1735-6, an oath was administered by the sacrifice of a chicken and the drinking of its blood, mixed with rum. Likewise in Jamaica, in the Maroon War of 1795, one of the Maroon captains tried to recruit a runaway slave by ‘making three cuts on his wrist and catching the blood in a calabash, intending to make him drink it at the next full moon and to swear an oath not to return to his master but to act as a recruiting agent’, though in this case the man fled before the oath could be administered. In Jamaica again, a slave conspiracy in 1816, although reportedly inspired by the preaching of a black Baptist missionary, also employed a non-Christian oath, ‘with all the usual accompanying ceremonies of drinking human blood, eating earth from graves, etc.’

By the early nineteenth century, however, slave insurrectionists were beginning to invoke Christian rather than African ritual to bind their associates. A conspiracy in Trinidad in 1805 reportedly involved an oath based on ‘a blasphemous parody of the Catholic mass’ (as well as reference to the recent Saint Domingue insurrection); and in the rebellions in Demerara in 1823 and in Jamaica in 1831, oaths were taken on the Bible.

While it has generally been acknowledged that the Bois Caiman ceremony represented the transposition of an African ritual, there has been dissensus over the likely provenance within Africa of this ritual. One tradition of scholarly interpretation within Haïti itself has held that the ceremony was a specifically Petro, i.e. Congolese, rather than a Rada rite. One commentator, indeed, has insisted on this with great emphasis, claiming not only that it was the Petro cults which gave ‘both the moral force and the actual organization’ to the insurrection, but also that the Rada rites, by their nature, were incapable of serving this function: ‘For this kind of action the Dahomean gods had not prepared them; nor were the Rada gods the kind of deities who could inspire an enslaved people to revolt’. This argument seems to be based on the conventional perception of the Petro loa as more violent,
in contrast to the ‘gentle’ character of the Rada deities. But it is not persuasive, running in fact quite counter to another conventional perception, associating the Congos with passivity in servitude, and those from ‘Guinea’ (meaning West Africa, but more especially Dahomey) by contrast with resistance and revolt. The conventional contrast between the violence of Petro and the gentleness of Rada loa, in fact, should be understood as referring to their relations with their worshippers, rather than to the behaviour which they inspired in these human followers.

Ritual oaths involving the drinking of blood do not appear to have survived into recent times in Haïti, either in the Rada or the Petro tradition. The use of a blood oath within the vaudou tradition is, however, attested in one contemporary account of the immediate pre-revolutionary period; this is the famous description of a ‘vaudoux’ possession ceremony by Moreau de Saint-Méry, which notes that the presiding priestess killed a goat, and used its blood to ‘seal the lips of all present with a vow to suffer death rather than reveal anything’. Moreau himself associated ‘vaudoux’ specifically with the ‘Radas’, and this is on the face of it confirmed by his description of the deity as represented by a snake, a practice seemingly specific to the Dahomian-Rada tradition. However, the matter is complicated by the fact that a chant which Moreau de Saint-Méry records as used in this ceremony is in fact in the Kikongo language (and addressed to the Kongo deity Mbumba); though whether this reflects syncretism between different African religious traditions, or confusion on his part, is debatable.

The attribution of the Bois Caiman ceremony to the Petro cults in recent tradition is seemingly based mainly on the report of the sacrifice of a pig, which in Haïti in recent times has been associated especially with Petro. But against this, ritual oaths by the drinking of blood do not seem to be reported as a feature of religious practice in the Congo area from which the Petro cults derived. One account, obtained from Congo slaves in the Danish West Indies, does mention a ‘purifica-
tion potion’ administered to wives suspected of adultery, which was thought to kill them if they were guilty; but this is said to have been made from the bark of a tree, rather than blood.

By contrast, the Dahomey area, the cradle of the ‘Rada’ cults, not only has a well-attested tradition of such ritual ‘blood pacts’; but these also involved, in at least some of their variants, as will be seen, the sacrifice of pigs. The classic study of Haïtian *vaudou* by Alfred Métraux, while suggesting that traditions about the Bois Caiman ceremony were ‘confused’, unhesitatingly identified it as a form of the ‘blood pact’ practised in the Dahomey area.

