

**AFRICAN ORIGINS, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE:  
PLANTS AS A SYMBOL OF RESISTANCE  
IN AYITI**

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## ABSTRACT

The people of Ayiti have a long history of resistance, from the indigenous Arawak inhabitants of the land to the Africans who were later brought there against their will. Both groups have historically relied on the land in ways that promote resistance in a way that is not a direct response to slavery and oppression. The inherited African cultural values explored in this paper preceded European cultural domination. The relationship between Ayitians and plants is rooted within African cosmological understandings of an interwoven web that includes all beings on the earthly and spiritual plane. Using an Afrocentric theoretical framework, I examine how interspecies collaboration through Ayitian plant practices demonstrates African cultural preservation. In this paper, I draw parallels between the concepts of ubuntu and Ma'at to demonstrate ancient and contemporary African ontology and how they manifest in the Ayitian holistic medical system as illuminated by Vodou priest Max-G. Beauvoir. This paper's findings indicate that one way Ayitian people have preserved their African cultural roots is through plant practices. Through this form of cultural preservation, they have resisted European cultural domination.

## DEDICATION/ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Haiti and Kemet are examples of outstanding Afrikan agency, humanity, and achievement rendered dangerous to the perpetrators of global domination and oppression because it is a dramatic illustration of the falsity of those inaccurate and demeaning notions of Afrika and Afrikans so necessary for the existing world order.<sup>1</sup>

—Kimani Nehusi, *The Strategic and Intellectual Importance of Kemet*

By using plant practices to defy Western domination, the revolutionary capacity of the Haitian people aligns with the African traditions of resisting colonization. This resistance maintains cultural values passed down to Africans across the African diaspora, drawing to Kemet. For example, the moral ideal of Ma'at proposed a way to live that was defined primarily by the implementation of the Seven Cardinal Virtues of truth, balance, justice, propriety, reciprocity, harmony, and order (Asante & Dove, 2021; Karenga, 2004). Maintaining balance with the cosmos and the natural world keeps Isfet (chaos), evil, and disorder at bay and allows for the continuation of a community and people (Nehusi, 2016).

Professor and social theorist Patricia Hill Collins argues that there is an intrinsic link between oppression and resistance in that the shape of the resistance directly responds to the shape of the oppression being combatted (Collins, 2000). The intensity of the oppression creates the intensity of resistance, thus removing the agency of the

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<sup>1</sup> Nehusi, K. (2011). The strategic and intellectual importance of Kemet. In K. Exell (Ed.), *Egypt in its African context: Proceedings of the 24th annual ACM international conference on the design of communication*. British Archaeological Reports. Retrieved October 10, 2022 from, [https://www.academia.edu/1921955/Book\\_Egypt\\_in\\_its\\_African\\_Context](https://www.academia.edu/1921955/Book_Egypt_in_its_African_Context)

oppressed, as though their every act is merely a response to what is done to them, as opposed to a way of being intrinsically rooted in indigenous cultural values. The early Africans of Kemet believed that the goddess Ma'at represented the concept of order and balance; without this goodness and correctness in the universe, it would fall into disordered chaos and evil (Asante, 2009):

It is certain, however, that the ancient Africans believed her to be the glue that held back chaos. Without Maat, chaos would overtake society. Therefore, for African societies, the presence of Maat is fundamental to the working of civil and spiritual institutions and is at the base of all normal operations of the universe. (para. 8)

These values can still be seen across different iterations of African culture, the *iwa* (character) in Ifá being a prime example (Karenga, 2004). Chattel slavery is an example of Isfet (chaos) because it attempts to strip African people of humanity and reduce them to non-entities. However, the preservation of African culture in the African diaspora today proves that such an endeavor is impossible to achieve in totality.

The Africans of Haiti's plant practices are an example of a way to resist cultural domination that is not merely a response to oppression. Europeans documented their observations of African plant practices and rituals in the Saint Domingue colony, suggesting that these methods existed before European colonization (Weaver, 2006). To argue that African plant practices are a response to European domination erases the values and culture that existed before and implies that Africans only came into existence (Being) when they arrived in Haiti. African cosmological understandings of plant practices existed within and before Western cultural domination. Africans arrived on this side of the world with knowledge, will, and plant practices. These ways of moving predated the European Slave Trade.

The fear of losing their identities in this transition from Human Being to Enslaved Person might have led to their using everything at their disposal to remember who they were, even if that meant adopting some indigenous Arawak practices mixed with Catholic symbols to create a new culture that over time, with practice became solidified. “The survival of a culture and of truncated cultural elements over the span of five centuries indicates that compromises and adaptations are the sine qua non of a living and dynamic culture” (Bellegarde-Smith, 2006, p. 29). The preservation and adaptation of plant practices reinforce the balancing nature of Ma'at, which significantly contributes to the maintenance of African culture despite European cultural domination. From the European perspective, their domination appeared all-encompassing, eradicating the African person's humanity. However, the constancy of rebellion by Africans proves that this domination was never as thorough as Europeans believed. Rebellion efforts were widespread throughout the European Slave Trade journey (James, 1989). Africans resisted capture, whether by attacking their captors or by committing suicide. On the plantations, healers and non-healers alike used their positions and expertise to poison the food of their enslavers, ruin crops and kill livestock (Weaver, 2006). Agriculture was the domain that Europeans used to oppress Africans, yet this placed Africans in contact with their most consistent resource against domination: plants.

Cheikh Anta Diop's (1974) Two Cradle Theory posits that humanity originated out of Africa and what we describe as Culture today are responses to a group's natural environment. Black Studies professor Karanja Keita Carroll explains “Diop's environmentally based reading of each cradle distinguishes between both based upon natural resources, proximity to bodies of water, duration of sunlight, soil conditions,

glaciations, precipitation, etc” (Carroll, 2018, p. 61). Diop explains that populations in Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean were in the Southern Cradle and had an agrarian lifestyle in a climate with many natural resources. This culture of abundance allowed them to develop matrifocal societies where they lived with nature and others in harmony (Akbar, 2002; Allen, 2008; Amadiume, 1997; Diop, 1974; Wobogo, 1976). In contrast, populations in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East are in the Northern Cradle. These groups developed patriarchal and nomadic traditions from harsh and unpredictable environments with scarce resources, shifting their focus to survival at whatever cost (Akbar, 2002; Allen, 2008; Diop 1974; Wobogo, 1976). According to Carroll, the African worldview and the Two Cradle Theory demonstrates that racism is “a means of separating humanity based upon phenotypical differences, assuming the inherent superiority of those phenotypically classified as white and imposing their cultural value systems upon the rest of humanity” (Carroll, 2018, p. 59). The “illusion of race” distracts humanity from Ma’at (Asante & Dove, 2021). Racism and cultural domination hinder our ability to connect with the land and others because one is only interested in what one can control. European cultural values place high importance on individualism and materialism instead of communalism. Others are seen as competition for limited resources, and nature is viewed as something that must be conquered.

