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I

Foundations

Haiti was born as a nation in 1804, but its foundations lie in the colonial society of French Saint-Domingue and in the remarkable revolution that began there with a massive uprising of the enslaved in 1791. The excerpts in this section offer a few pathways through this complex and layered history. They highlight part of the challenge of understanding and recounting Haitian history—the fact that relatively few were able to leave behind written traces of their lives, thoughts, and projects. For this reason, among the excerpts here are alternative ways of accessing the colonial and revolutionary past, including songs, contemporary novels, and images.

At the core of the events of this period were the efforts of the enslaved, who made up the vast majority of the colony's population, to resist and ultimately overthrow slavery and to create a different social order on the ashes of the plantation world. From the beginning, the Haitian revolutionaries were performing on a world stage, their actions observed, commented on, dissected, critiqued, and recounted throughout Europe, the Americas, and beyond. The revolutionaries in Haiti understood this well, as did those who followed them, and some—including many of the authors featured in this section—actively sought to shape the way the broader world viewed their struggle.

There also was—and in some respects, continues to be—profound disagreement within Haiti over precisely what the revolution and its aftermath should mean. Key leaders, both during the revolution and after independence, were committed to the idea that Haiti's economy could thrive only through the continuation of some kind of plantation order. They sought a range of strategies for maintaining aspects of the plantation economy without slavery. In the process they faced constant, and at times successful, resistance from what Haitian historian Jean Casimir calls the "counter-plantation" system. The battle over what freedom, autonomy, and sovereignty truly meant began during the Haitian Revolution and, in a way, that battle has never truly ended.

The excerpts in this section attempt to capture the dreams, struggles, and contradictions of the colonial population as well as the first generation of Haitians. They represent the beginning of a set of stories that would spiral through the country's entire history.

An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians

Ramón Pané

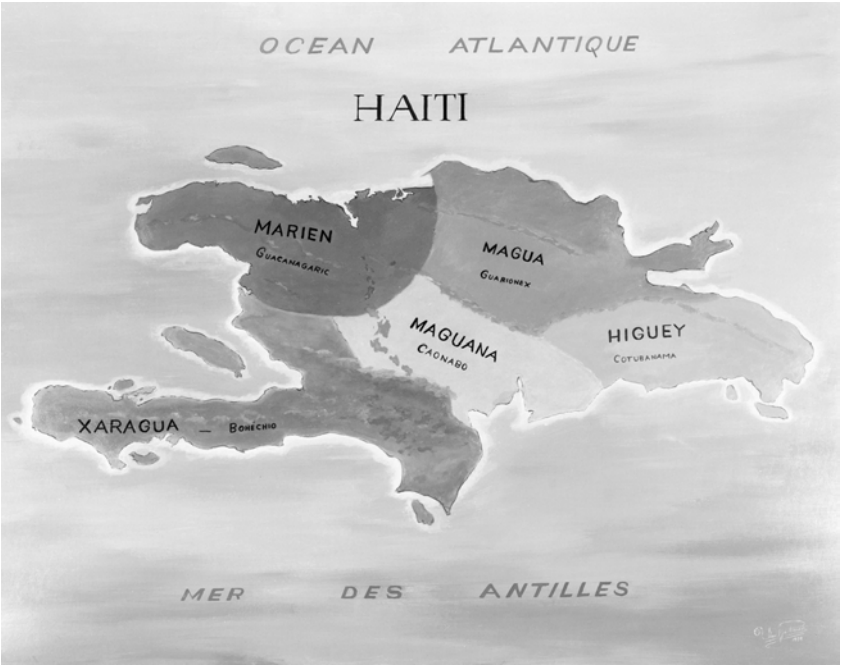
A few years after Columbus's arrival in 1492 on the island that he dubbed "Hispaniola," a Spanish friar named Ramón Pané wrote a manuscript describing some of the practices and beliefs of the indigenous people who inhabited it.

Pané's text offers valuable descriptions of the way indigenous groups narrated their own history, as well as their religious beliefs and practices, including the use of carvings called zemis. The indigenous population was largely decimated through war, disease, and enslavement, dropping from perhaps 500,000 to 750,000 to just tens of thousands. By the time the French colony of Saint-Domingue was settled in the late seventeenth century, there were only scattered indigenous communities in the mountains. But the material culture of the indigenous societies was present throughout the island, and artifacts were sometimes found as fields were planted. Some of these remains, including zemis, were in fact preserved and used in the developing Vodou religion.

Though Pané calls the island Hispaniola, he notes that "before" colonization it was "called Haití, and the inhabitants call it by this name." Because the original indigenous name was preserved in the written record in this way, it was able to be recovered and redeployed in 1804 by the founders of the nation of Haiti.

I, Fray Ramón, a humble friar of the Order of Saint Jerome, am writing what I have been able to discover and understand of the beliefs and Idolatries of the Indians, and of how they worship their gods. . . .

In worshiping the idols they keep at home, which they call zemis, each one observes a particular manner and superstition. They believe that he is in heaven and is immortal, and that no one can see him, and that he has a mother. But He has no beginning, and they call him Yúcahu Bagua Marocoti, and they call his mother Atabey, Yermao, Guacar, Apito, and Zuimaco, which are five names. . . . They know likewise from whence they came, and where the sun and the moon had their beginning, and how the Sea was made, and where the dead go. And they believe the dead appear to them along the road when they travel alone because they do not appear when many of them travel together. Their ancestors have made them believe all this, for they do not know how to read, nor can they count except up to ten.