**The ‘blood pact’ in Dahomey**

The ceremony of the ‘blood pact’ in the Dahomey area is best known through the study published by the local scholar Paul Hazoumé in the 1930s; subsequent discussions of the practice in the ethnographic literature are essentially derivative from this work. The ritual is documented among all the major Gbe-speaking groups - the Ewe (Ouachi), Adja, Houla and Hueda to the west, the Mahi to the north, and the Gun to the east, as well as among the Fon of Dahomey; and also among some western Nago (Yoruba) groups in neighbouring areas - Ketu, Sabe, Dasa, Holli - among whom it presumably represents a borrowing from the Gbe-speakers.

The term ‘blood pact’, if understood as implying that the purpose of the ritual is to create fictive ties of kinship (‘blood brotherhood’), is misleading; the point was rather that the ritual draught was thought to have the power to kill any participant who broke the oath. Particular forms of death, involving the swelling of the body and delirium, were thought to be symptoms of the operation of the ‘pact’. Moreover, although most of the forms of the oath described by Hazoumé do involve the participants drinking each others’ blood, a few do not. In the simplest
(and, in Hazoumé’s assumption, original) form of the ‘pact’ the participants drank each other’s blood directly, by sucking on incisions made in their wrists; but in more elaborated versions it was mixed with or replaced by other substances and drunk from a calabash (or sometimes, a human skull). The ritual drink thus includes a mixture, in various versions, also of blood from sacrificed animals, remains of victims sacrificed earlier, earth (sometimes taken from the shrines of *vodun*, especially Hevioso, the god of thunder, and Ogun, god of iron/war), ashes, and alcoholic drinks (palm-wine, beer, or imported spirits). In indigenous idiom, the ceremony is termed not a ‘blood-pact’, but ‘drinking vodun’, or ‘drinking earth’.

As just noted, the blood ingested in the ritual of ‘drinking vodun’ in Dahomey was not only human, but sometimes also that of non-human sacrificial victims. The animal sacrificed is usually specified as fowl (chicken or duck), but in six of the fourteen variants described in detail by Hazoumé, a pig is mentioned as an alternative or supplementary victim: this is recorded of forms of the ritual practised among the Adja, Hueda (i.e. the original inhabitants of Ouidah, displaced westwards by the Dahomian conquest in 1727), in Ouidah itself (two versions), in Abomey (the historical capital of Dahomey), and among the Gun of Porto-Novo. (In one variant, it may be noted, as an alternative to a pig, a goat may be killed, as in Moreau de Saint-Méry’s eighteenth-century account.) Hazoumé’s explanation of the symbolic appropriateness of the pig in this role - as a symbol of discretion, because he ‘goes around looking at the ground ... doesn’t look at the sky’ - is perhaps fanciful. More prosaically, it may be suggested, it was simply a matter of scale; as he explicitly says in four of the cases, the participants would use a pig ‘if they are numerous’.

There are, of course, serious problems about the procedure of extrapolating from twentieth-century ethnography to reconstruct the cultural background of
slaves taken from Africa two hundred years earlier. In this case, however, although it is best known from Hazoumé’s modern account, the Dahomian ‘blood pact’ was certainly already practised in pre-colonial times, when it is attested in contemporary European accounts. The ceremony is first described by Jean Barbot, a French trader who visited the Hueda kingdom in 1682, who gives it the name of ‘drinking dios [god]’, evidently translating the indigenous idiom ‘drinking vodun’:

They make two small holes in the earth, into which they let some of their blood drip, and after having diluted the blood with a little of the earth, the two drink as much of it as they can. By this means they enter so strongly into one another’s interest that whatever happens to them, good or ill, is common to both. That is why they reveal to each other whatever they think, and whatever they hear, whether said for good or ill, imagining that the least relaxation in this respect will make them die suddenly.