In this paper, I will refer to Haiti as Ayiti, which is the original name of the land. I will explore how plant medicine is a portal that allows us to tap into our ancestral memory. The Repiblik d’Ayiti (Republic of Haiti) was initially inhabited by the “Taíno,” a name used as an umbrella term to refer to a branch of the Arawak people (Sauer, 1966, p. 37). The Arawak people are an indigenous group originally from Cuba, Haiti, the



Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands (Sauer, 1966). Before colonization, the Taíno people called the land they inhabited “Ayiti Kiskeya Boyo,” meaning “high ground,” “land of high mountains,” or “mountainous land” (Girault et al., n.d.; Richardson, 1992). The migration of humanity out of Africa millions of years ago can mean that the Arawak people, like many indigenous groups, hold similar cultural beliefs and values that originated in the birthplace of humanity. One such belief is the deep respect for nature, as demonstrated in the name “land of high mountains.” True to European conventions, the Spanish renamed Ayiti “La Isla Española,” meaning “the Spanish island.” Europeans divided Española (anglicized as Hispaniola) into two parts after the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697, with the right side becoming Santo Domingo (modern-day Dominican Republic) and the left becoming Saint Domingue (modern-day Ayiti). In renaming the island, Europeans demonstrated that their relationship with the land was one of ownership and domination as opposed to reverence and collaboration. By honoring the mountains of Ayiti, the Taíno demonstrated harmony that is aligned with Ma'at. Many Africans trafficked to Ayiti fled to the mountains to escape bondage (James, 1989). The land was a sentient collaborator that protected Africans from European enslavers. Additionally, the Europeans’ inability to conquer the mountains kept them at bay. The land is an actor, not simply acted upon, and it works to preserve Ma'at. After the formerly enslaved Africans of Saint Domingue abolished slavery and obtained their independence in 1804, they renamed the country Ayiti to honor the historical and linguistic contribution of the Taíno people and pay respect to the land that allied with them in their quest for independence.

Disease, starvation, and brutal enslavement by Spanish colonizers led to the severe decimation of the Taíno population (Dunn et al., 1992; Richardson, 1992; Roden, 2016). Bartolomé de las Casas, an enslaver and Catholic priest, traveled to Spain in 1515 to advocate for better treatment of indigenous people and suggested that they be replaced by Africans who supposedly had a more robust constitution, a racist stereotype that persists even today (Dunn et al., 1992; Washington, 2006). Thus, Europeans forcibly captured and trafficked Africans to Ayiti to work as enslaved laborers on plantations. The Africans that were trafficked to Ayiti were predominantly from West and East African cultural groups: the Fon people of modern-day Benin, the Yoruba people of Nigeria, and the Kongo people of Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo, to name a few (Michel & Bellegarde-Smith, 2007; Murrell, 2009).

While it may seem that these groups lost their cultural identity due to enslavement and erasure, they have maintained these historical roots. The cultural anthropologist Alexander Fernández (2021) notes, "While the African body arrived in Haiti with few if any tangible objects or possessions, there existed strong African religious and social memories and practices that prevented the erasure of notions of African identity." These memories and practices can be seen through African Traditional Religions (ATR) such as Vodou in Ayiti, Santeria in Cuba, Obeah in Jamaica, Candomble in Brazil, and various social markers such as family structure, foodways, art, and language. However, how did Ayitian people retain this identity? What physical resources did they have at their disposal? I posit that plant materials and medicine acted as collaborators to help Africans of Ayiti retain their cultural identity.

African cosmology does not create a hierarchical separation between beings that is rooted in domination. Africology professor Kimani Nehusi (2016) asserts that the core foundation of the African world-view “is that there is a oneness, or unity, with consequent interconnection and interdependence, balance and harmony, within and among all beings and things in the cosmos” (p. 2). The Kenyan philosopher and theologian John Mbiti (1970) divides the African world into five categories: God; spirits; humans; animals and plants; and phenomena and objects without biological life (p. 16). When Africans arrived at Ayiti, they searched for plants similar to those used in their native lands. Western cultural domination creates a separation between different beings and between beings and the earth. Africans who arrived in Ayiti also brought African cosmology. They were not yet of the New World and had an ontology rooted in something else, in African culture and Ma'at. This ontology is a resistance to the Western ideology of individual over plant and individual as separate from the Earth. Africans of Ayiti, who are rooted within Ma'at, have resisted the belief that one has to dominate the Earth instead of working with the Earth. The European epistemological underpinning is that they are powerful, and to demonstrate this power, they must dominate the Earth, and every being in it must be subservient and under their control. The collaboration with a plant ally reconfirms the African cosmology and epistemology, which serves as both cultural preservation and cultural resistance.

Western medicine is heralded as the superior healing science, and this institution, like many others, is used as a tool to elevate the culture of the oppressor (Nobles, 1978). The European epistemological foundation is rooted in rationalism and supposed objectivity. However, objectivity is an illusion since personal experiences influence the

worldview of everyone. The exclusion of feeling found in this model places distance between the scientist and the phenomena they are attempting to understand, thus contributing to objectification and misrepresentation of whatever is being observed (Akbar, 2002). The plant knowledge and traditional medicines Africans use are often ridiculed and dismissed, especially the spiritual component of African herbal practices (Washington, 2006). The Western epistemological underpinning is that what is knowable and relevant can only be ascertained by its material aspects. Esoteric knowledge is deemed inferior along with the people who maintain it. The Africans of Ayiti have maintained a connection to the land by understanding its significant role in cultural continuity. This connection ties Ayitian people to their ancestry, allowing them to carry on the traditions of their more recent West African ancestors and their distant Kemetic ancestors. Ayitian people's relationship to plants, rooted in African indigenous ways of knowing, demonstrates the continuity of historical agency, and validates ancestral linkages that provide tools for generational healing. Historically, even as European enslavers attempted to destroy African people's identities, their long-standing knowledge of plant practices provided agency for enslaved Africans, connecting them to their culture of origin.

Ayitian author and humanities professor Jean Casimir credits the *bossales*, enslaved Africans who were born on the African continent, for their immense contributions to Ayitian culture: "Their victory was to plant, germinate, and cultivate a tolerable existence in the midst of the hell in which the Europeans had imprisoned them.... In seeking to design a life with at least a tiny bit of autonomy, they ended up inventing the nations of Afro-America" (Casimir, 2020, p. 8). It is estimated that by the

end of the Ayitian Revolution, about three-quarters of the formerly enslaved population were *bossales*, and this demographic lived with little European influence after the revolution (Michel & Bellegarde-Smith, 2007). The ability of the *bossales* to maintain African culture despite the terror and brutality of enslavement likely occurred through the use of orality. The oral tradition is often associated with only performances of poetry, music, and entertaining speeches. However, the African oral tradition is also inextricably linked to the passing down of cultural knowledge (Alkebulan, 2005; Hebblethwaite, 2012). Cultural preservation often occurred through rituals, storytelling, recipes, and singing songs centered on plant practices. This cultural preservation tool was not easily destroyed, even with language barriers in place. Azaka is the Ayitian Vodou *lwa* (spirit) of agricultural life. Rodman and Cleaver (1992) speculate that Taino influenced the name Azaka with the farming words *zara* (corn), *azada* (hoeing), and *maza* (maize). Others claim that the variation Azaka Mede points to his origins being with the Mede people of Ivory Coast, who were well-known for their agricultural skills (Armand, 2015). He is considered the patron of farmers, laborers, and those who work the land, and his role is to ensure fertility, abundance, and prosperity in agricultural activities.

Scholars need to pay more attention to the importance of the collaboration between plants and humans as a symbol of African cultural resistance. Over time, the plant practices of African people have been pushed to the margins, and their knowledge of the land has been overlooked and erased to facilitate the project of Western domination. As such, this paper asks the following: What role have plants played in Ayitian culture? Who uses plant practices in Ayiti? What are the attitudes around Ayitian plant practices? How have plants in Ayiti symbolized resistance?

This paper uses a framework of Afrocentricity to understand how Ayitian people have incorporated plants as a symbol of resistance. As such, the Ayitian people have symbolized resistance through three forms: the creation and veneration of several *lwa* (spirit) of plants and agriculture, the music genre of *rasin* (roots), and lastly, the use of teas as a form of plant medicine. This thesis is divided into four chapters. Instead of relying on a Eurocentric theory, the first chapter briefly discusses the Afrocentric theoretical framework, which I use to explore how the Ayitian people engage in the power of plant medicine as a community to honor their cultural roots. In the second chapter, I conduct a literature review to explore some of the arguments and limitations regarding studying Ayitian cultural resistance through plant medicine. Chapter three is a discussion of Ayitian Vodou cosmology and the *lwa* (spirits) Kouzen Azaka, Gran Bwa, and Papa Loko who are associated with plants. The fourth and last chapter explores the Ayitian use of plants for medicinal teas, infusions, and decoctions. In this chapter, I briefly discuss the Ayitian musical genre of *rasin* and the popular folk song *Twa Fey* (Three Leaves) that was remixed into the genre.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This examination is rooted within the discipline of Africology. The Africological movement emerged in the 1980s and marked a clear shift within Black Studies; no longer was it simply a field, it was now a discipline of study (Asante, 2007). As a discipline, Africology has been tasked with examining African phenomena from the perspective of African people, and this epistemological stance opens the mind to new ways of understanding African culture and humanity. Africology is the Afrocentric study of African phenomena, acts, events, or people, whether transcontinental or transgenerational

(Asante, 2015). Afrocentricity enables Africans to place themselves within the center of the narrative instead of being on the margins. Molefi Kete Asante argues that the education system in the United States is taught from the European perspective of history, whereby Europe is the primordial and central actor (Asante, 2007).

Even a discussion of the European slave trade concentrates on what the whites were doing instead of the resistance of the Africans. In such a world, the African student is always acted upon but seldom shown to be an actor. Centricity must be practiced in such a way that students from various cultures see themselves as participating in the flow of information and knowledge (Asante, 2007, p. 79).

In order to return to an African center, African people must look to Kemet, one of Africa's first great civilizations. This reveals that what seems like thousands of different ethnic groups and cultures are actually one indigenous African culture and spiritual system with diverse expressions (Nehusi, 2016). Studies have found linguistic, ritual, and artistic linkages between Kemet and other civilizations, such as the Yoruba, Kush, Congo, and Akan civilizations, to name a few (Asante, 2007).

The Afrocentric metatheory will be the theoretical framework used in this paper. Afrocentricity rejects the Western hegemonic notion that Europe is the origin and source of knowledge, discovery, and progress, placing all other cultures and groups on the margins of Western ideas. Afrocentricity challenges the Eurocentric tendency to engage with African and other non-European cultures from the lens of extraction and consumption. Asante defines Afrocentricity as “a consciousness, quality of thought, mode of analysis, and an actionable perspective where Africans seek, from agency, to assert subject place within the context of African history” (Asante, 2007, p. 16). Afrocentricity requires an epistemological and paradigmatic shift “that privileges African agency within the context of African history and culture transcontinentally and

transgenerationally” (p. 2). In other words, in order to understand African transcontinental experiences (occurring across continents) and transgenerational experiences (across different centuries), African people must learn to view ourselves in the center of our own story instead of on the margins of the Western experience. In doing so, we will honor our humanity, reimagine our origin narratives, and recognize and access the historical strength in Ayiti long before the colonizers attempted to exert control.



## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Texts that have explored Ayiti's relationship to plants have primarily focused on deforestation (Foxx, 2012). Michel & Kendall (2013) argue that deforestation rates are tremendous in Ayiti and attribute the root cause to Ayitians needing wood for charcoal to heat up their homes. The authors critique other scholars for arguing that frivolity and irresponsibility are what motivate Ayitian people to cut down trees. Arguments that blame the Ayitian peasant class for the environmental degradation of Ayiti are rooted in anti-black racism as they suggest Ayitian cultural values are inherently destructive to the environment. While the authors bring attention to the biased way journalists report about deforestation practices in Ayiti, they do not speak of Ayitian people as agents, and this is further demonstrated by their recommendation that NGOs lead the charge in remedying this catastrophe. In an article that deters from the usual narrative, Pauleus & Aide (2020) argue that deforestation is not as dire as previously assumed and claim definitions that describe this phenomenon poorly encapsulate what is occurring. The researchers argue that forest cover for the years 2000 and 2015 was "10 to 20 times more than previously cited, mainly due to differences in classification methods, definition of forest, and politics". The reasonings provided by the authors are worthy of note as they hint to the creation of a narrative that might be rooted in exaggeration and begs the question: who does it serve for Ayiti to be perpetuated as a hopeless, soon-to-be wasteland that is in dire need of outside intervention to save its citizens from themselves? A limitation of the study is that the data set used by the researchers to produce land use maps of Ayiti came

from landscape-level Landsat imagery from the Google Earth Engine. This software has been known to have autocorrelation errors that can impact assessment accuracy; however, these possible errors are considered very small.

Few texts have highlighted the exploitative deforestation practices facilitated by Western imperial powers. The indigenous Arawak people inhabited Ayiti for several thousand years before the arrival of Europeans (Richardson, 1992). The Arawak used forest plots called “conucos” to cultivate root crops in a way that did little to modify the landscape, thus protecting themselves from the hurricanes that are prevalent in the region (Richardson, 1992; Sauer, 1966; Steckley & Shamsie, 2015). This demonstration of interspecies collaboration reinforces the harmonious nature of Ma'at; the Arawak used noninvasive techniques to grow the food they needed, and the land provided food and shelter from the elements. As part of their plantation project, Europeans cut and burned down forests and introduced planting methods that exhausted the soil, making the land less able to combat the floods and winds associated with hurricanes (Bourdieu, 1984). The landscape of Ayiti has never recovered from the environmental destruction that was precipitated and still maintained by Western capitalistic greed (Steckley & Shamsie, 2015). Despite the seemingly bleak condition of the Ayitian landscape, Steckley & Shamsie (2015) argue that the Ayitian peasant class has the space and ability to combat food insecurity. Unfortunately, Ayitians are being thwarted by governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that wish to turn the country into a corporate-industrial landscape. The authors credit agricultural projects that are financed by the United States for the exorbitant deforestation rates. These institutions focus on integrating Ayiti into the world trading system to promote export-led growth instead of self-

sufficiency. External donors have been more likely to fund endeavors that enable them to remain incorporated in Ayiti's economic affairs, leading to policies that benefit them, often at the expense of Ayitian people. These actors are eliminating farmland to make space for industrial spaces leading to the further destruction of Ayiti's already vulnerable landscape.