A second account, in an unpublished French manuscript of the 1710s, alludes to another form of the practice, noting that the ashes of human sacrifices offered to the god Dangbe (the royal python, the national deity of Hueda) were collected and preserved, in order to be mixed with water and given to ‘a Black who wants to affirm something, convinced that the least relaxation in this respect will make them die suddenly’. A chief of Hueda, the Aplogan, seeking to mobilize opposition to the reigning king in 1715, is reported to have bound his supporters to him by ‘drinking together on the snake or fetish’ - i.e., here again, on the god Dangbe; and King Agaja of Dahomey, after his conquest of Hueda in 1727, likewise ‘drank the fetish’ with a displaced Hueda prince whom he proposed to install as puppet ruler there, as a guarantee of his loyalty.
The practice is also attested in contemporary sources in the Gun community of Badagry on the coast to the east (in south-west Nigeria). In Badagry, indeed, such ritual oaths played a critical role, in a politically fragmented society without formal institutions of central government, in maintaining the cohesion of the community. As described by an English missionary in 1844, the Badagry chiefs met annually, or in times of emergency, to exchange ritual oaths, involving drinking from human skulls, ‘that they would unite to defend the town’; blood is not mentioned, and the oath is said to have been taken in the names of the ‘fetishes’ of ‘thunder and snakes’, i.e. Hevioso and Dangbe.

Such ritual oaths, it may be noted, were commonly employed in agreements between Europeans and Africans, as well as in intra-African dealings. When the chief factor of the English Royal African Company at Ouidah in 1687, for example, sought to form a military alliance with Ofori, chief of Little Popo to the west, he proposed to make him ‘take fetish to serve the Company only’; and the English slave-trader William Snelgrave, trading at Jakin, east of Ouidah, in 1727, in negotiation with the ruler of the town, recorded having ‘taken his fetische or oath’ to secure the agreement.

There is no reason to doubt that the practice of the ‘blood pact’ was carried to the Americas by slaves transported from the Bight of Benin. An ‘Arada’ slave in the Danish West Indies thus told the missionary Oldendorp in the 1770s that ‘his people believe that whoever swears a false oath will definitely die within seven days’. The ceremony at the Bois Caiman in 1791 is clearly interpretable as a Dahomian-type ritual oath, even though some of the details may have become confused in Haïtian tradition. Specifically, recollection of the drinking of human blood may have dropped out of the story (although, as has been seen, this was not in fact an invariable concomitant of ‘drinking vodun’); and the blood of the sacrificed pig
was more probably mixed, along with other ingredients, into water, than imbibed
neat.

**Alternative traditions: Ritual oaths elsewhere in West Africa**

It might be questioned whether the taking of an oath by drinking blood, as per-
formed in the Bois Caiman, can confidently be attributed to the specific region of
Dahomey, as opposed to other areas of western Africa. Ritual oaths involving the
drinking of a magical potion were, certainly, not peculiar to the Dahomey area. On
the Gold Coast (modern Ghana) to the west, for example, several European authors
from the seventeenth century onwards describe similar practices there. Already in
1602 the Dutch trader Pieter de Marees noted that, among other forms of ritual
oath, ‘some will for a further affirmation take a potion’; and the German clergyman
(in Danish service) Johann Müller in the 1660s more fully describes the practice of
‘eating or drinking in the name of ... fitiso [fetish]’, though he discusses it primar-
ily in a judicial context, as a means whereby an accused person might establish his
innocence. Two accounts from the 1690s make explicit the rationale of the prac-
tice. The English trader Thomas Phillips notes that the potion taken ‘is to kill them
the very minute that they break or violate the oath or promise they took on it’; and
the Dutch trader Willem Bosman that ‘When they drink the oath-draught, ‘tis usu-
ally accompanied with an imprecation, that the fetiche may kill them if they do not
perform the contents of their obligation’. Among later writers Rømer in the 1750s
and Isert in the 1780s also describe the ritual of ‘eating fetish’ on the Gold Coast:
the former, like Müller, in the context of judicial oaths, and the latter as a means of
concluding military alliances between African communities. As in the Dahomey
area, such ritual oaths were commonly used on the Gold Coast to seal agreements
between Europeans and Africans. When the factors of the Royal African Com-
pany’s factory at Accra concluded an agreement with the King of Akwamu in the
interior in 1681, the king’s son ‘took the fetish’ to seal the agreement; two of the Englishmen swore on the Bible, but a third took ‘their fetish’.

Likewise in the Efik community of Old Calabar to the east (in south-eastern Nigeria), oaths were sealed by the drinking of a magical potion called *mbiam*, which was believed to cause anyone who swore falsely to swell up, sicken and die. Although not unambiguously documented before the mid-nineteenth century, it is probable that the *mbiam* oath-draught was already used earlier, during the period of the Atlantic slave trade; a reference in the diary of the Old Calabar merchant-chief Antera Duke, in 1785, to the refusal of another chief to ‘drink doctor’, probably relates to *mbiam*. A similar ‘oath-draught’, believed to kill perjurors, was reportedly employed, apparently for judicial purposes, in Bonny.

In these cases, however, there is no reference to the drink containing blood, whether human or animal. The Gold Coast ‘oath-draught’ is described by Müller as consisting of ‘the juice of green leaves, water and other ingredients’; by Phillips as ‘water mixed with powders of divers colours’. *Mbiam* in Old Calabar was also clearly seen as distinct from the ‘blood pact’ (termed locally ‘chopping [i.e. eating] blood’, as opposed to ‘chopping doctor’, for *mbiam*), which appears to have come in as an innovation in the mid-nineteenth century.

The only other area of West Africa where a ritual oath-draught consisting of or including specifically blood is clearly recorded is in fact Igboland, in the hinterland of the Bight of Biafra (south-eastern Nigeria), where such ‘blood pacts’ are called *igba ndu* (literally, ‘binding life’). In the Igbo form of the ritual, the participants’ blood was smeared onto kola nuts or mixed into palm-oil to be eaten or drunk; it sometimes also included the sacrifice of chickens (or a cow), but it is not made clear whether their blood was also drunk. Here too, the ‘blood pact’ was not thought of as creating fictive kinship links, but to kill those who broke the oath. Although not clearly attested in any contemporary record before the twentieth cen-
tury, there is no reason to suppose that the practice was not already established earlier, during the period of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The Igbo form of ‘blood pact’ was used to cement commercial agreements between communities and individuals, and according to tradition played a critical role in the expansion of the commercial system of the Aro, which supplied many slaves for sale to the Europeans at the coast, during the eighteenth century. It was, in fact, very probably from the Igbo interior that the ‘blood pact’ was introduced into Old Calabar in the nineteenth century.

Despite the reputation of Igbo slaves in the Americas for docility (or more precisely, for expressing their disaffection through suicide rather than rebellion), it seems quite likely that it was the Igbo form of blood-oath which was utilized in some recorded slave insurrections. The conspirators in Jamaica in 1816 seem to have been predominantly Igbo, since they proposed to elect a ‘King of the Eboes’ as their leader. It also seems possible that the blood oath reported in Tackey’s conspiracy in Antigua in the 1730s had an Igbo origin, since Igbo were relatively numerous among the slaves taken to English Caribbean colonies (though Tackey himself was presumably, from his name, an Akan-speaker from the Gold Coast). It is perhaps conceivable that the Haitian ritual oath of 1791 also derived from an Igbo rather than a Dahomian prototype, but it does not seem very likely: not only because Igbo were numerically less significant than ‘Radas’ in the Saint-Domingue slave population, but also because there is no suggestion in accounts of the rituals of the Igbo ‘blood pact’ that they involved the sacrifice of a pig.

In a recent publication, David Geggus has queried the view that the Bois Caiman ceremony was ‘simply’ a ‘Rada’ or Dahomian ritual, partly on the grounds that slaves from this region of Africa were in fact less numerous in the North than in other areas of Saint-Domingue, and suggests that its role in the insurrection in the North would be more intelligible if it was understood as ‘a syncretic bringing
together of people from West and Central Africa’. There is clearly some force in
this argument, inasmuch as ‘Congos’ formed a much greater proportion of African-
born slaves in the northern plain than ‘Radas’ (over half) - although it has to be
said that we do not, in fact, know precisely which slaves were involved in the Bois
Caiman ceremony, or in the beginnings of the insurrection which followed it. It
does not necessarily follow, however, that ‘syncretism’ is the most appropriate way
of conceptualizing the putative trans-ethnic appeal of this ritual. It was arguably
inherent in the nature of the ‘blood-pact’ (and of other forms of ‘oath-draught’) that
they provided a means for organizing collective action independently of existing
political institutions, which might therefore transcend the boundaries of existing
communities, in Africa as well as in the Americas; as they served, for example, as
has been seen, to cement agreements between African traders from different com-
munities, and indeed between African and European slave-traders.