Other texts that have explored Ayitians and their relationship to plants have explored the use of plant medicine by Ayitian migrants. Volpato, Godínez, & Beyra (2009) asked 24 Ayitian elders (ages 60 to 102) who emigrated to Cuba about using *tifey*, a drink prepared by soaking different leaves and other plant materials into rum or other spirits. The authors credit African cultural roots to the knowledge of and preparation of the alcoholic maceration. Plant medicine in the form of alcoholic maceration has been used for millennia and is mentioned in one of the oldest known written medical documents on the continent of Africa. The Ebers Papyrus (named after the German "Egyptologist" who purchased it in 1872) details herbal remedies for various ailments (McGovern et al., 2009).

In a work titled *Medical Revolutionaries: The Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue*, historian Karol Weaver explores the methods healers in the colony of Saint Domingue (now Ayiti) used to resist colonial domination. Weaver (2006) credits African cultural traditions for the methods used by healers. While Weaver does discuss plants in her work, her primary focus is on the position healers occupied in plantation society and how these positions of esteem uniquely placed them in situations where they could disrupt the status quo. Weaver (2006) briefly mentions the African cultural continuity found within the healing arts but does not explore plants themselves as

a symbol of African cultural continuity in the psyche of the Ayitian people and how this symbol is used to resist.

None of the aforementioned texts are rooted in an Afrocentric framework that places African people at the center of African phenomena analysis (Asante, 2003).

Without an Afrocentric lens, and particularly with a Eurocentric one, researchers risk perceiving African people as objects who were acted upon instead of agents in their own story who theorized and acted on their own accord. Are the researchers looking at Ayitian people from the lens of Ayitian people? Or are they bystanders consuming Ayitian phenomena without the inclusion of Ayitian perspectives? How would the Africans in the above literature interpret the observed phenomena? What do they believe they can do to combat the issues they are facing?

### **CHAPTER 3: AYITIAN VODOU COSMOLOGY**

Two significant spiritual sites targeted by European colonizers and Ayitian officials threatened by the power of Vodou are mapou trees and Bwa Kayiman. The targeting of these sites was partially fueled by economic and political motives (Michel & Bellegarde-Smith, 2007). After the Ayitian Revolution, the Ayitian elite attempted to demonstrate their ability and willingness to participate in global trade as a new and equal Western nation. White Western nations refused to recognize and trade with Ayiti as acknowledging the existence of this sovereign nation that was led by formerly enslaved Africans would prove the falsity of white dominance and superiority (Richardson, 1992). Thomas Jefferson, an enslaver and United States president, refused to recognize Ayiti as a sovereign country as he and his constituents feared it would inspire the enslaved Africans of the United States into further rebellion. Thus, Ayiti was cut off from trade with Europe and the United States for almost a century (Michel & Bellegarde-Smith, 2007). Ayitian politicians worried that the stigma surrounding Vodou as primitive and inferior would hinder Ayiti's acceptance as a civilized nation. The African cosmological roots in Vodou that inspired and united Africans in their fight for independence were shunned and demonized in public yet practiced privately. Ayitian elite and politicians today practice Vodou in secret to avoid being perceived as uncivilized by foreign powers even while implementing and lobbying for legislation to criminalize the observance of its beliefs. While the elite were publicly performing a rejection of their African cultural

roots, the Ayitian peasant class leaned into their origins. *Houngan* (Vodou priest) Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (2004) asserts:

Vodun is a coherent and comprehensive system and worldview in which every person and everything is sacred and must be treated accordingly. In Vodun, everything in the world— be it plant, animal, or mineral— shares basically similar chemical, physical, and/or genetic properties. This unity of all things translates into an overarching belief in the sanctity of life, not so much for the thing as for the spirit of the thing. (p. 24)

The mapou tree (*Cyphostemma mappia*) or silk-cotton tree holds great cultural and historical significance in Ayiti. It is often considered a symbol of strength, resilience, and connection to Ayitian heritage. This tree is believed to be a conduit between the human and spirit realms, making it a sacred and powerful symbol in Vodou rituals and ceremonies. The mapou tree can grow up to 100 feet tall, and some of its roots sit above the ground. Like the Ayitian people themselves, the mapou tree is known for its ability to thrive in challenging conditions. It is highly resilient to hurricanes, droughts, and deforestation, making it a vital component of Haiti's ecosystem. The tree's extensive root system helps prevent soil erosion, contributing to the stability of the land. The importance of this is that the tree serves as a symbol of the Ayitians' ability to connect to their cultural roots and to lean upon the environment for support. The mapou tree played a vital role during the Ayitian Revolution (1791-1804). During secret gatherings of enslaved people planning a rebellion, the mapou tree often served as a meeting place, providing shelter and serving as a symbol of unity and resistance against oppression.

On August 21, 1791, Cecile Fatiman, a *mambo*, and Dutty Boukman, a *houngan*, led a Vodou ceremony to offer sacrifices to *Bondye* and *lwa petwo* such as the rebellious warrior spirit Erzulie Dantor. This ceremony occurred under the cover of trees in Bwa

Kayiman (Alligator Forest). The words of Boukman were recorded after documenting oral accounts of the night:

The god who created the sun which gives us light, who rouses the waves and rules the storm, though hidden in the clouds, he watches us. He sees all that the white man does. The god of the white man inspires him with crime, but our god calls upon us to do good works. Our God who is good to us orders us to revenge our wrongs. He will direct our arms and aid us. Throw away the symbol of the god of the whites who has so often caused us to weep, and listen to the voice of liberty, which speaks in the hearts of us all. (James, 1989, p. 87)

One can glimpse the psyche of the Africans of Ayiti from this prayer of resistance. Boukman distinguishes “our god” from “the god of the white man” in this prayer. The critical difference between the two gods is that one is of nature, harmony, and justice. As this god is associated with nature, Boukman implies that this is the true god. This god fills their hearts with “the voice of liberty” and demands that vengeance restore balance. In contrast, the white god is of criminality and wickedness. These gods and the behavior they inspire are at odds with one another, as are the people who follow them. There is an acknowledgment that although Christianity is prevalent, Vodou is foundational to Ayiti and Ayitians themselves.

Vodou is a way of life for the Ayitian people, and it encompasses a range of beliefs and practices, including healing, ancestral worship, and connection with the divine. Ayitians jokingly claim they are “100 percent Catholics and 90 percent Vodouisants”. Whether a person is a Vodouisant or not, they must abide by the ethics of Vodou as this belief system sets the community's political, economic, and social standards. Through adherence to Vodou values, Ayitians are united under one cosmological and theological foundation. Vodou derives from the Dahomean (modern-day Benin) Fon words vodu and vodun, which mean deity or spirit (Desmangles, 2009).

Thus, one would be hard-pressed to encounter a native Ayitian who claims to be a Vodou practitioner; they would instead assert that they serve the spirits or *sevi lwa*. Vodou combines multiple Dahomean traditions (Bellegarde-Smith & Michel, 2007; Hebblethwaite, 2012). Despite their differences in ethnicity and language, enslaved Africans forced into the European Slave Trade and involuntarily brought to the Caribbean found commonalities - particularly in spirituality (Hazzard-Donald, 2013). Vodou enables Africans in Ayiti to connect to their ancestral traditions, thus preserving African culture and identity. These spiritual practices allowed enslaved Africans to focus on and find comfort in their shared values.

Vodou was the vital spiritual force that provided respite from the daily torture and degradation of slavery because it allowed Africans on the territory of Saint Domingue [Ayiti], despite the cruel and methodical efforts of the colonists, to see themselves as independent beings. (Lundy, 2009, pp. 689-690)

Lundy's quote addresses the African ontological and cosmological understanding that an African person's being could not be destroyed or erased regardless of the barbarism Europeans subjected them to. God, or the Creator, is all-powerful and controls an invisible force or energy that it imbues within spirits and beings (Akoto & Akoto, 2005; Mbiti, 1970). This cosmic force is greater than human beings and allows us to be thus, others have neither the right nor the power to remove it. Europeans could never eliminate African identity and culture, at least not in the all-encompassing way they set out to do. As in nature, there is no actual death, simply rebirth, and regeneration through the passing down of knowledge to the next generation (Nehusi, 2016). One can easily observe the African roots in Ayitian culture today, especially regarding Vodou. African cosmology, reiterated in Vodou, works in opposition to the Patricia Hill Collins theory that resistance is in response to the specific oppression faced (Collins, 2000). My



argument does not attempt to erase the severity and consequences of the acts of European colonizers. Instead, I argue that African cosmology existed before and after the European Slave Trade thus, the African understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings did not come into existence as a response to slavery and oppression.

European slavery in its capitalism does not allow for respite and beingness. Africans are not seeking disconnection from Europeans but restoration and a return to harmony through Ma'at. Courlander (1973) explains, “In short, it is a true religion which attempts to tie the unknown to the known and establish order where there might otherwise be chaos” (Courlander, p. 12). As shown in Boukman’s speech, the criminal acts of white people are the problem, not white people themselves. The Maafa, Marimba Ani’s (1997) term for the African holocaust also known as the Transatlantic Slave Trade, is a short deviation from over millennia of African and world history. Balance must be restored to the cosmic order, human and non-human beings, and the Earth.

In Ayiti and many other African cultures across the African diaspora, it is a common factor that the spiritual and physical are not separate, but they work together in harmony (Adogame, 2009; Akoto & Akoto, 2005). Sociology professor Katrina Hazzard-Donald explains, "For the traditional African, there was no clear separation between sacred and secular as one finds in contemporary European and American society” (Hazzard-Donald, 2013, p. 21). In *Of Water and the Spirit*, writer Malidoma Patrice Somé explains the Dagara people: “In Western reality, there is a clear split between the spiritual and the material, between the religious life and secular life. This concept is alien to the Dagara. For us, as for many indigenous cultures, the supernatural is part of our everyday lives” (Some, 1994, p. 8). Asante and Dove (2021) make the same assertion that

there is no separation between the physical and metaphysical in African culture: “The study of the human mind and behavior cannot be separated from an exploration of matters of the spirit as they shape concepts of humanity and understanding of self” (p. 37). Africans recognize the existence of a higher being and participate in rituals to ask this source to intercede for them (Akoto & Akoto, 2005). These rituals are passed down from one generation to the next, often by children observing recipes and other practices of their elders (Hebblethwaite, 2012; Nehusi, 2016).

The core underpinning belief of Vodou is that *Bondye*, the Supreme Being, created the universe and maintains natural order by extending its spirit force into all things starting from “the lwas, to humans, to animals, and finally to physical objects in the world” (Desmangles, 1992, p. 96). The *lwa* are spiritual entities that act as an intermediary between *Bondye* and all other beings (Hebblethwaite, 2012). Each *lwa* has its distinct personality, attributes, and areas of influence. The *lwa* reside within natural environments and “have dominion over natural elements such as fire, water, wind, trees, and plants including the secrets of the medicinal properties of these elements and illnesses and their cures— in sum, all actions, sentiments, and virtues” (Fleurant, 2006, p. 47). *Lwa* are divided into different pantheons or family-like groupings called *nasyons* (nations) that typically correspond with the original ethnic lines that came into contact during the European Slave Trade. While some of the *nasyons* originated in Africa, many were created in Ayiti. The most well-known *nasyons* are Petwo, Kongo, Rada, Ibo, Makanda, Nago, and Bizango (Fleurant 2006).

Some nanshons [nasyons] are known for their healing power and manifest their aptitudes through various medicinal plants or other ritual paraphernalia prescribed to believers by folk healers. Others are cosmic spirits that ensure the mechanical operation of the universe. (Desmangles, 2009, p. 696)

The relationship between humans and the *lwa* is interdependent. Cleophas (2022) argues, “The *lwa* embody natural elements that give meaning to and make relevant the mysteries inherent in the supernatural world to the everydayness of the human person.” (p. 259). As everything is believed to be spirit, we must maintain equilibrium with both seen and unseen spirits. Vodou is a complex and diverse spiritual tradition with variations across regions and communities. The understanding and practices associated with *lwa* may differ slightly depending on the specific lineage, house, or individual practitioner within the Vodou tradition (Laguette, 1980). This variation allows for the longevity of the spiritual practice and speaks to the fluidity and porosity found within African culture. *Lwa* and spiritual traditions never cease to exist; they multiply and transform while retaining their connection to the Creator.

Ayitiens have created several *lwa* to complement the forces of the universe they encounter daily. Like in many other African groups, separate entities play a significant role in nature (Nehusi, 2016). In this section of the paper, I describe the origins and attributes of some of the *lwa* that are specifically called upon for their expertise with plants. Some of these *lwa* were brought over with the Africans who arrived in Ayiti centuries ago, while others were created due to living in the Caribbean and speak to the adaptation and cultural expansion that occurred throughout this time. 18th Century Saint Domingue was a plantation economy sustained by the labor of enslaved Africans. The work was grueling and “began at day-break: at eight they stopped for a short breakfast and worked again till midday. They began again at two o'clock and worked until evening, sometimes till ten or eleven” (James, 1989, p. 10). Historian C.L.R. James goes on to explain that the two-hour break was used by enslaved Africans to cultivate vegetables as

the meals they received were not enough to feed them for the week. With their lives revolving around agriculture, it is no wonder that the *lwa* discussed in this paper grew to prominence during this time.