Ritual oaths, social control and slavery
Although the ‘blood pact’ clearly came to Haïti from West Africa, the social func-
tion which it served there was very different. In West Africa, ritual oaths generally
functioned essentially a means of social control, reinforcing the authority of ruling
elites, rather than as an organizational tactic of insurrection. On the Gold Coast, for
example, Müller noted that the ceremony of ‘drinking fetish’ was employed by
husbands to test and secure the fidelity of their wives. Likewise in Dahomey, hus-
bands ‘drank vodun’ with their wives, and the king with his subjects, in order to
secure their loyalty. (In the West Indies also, it will be recalled, African ritual oaths
were used by husbands to prevent or detect infidelity by their wives.)

However, the practice could clearly be used against, as well as in support of,
established authority. The ‘blood pact’ in Dahomey was, in fact, sometimes used
for criminal purposes, by thieves or bandits. It could also serve as a means of or-
ganizing political opposition, as in the case of the Aplogan of Hueda in the early eighteenth century, cited earlier. The coup d’état by which King Gezo seized the Dahomian throne in 1818 likewise seems to have been based on use of the ‘blood-pact’: Gezo is said to have had over 600 ‘sworn-friends’, of whom the best known was the Brazilian slave-trader Francisco Félix de Souza, who notoriously financed the coup. The Kings of Dahomey, indeed, recognised the subversive potential of the blood pact, to the extent that they forbade their subjects from contracting pacts among themselves (as opposed to with the monarch, individually), since this was seen as a potential constraint on royal power.

Such cases of the use of the ‘blood pact’ for oppositional purposes, however, related generally to factional divisions within the ruling class, rather than to the mobilization of a subordinate social group, such as insurgent slaves. In most of the few cases where ritual oaths are linked to issues concerning slavery, in fact, they served as a means of maintaining masters’ control over their slaves. On the Gold Coast in the seventeenth century, for example, it was noted that a man’s ‘newly bought slaves’, as well as his wives, were ‘bound by oath to remain faithful to their ... master’. Likewise in Dahomey a man would ‘drink vodun’ with his ‘servants [serviteurs]’, as well as his wives, to secure their loyalty.

Intriguingly, the practice was adopted by at least one European slave-trader. The Englishman Thomas Shurley (who died trading off the West African coast in 1693) is said to have ‘used to make his negroes aboard take the fatish, that they would not swim ashyre or run away, and then he would let them out of irons’, using for this purpose ‘a cup of English beer, with a little aloes to imbitter it’. His fellow-slaver Thomas Phillips, who reports Shurley’s practice, while acknowledging that this ‘operated upon their faith as much as if it had been made by the best fatishes in Guiney’, nevertheless observed sardonically that ‘for my part I put more dependence upon my shackles than any fatish I could give them’.
The only parallel for a ritual oath serving in the organization of a slave insurrection in West Africa of which I am aware is the case of the society of ‘blood men’ (*nka iyip*) organized among slaves in Old Calabar in the nineteenth century. This was based on a blood oath, involving a mutual exchange of blood. As described by a European missionary in 1858:

They had a small quantity of blood in a plate, which they had drawn, a drop or two from those who came forward to take the oath, by tasting which, and pronouncing the oath, they entered into a covenant ... [The administrator of the oath] pulled up the wrist and cut it, drawing a drop or two of blood, which was mixed with that in the plate, and the individual took out of the blood one of the seeds, which has a symbolical significance, eat [sic: ate] it, and then dipping his fingers in the blood, put them in his mouth.

One modern account has interpreted this ritual as establishing a form of fictive kinship, but the contemporary account makes clear that, as in Dahomey, it was intended rather to kill defaulters; the oath administrator ‘made a formal address to the blood, charging it to look and avenge the violation of any breach of the covenant’.