After the success of the Ayitian Revolution, the Ayitian elite attempted to restore forced labor practices as a way to sustain the economy, which up until that point was solely reliant on plantation crops. In seeking autonomy, Ayitians moved further into rural areas and cultivated an agrarian lifestyle that supported them and the new Ayitian economy, much to the dissatisfaction of the elites whose fantasy of liberation from French rule was to replace their oppressors with themselves (Spieler, 2021). Spieler argues, “The violence of elite efforts to resurrect the colonial slave plantation under another name raises the question of how Haiti’s peasants managed to destroy the old system so thoroughly and irreversibly” (p. 416). While the Ayitian elite adopted the norms, habits, and values of their European oppressors, the peasant class in Ayiti turned to their agricultural roots, reinforcing the balancing nature of Ma'at.

### ***Lwa* Related to Plants**

Azaka is the Ayitian Vodou *lwa* of agricultural life. He is of the Rada *nasyon*, which is said to include *lwa* that are cool and benevolent although vindictive if offended. He is affectionately addressed as *kouzen* (cousin) by many Ayitian people and is also sometimes referred to as Minis Azaka, Azaka Mede, or Zaka. Azaka is depicted as a hardworking peasant who is suspicious by nature and skeptical of urban dwellers. He also has keen attention to detail and is believed to have deep knowledge of the land and its

secrets. Azaka is often depicted with a pipe in his mouth, a straw hat on his head, and no shoes on his feet. The colors and textures associated with Azaka are red, yellow, green, and denim, commonly worn by peasant farmers. Azaka, like other *lwa* associated with plants, is a skilled herbalist and carries healing herbs and food in his straw sack. In rituals, devotees may invoke Azaka to seek his blessings and assistance in matters related to farming, gardening, and agricultural endeavors. Offerings such as fruits, vegetables, grains, and rum are often presented to him as a sign of respect and to establish a connection. Azaka is considered a vital figure in the Ayitian rural community, where agriculture significantly affects people's livelihoods.

Gran Bwa (Great Wood) is a *lwa* closely associated with forests and the wilderness. He protects wildlife and lives deep in the forest where vegetation is uncultivated. Gran Bwa is responsible for the health of plants and inhabitants of the land. He is a skilled healer and knowledgeable botanist associated with healing, protection, and wisdom. Gran Bwa is also a powerful wielder of magic and is often invoked to assist in spiritual communication, divination, and understanding hidden or esoteric knowledge.

Papa Loko is the Ayitian Vodou *lwa* of trees and all other vegetation. He is associated with the spirit of the forests, herbs, and medicinal plants. Loko is a distinguished healer and imbues leaves with healing properties. He is the patron of *medsen fey* (leaf doctors) and other plant healers. In *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*, the anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston writes: “Loco Atisou gives knowledge to the hougan [Vodou priest] and indicates to them what should be done. In case clients come to them Loko shows the hougan what leaves and medicaments to use for treating the ailments” (p. 129). Papa Loko is often depicted as an elderly,

hunchbacked man with a long white beard who walks with a cane. He also takes the form of a butterfly and sometimes transforms into the wind, so that he can listen to people without them knowing. Papa Loko is believed to be the keeper of knowledge and the source of divine wisdom. The colors associated with Papa Loko are red and white.

### ***Twa Fey: The Three Leaves of Remembrance***

Ayitians' ability to resist oppression through their relationship with plants has also permeated their music. Ayiti was once again invaded by Western foreigners when the United States sent its Marine Corps to Ayiti under the pretense of restoring political and economic order after the assassination of then President Jean Vilbrun Guillaume Sam in 1915 (James, 1989). In actuality, the United States looked for ways to spread its influence and succeeded in moving Ayiti's financial reserve to the United States and rewriting the Ayitian constitution to allow foreigners the right to own Ayitian land (Danticat, 2015). The United States occupation of Ayiti is documented as having lasted from 1915 to 1934 despite the United States being in direct control of Ayitian finances until 1947 and maintaining indirect influence today.

1971 began the rule of Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, who took over the dictatorship after the death of his dictator father François "Papa Doc" Duvalier. The Duvaliers exemplify how some Africans still keep the oppressive European cultural values they were forced to believe and enact. François Duvalier was born in 1907 and witnessed the United States occupation of Ayiti that took place from 1915 to 1934. This invasion was viewed as racist, violent, and economically exploitative. Eurocentrism breeds domination and fear which are values that the dictators upheld. The rule of

François Duvalier was distinguished for his efforts to censor the Ayitian people. Anyone who vocalized their views that went against the ruler often met their demise. François Duvalier viewed his survival as the ultimate priority, so much that he persecuted those who opposed him. He operated through a hierarchy and militarized peasants (Ton Ton Makout, named after Ayitian mythological boogeymen) to empower them through violence. The Duvaliers ensured order was maintained through brute force and terrorization of the very people they claimed they wanted to protect. Like many Africans forced to live under Western domination, the Duvaliers were dislocated and through this dislocation caused devastating traumas to other African people.

The Africans of Ayiti *Mizik rasin* (roots music) emerged in Ayiti during the 1990s with the rise of popular bands like RAM and Boukman Eskperians. Although the music genre was popularized in the 90s, the *mouvmen rasin* (grass-roots movement) began in the 70s as a response to the brutal Duvalier regime. *Rasin* is a blend of Ayitian folk music and rock. It is best known for its guitar riffs, resounding traditional drumming, and themes of resistance. The notable drum rhythm of *mizik rasin* is pulled from the *rada* style of Vodou which originates from Fon/Ewe and Yoruba cultural groups. *Rada* rhythms are known for being fast-tempo and fiery. These beats are partnered by *petwo* beats which when combined make up the *mizik rasin* that we know today. Ayitian music is peppered by the themes of justice and liberation which became known as Freedom Culture or *Kilti libète* (Fleurant, 2006). The overall messages in these songs indicated the social injustices occurring during the rule of their different leaders.

The traditional Vodou song *Twa Fey* (Three Leaves) goes as follows:

*Twa fey, twa rasin o*

*Jete bliye, ramase sonje*

*Mwen gen basin mwen*

*Twa fey tombe ladan 'n*

*Jete bliye, ramase sonje*

Three leaves, three roots oh

Drop them [and] forget, gather them up [and] remember

I have my basin

Three leaves fall in

Drop them [and] forget, gather them up [and] remember

On her 2018 album *Radyo Siwèl*, the Ayitian-Canadian artist Méliissa Laveaux covers *Twa Fey*. Jim Di Gioia writes that the song is

referring to the basic herbs and medicines of Vodou culture, but the song's lyrics spin an interwoven web that references forgetting and remembrance, gathering and losing, finding roots and pulling up stakes. In its frenetic rhythm and Laveaux's intoxicating voice, "Twa Fey" is presented to the spirits as a peace offering, a pean to the past, and a reminder to future generations that the history and story of the place you call home goes deeper than the layer of topsoil on which you're standing. To honour, to understand, and to recognize the generations that came before, you need to scratch deep below the surface and find the embedded roots that anchor us to wherever we call home. (Di Gioia, 2020)

*Twa Fey* can be sung to infuse intention into an herbal remedy and is often accompanied by a fast *petwo* rhythm that channels the volatile and hot *lwa*, which are spirits or facets of the divine (Frere-Jones, 2009; Michel & Bellegarde-Smith, 2007).



## **CHAPTER 4:**

### **AYITIAN PLANT MEDICINE**

Keeping in line with African values, in Vodou and Ayitian culture, there is no significant distinction between physical, spiritual, and even interpersonal ailments. Medical ethicist Harriet A. Washington (2006) writes that “Appeals to God, the importance of moral fitness, and enlisting the help of departed spirits, especially the intercession of ancestors, were all key to the African-based healing process” (p. 48). The Eurocentric paradigm highlights the individual's primacy and unique motivations, whereas, in African cultural groups, it is believed that the individual is only understood in relation to others; the philosophy of ubuntu articulates this notion well. Community, nature, spirit, and ancestors are included in this relationship web (Michel & Bellegarde-Smith, 2007). Healing in African spiritual systems focuses on the root of the problem, not just the symptoms it causes. For example, disrupting one's relationship with spirit can manifest as physical problems. Washington (2006) writes, “Ancestors who were angered by disrespect or neglect could cause illness, alienation, and other troubles for the living” (p. 49). The African healer must probe and consider whether the symptoms are due to a social, physical, spiritual, or combination of the three. In an attempt to continue their traditional healing methods, Africans used their cultural knowledge to communicate with one another and to look to the new land around them in search of plants with similar properties to the ones they collaborated with back home:

Relatively few African plants crossed the Middle passage on slave ships as provision crop, fodder or weed. Slaves had to reinvent their medicinal flora in an unknown environment by exchanging information with Amerindians and Europeans, using their knowledge of African plants and going through a long

process of trial and error to find substitutes for their homeland herbs. (van Andel et al., 2012, para. 1)

When one looks at the transhistorical aspect of African people, one will see the application of many plant and spiritual practices pertinent to the health of Africans across the diaspora. Therefore, it is easy to recognize and honor the African continuity of plant medicine from Kemet to Ayiti. Symbols, animal blood, and natural resources such as tree bark, roots, and leaves are all considered elements of indigenous resources that are oriented toward providing better health for Africans (Bird, 2022; Ogungbile, 2009; Washington, 2006). Considered one of the oldest medical papyri in Kemet, the Ebers Papyrus of 1550 B.C. contained not only herbal remedies for diseases but also clear instructions on how to examine, diagnose, and prescribe treatment for illnesses (Hallmann-Mikołajczak, 2004; Manniche, 1989; Nunn, 1996). The Ebers Papyrus served as a medical textbook of sorts and is 110 pages long. It should be noted that this is not the original name of the document, but the document is named after the German “Egyptologist” who purchased it. The Ebers Papyrus included incantations and remedies for illnesses affecting different body parts. Some of these parts include but are not limited to the heart, head, stomach, anus, and skin (Nunn, 1996).

Many vegetables and fruits, including garlic, onion, celery, Cyperus grass tubers, watermelon, fig, moringa, persea, and zizyphus, for example, figure prominently as ingredients in the formulations; however, by far the most numerous are alcoholic beverages (wine and beer), tree resins (e.g., terebinth, pine, frankincense, myrrh, fir), and herbs of all kinds (e.g., bryony, coriander, cumin, mandrake, dill, aloe, wormwood). These plants and their exudates are described as being macerated; mixed together; steeped as a decoction or infusion in wine or vinegar, beer, honey, milk, oil, and/or water; strained; and administered for specific ailments (e.g., laxatives, emollients, expectorants, anthelmintics, analgesics, diuretics, aphrodisiacs). (McGovern et al., 2009, para. 40)

The enslaved Africans of Ayiti searched on both earthly and spiritual planes for allies and collaborators to aid in their quest for freedom. The *houngan* (Vodou priest), *mambo* (Vodou priestess), *medsen fey* (leaf doctor), and other Africans who were skilled in plant medicine emerged as leaders and significant contributors to Ayitian resistance struggles. Some of these healers' names have been included in Ayiti's written historical record. Romaine-la-Prophetese, Francois Makandal, and Dutty Boukman were prominent herbal practitioners who played significant roles in the African fight for liberation and autonomy in Ayiti. Healers and Vodou practitioners alike were pillars in their communities before, during, and after enslavement. The ability of newly arrived Africans to experiment with the plants in Ayiti speaks to a cosmological foundation that emphasizes the interdependent spiritual connection between all things. Across the various iterations of African culture, a common thread is the understanding of the Earth as a living and autonomous entity that acts in ways that maintain balance throughout the cosmos (Nehusi, 2016). Africans have understood the power of plant medicine for thousands of years and have consistently used the plants surrounding them as medicine for spiritual and physical healing (Martin, 2009).

In this section of the paper, I will discuss what *houngan-therapeute* Max-G. Beauvoir (2006) describes as the modern-day Ayitian holistic medical system and also how it echoes Arawak indigenous practices. This system is divided into three categories: the Phytotherapeutic Social System, the Phytotherapeutic Medical System, and the Masterly Medical System. This system unlike the Eurocentric paradigm is not a response to domination but finds its roots within African ontological and cosmological philosophies of healing in collaboration with the land and the community. The

longstanding knowledge of plants benefitted enslaved Africans even as white medical doctors neglected and abused them in the name of Western science (Roberts, 1998; Washington, 2006).

Other than the indigenous plant systems that were used, Ayiti did not have an opportunity to develop a formal medical system given the constant influx of colonization. Robert P. Parsons (1929) argues that during the colonial period and beyond, the Ayitian medical system was first French then British, and lastly, American. During the 17th century, the Europeans in Ayiti modeled their medical system after the French. The excessive use of mercury and bloodletting are two of the many unsound medical treatments that significantly delayed Ayiti's medical progress during that period (Parsons, 1929). After the Ayitian Revolution, Western nations like France and the United States refused to trade with Ayiti, leaving room for the English to begin commercial trade with Ayiti. This led to the influx of English personnel such as doctors and teachers who were employed for their expertise in Western knowledge systems (Parsons 1929).