The ‘blood pact’ in Old Calabar was clearly distinct from the *mbiam* oath, and no doubt represents, as suggested earlier, a borrowing from the Igbo interior - most of the slaves held in Calabar being Igbo. The practice is first attested in Old Calabar in the 1840s, and took on an insurrectionary character during 1850-1, when slaves on the plantations belonging to the Duke Town section of Old Calabar reportedly ‘began to bind themselves together by a covenant of blood for mutual protection’. The objective was not, strictly, as in Haïti in 1791, to overthrow slav-
ery, but rather to resist and limit abusive treatment by their masters, and more par-
ticularly the sacrifice of slaves at chiefs’ funerals: that ‘they should not be killed for
nothing, or flogged without cause’. The Old Calabar authorities, supported by the
British Consul John Beecroft, attempted to repress the practice, negotiating a treaty
with the disaffected slaves which provided that ‘no slave who has a master living
shall chop blood with other slaves without special permission of the said master’,
and that ‘all combinations among slaves for interfering with the correction of any
domestic servant by his or her master shall be henceforth declared illegal’; but this
attempt at control was clearly ineffective. King Eyo Honesty II, ruler of the Creek
Town section of Calabar, likewise initially forbade his slaves from entering into
such blood covenants with each other; but on his death in 1858, his own slaves,
fearing that they might be taken for funeral sacrifices, also ‘entered into a covenant
of blood to defend themselves’.

Even in the Old Calabar case, indeed, there is an element of ambiguity, since
the ‘blood pact’ was used there by masters to control their slaves, as well as by
slaves to defy their masters; and indeed, even the organization of the ‘bloodmen’
was quickly co-opted into the political system. The earliest allusion to the blood
oath in Old Calabar, in 1848, in fact, relates to the settlement of a dispute between
a Calabar chief, Adam Duke, and his slaves, in which Duke was made to swear an
*m比亚m* oath not to punish his slaves, and at the same time ‘chopped blood’ with
their headmen, as a means of reconciliation. By 1851 the ruler of Duke Town, King
Archibong I, had made his peace with the ‘bloodmen’, and ‘joined their covenant
to secure their allegiance to himself’; and the famous invasions of the city by the
‘bloodmen’ - in 1851, 1852 and 1871 - seem to have been more concerned with
supporting rival factions among the Duke Town freemen (and especially enforcing
trial by ordeal on those suspected of using witchcraft against the king) than with
asserting the rights of slaves as such. Likewise in Creek Town, in the crisis follow-
ing King Eyo Honesty II’s death in 1858, the blood oath was in the end used to secure the slaves’ allegiance to his son and successor, Young Eyo (King Eyo III). Although Young Eyo himself, as a Christian convert, declined to take any oath, the headmen of the slave communities ‘administer[ed] the oath of allegiance to all under them. They swore to be true to [Young Eyo], to hear his word and do his work; and when they deserved it, to take their punishment’, while at the same time securing a reiteration of guarantees against mistreatment: ‘they must not be killed for nothing’. The invasion of the town by the Creek Town ‘bloodmen’ in 1861, on the death of King Eyo, was likewise directed against the late king’s enemies rather than against oppression of slaves by masters.

That the ‘blood pact’ should have served a quite different social role in the Diaspora from in Africa should perhaps occasion no surprise, and is certainly by no means a unique case. A close parallel is provided by the case of the Cuban ‘secret society’ of Abakuá, which is clearly derived from the well-known Ekpe (Egbo) masquerade society of Old Calabar. Ekpe in Old Calabar was a society of wealthy merchant-chiefs (its class, rather than ethnic, character being illustrated by the fact that some European merchants were allowed to join it); and was explicitly understood to serve the function of maintaining the authority of wealthy freemen: ‘to keep women and slaves in subjection’; whereas Abakuá in Cuba was a society of slaves (and in the longer run, free wage-labourers) which defended their interests against their owners (or later, employers). The reality of cultural ‘continuities’ across the Atlantic does not mean that African institutions were transported unchanged, or fossilized in the Americas, any more than they were unchanging or fossilized in Africa itself.