After invading Ayiti in 1915, the United States rewrote the Ayitian constitution and designed a medical school where Ayitian students interned in Paris with the intention of returning to Ayiti to reproduce French medical practices (Parsons, 1929). This is yet another example of the European imperialist paradigm: to destroy and destabilize parts of the world, then return to save them and build them up in the image of the imperialist; therefore, reinforcing the identity of the imperialist as the so-called savior or humanitarian of a problem that they themselves orchestrated. In a country where hospitals were sorely lacking the appropriate conditions to treat patients for centuries,

plant remedies were the most consistent and historical collaborator for healing of the Ayitian people.

In the Phytotherapeutic Social System, Ayitians rely on *medsen senp*, a simple healing method (Beauvoir, 2006). The beauty of this healing system is that it is accessible to everyone in that one need not be a professional healer to participate. This system often relies on historical precedent in the form of indigenous knowledge and anecdotal experience to validate the efficacy of the recommended treatments.

Having learned the positive outcome of a recipe through past experience, he or she is able to recommend it to a sick person only as a suggestion. In doing so, that healer performs both a cultural and medical act, though he or she may not feel concerned with matters of methodology or principles. (p. 114)

This excerpt demonstrates that the Phytotherapeutic Social System is in accordance with the African practice of ubuntu which promotes communalism as opposed to individualism. Communalism can incorporate non-human beings, such as plants, who act as community members whom humans turn to for support and healing. Knowing that someone is ill, an Ayitian person is duty-bound, through African values, to suggest a recipe they have used successfully.

The Phytotherapeutic Medical System is practiced by a professional healer such as a *mambo*, *houngan*, *fanm chaj* (midwife), *ganga* (healer), or *medsen fèy* (p. 114). These healers are what Westerners would consider to be herbalists, people who are plant medicine specialists. Beauvoir explains that herb “is understood to mean plants and animals, or any parts of plants and animals, that are used for medicinal purposes. An herb may be a leaf, a flower, a stem, a seed, a root, a fruit, or the bark of a tree, or it might also be part of an animal or the animal in its entirety” (p. 115). A plant commonly used in Ayiti is *vèvèn* or vervain (*Verbena officinalis*). It is believed to have calming and sedative

properties and is used to treat anxiety, insomnia, and digestive issues. Another is *korosòl* or sour sop (*Annona muricata*). This fruit tree is believed to have anti-cancer properties and is used to treat gastrointestinal issues, fever, and hypertension. *Jenjanm* or ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) is a warming herb used to treat digestive problems, colds, and menstrual cramps.

In their article, Galvin et al., stated that there is a difference in the practices between the *houngan* and the *medsen fèy*; mainly being that “medsen fèy are not generally inhabited by a spirit like ougan [hougan]” (Galvin et al., 2022). However, this is not to say that a leaf doctor is not inhabited by a spirit as the spiritual and the physical are inextricably linked. Following the notion of ubuntu, African people do not exist separately from the plants they use to heal. Instead, as harmonious embodiments of these living organisms, both the medicine and the body are healers and healed (Adogame, 2009; Some, 1999).

The Masterly Medical System is incorporated into Vodou cosmology and involves the patient’s relationship to spiritual entities and immaterial energies (p. 126). The Phytotherapeutic Social System and Phytotherapeutic Medical System are also included within this system. Through spiritual possession, often by the *lwa*, healers diagnose a patient’s illness. The concept of spiritual possession might be difficult for those who have been dislocated from African cultural expressions of spirituality to understand because this defies the European cultural ideas and normalities of spirituality that parade as universal. These African cultural expressions of spirituality can be seen in other African diasporic cultures, such as “catching the Holy Ghost” in an African American church service.

In the West, there exists a long-held belief that pharmaceutical drugs are superior to other forms of medicine. Terms like folk remedies and alternative medicine are used to distinguish plant medicine from so-called conventional medicine. As plant medicine has become more widespread in the US, so has the commodification of and misinformation surrounding said practices. The approach when using plants and trees is still rooted within a Western European episteme that assumes true healing can be found within a fast-acting, pain-relieving pill. Said pill is created by extracting the properties found in plants and enhancing said properties to sell these pills for profit. Vitamins and herbal supplements are mass-produced and promoted as healthier alternatives. Western medicine exploits plants to colonize and use them to eradicate their natural ecosystem, leading to a constant cycle of death and destruction. True healing is impossible when the relationship is predicated upon domination and erasure. Instead of living with the land, the West attempts to conquer it. The concept of nature is viewed as separate from humans it is implied that we have authority over it.

However, traditional and indigenous practices of medicine, healing, and plant medicine are tied to spiritual traditions:

The common method of treating patients consists of an enormous variety of medical preparations made of mixtures of roots, leaves, barks, fruits, and parts of animals and birds. The objects are often accompanied by incantations that imbue the medicinal preparation with power. The specialist consults the oracle and invokes the appropriate deity to give potency to the concoction before it is dished out to clients. In some cases, rituals and sacrifices are enacted to the appropriate spirit or divinity to sustain the immutability of such power. The treatment may include an herbal potion with pharmaceutical properties to deal with the symptoms. The medical preparations are administered orally, in ointments, by bathing, or through scarification. Although the healer/medicine man is versed in the collection of recipes and their preparation, such medical skills and knowledge are never revealed to clients. (Adogame, 2009, p. 309)

Ogunbile writes, “African medicine is the health practice involving the application of indigenous resources, spiritual and material, in providing mental, psychological, social, and physical well-being and wholeness to a human being and his or her environment” (Ogunbile, 2009, p. 413). Healers among African groups use herbs to cure illnesses in the body/spirit. This stands in epistemic contradiction to the universal European paradigm, which asserts the spiritual and physical are separate. One of the tenets of capitalism is to keep us believing in the separation between spirit and body in order to produce labor for the system. If we understand that they are related, it is harder to keep working in the way this system demands.



## CHAPTER 5:

### CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have presented a new interpretation of African resistance concerning plant practices in Ayiti. In summary, few texts have explored how Ayitian peoples' relationship to plants is rooted within an African cosmological framework that facilitates cultural preservation, not as a response to oppression but as a natural resistor to chaos and evil. Vodou cosmology, like African cosmology at large, is an example of Kemetic Ma'atic principles of balance, truth, reciprocity, harmony, justice, propriety, and order. Ayitian plant practices are rooted within Vodou cosmology and demonstrate cross-species collaboration to achieve Ma'at and combat European cultural domination. This is significant because it challenges the white supremacist lie that Africans have a backward, primitive culture that was successfully destroyed through colonization.

The key to Ayitian liberation is in agriculture, specifically as guided by the work of the peasant class. The cultivation of the land by the peasant class on their own terms draws the ire of the elite or foreign powers, who then sabotage their efforts for autonomy and self-sufficiency. The effort to disempower agricultural laborers in Ayiti negatively impacts everyone in the nation. Ayitian government officials are easily bought by foreign powers and do their bidding at the expense of their own people and cultural roots. Ayitian peasants took matters into their own hands and rejected the colonizers' way of life by attempting to support their own community and collaborating with the resource they knew they could trust: the power of the Earth. This demonstrates resilience and trust in a vital force that imbues Ayitians with a being that cannot be removed by another.

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