Artist Ulrick Jean Pierre created this map of the indigenous kingdoms (headings) and their respective rulers (subheadings) as they are believed to have existed at the time Columbus arrived on the island the inhabitants called, according to early Spanish chroniclers, Ayïti. Courtesy of Ulrick Jean Pierre.

Chapter I

CONCERNING THE PLACE FROM WHICH THE INDIANS HAVE COME AND IN WHAT MANNER

There is a province in Hispaniola called Caonao, in which there is a mountain called Cauta, which has two caves. The name of one of these is Cacibajagua, and Amayaúna the other. The majority of the people who populated the island came from Cacibajagua. . . .

Chapter IX

HOW THEY SAY THE SEA WAS MADE

There was a man called Yaya, whose name they do not know, and his son was called Yayael, which means son of Yaya. Because Yayael wanted to kill his father, the latter sent him into exile, and he was exiled for four months; and afterward his father killed him and put his bones in a gourd and hung it from the roof of his house, where it was hanging for some time. It happened one day that Yaya, desiring to see his son, said to his wife: "I want to see our son Yayael." And she was glad, and taking down the gourd, she turned it over to

see the bones of their son. And many fish, large and small, emerged from it. Whereby, seeing that those bones had been changed into fish, they resolved to eat them.

. . . And they also say that the Sun and the Moon emerged from a cave located in the country of a cacique named Mautiatihuel, which cave is called Iguanaboina, and they hold it in great esteem, and they have it all painted in their fashion, without any figures, with a lot of foliage and other such things. And in the said cave there were two zemis made from stone, small ones, the size of half an arm, with their hands tied, and they seemed to be sweating. They valued those zemis very highly; and when it did not rain, they say that they would go in there to visit them, and it would rain at once. And one zemi they called Boinayel, and the other Márohu.

Chapter XII

CONCERNING WHAT THEY BELIEVE ABOUT THE DEAD WANDERING ABOUT, AND WHAT THEY ARE LIKE, AND WHAT THEY DO

They believe there is a place where the dead go, which is called Coaybay, and it is located on one side of the island, which is called Soraya. They say the first person in Coaybay was one who was called Maquetaurie Guayaba, who was the lord of said Coaybay, house and dwelling place of the dead.

Chapter XIII

CONCERNING THE SHAPE THEY SAY THE DEAD HAVE

They say that during the day they hide away, and at night they go out to walk about, and they eat a certain fruit that is called guayaba. . . . And at night they change into fruit, and they celebrate and accompany the living. And in order to recognize them, they observe this procedure: they touch one's belly with their hands, and if they do not find his navel they say he is *operito*, which means dead: that is why they say the dead have no navel. And thus they are sometimes fooled when they do not notice this, and they lie with one of the Coaybay women; when a man thinks he has her in his arms, he has nothing because the woman disappears in an instant. They still believe this even today. When the person is alive, they call his spirit *goeíza*, and when he is dead, they call it *opía*. They say this *goeíza* appears to them often, in a man's shape as well as a woman's, and they say they have been men who have wanted to do battle with it, and one such a man would let his hands on it, it would disappear, and the man would put his arms elsewhere into some trees, and he would end up hanging from those trees. And everyone generally believes this, the children as well as the adults, and that it appears to them in the shape of a father, mother, brothers, or relatives, and other forms. The fruit they say the dead eat is the size of the quince. And the aforesaid that do not

Images of zemi of Maquetaurie Guayaba (profile at left, front is below). Gift of the Austen-Stokes Ancient Americas Foundation, 2005, Walters Museum. Reprinted courtesy of the Walters Museum.

appear to them in the daytime, but always at night, and that is why one is very fearful to venture to walk alone at night.

Chapter XIV

CONCERNING WHENCE THEY DEDUCE THIS AND WHO LEADS THEM TO HOLD SUCH A BELIEF

There are some men who are practitioners among them and are called *behiques*. . . . Just as the Moors, they have their laws gathered in ancient songs, by which they govern themselves, as do the Moors by their scriptures. And when they wish to sing their songs, they play a certain instrument that is called *moyahabao*, which is made of wood, hollow, strong, and very thin, the length of an arm and a half an arm in width. The part that is played is made in the shape of a blacksmith's tongs, and the other part resembles a mace so that it looks like a long-necked squash. And they play this instrument, which has a voice so loud that it can be heard from a distance of a league and a half. To its sound they sing their songs which they learn by heart and the principal men play it; they learn to play as children and to sing with it according to their custom. . . .

Chapter XV

CONCERNING THE OBSERVANCES OF THESE INDIAN *BEHIQUES*, AND HOW THEY PRACTICE MEDICINE AND TEACH PEOPLE, AND IN THEIR MEDICINAL CURES THEY ARE OFTEN DECEIVED

All of the majority of the people of the Island of Hispaniola have many zemis of various sorts. Some contain the bones of their father and mother and relatives and ancestors; they are made of stone or of wood. And they have many of both kinds, some that speak, and others that cause the things they eat to grow, and others that make it rain, and others that make the winds blow.

. . .

The zemi Opiyelguabirán has four feet, like a dog, they say, and is made of wood, and often at night he leaves the house and goes into the jungle. They went to look for him there, and when they brought him home, they would tie him up with a rope, but he would return to the jungle. And they tell that when the Christians arrived on the Island of Hispaniola, this zemi escaped and went into a lagoon; and they followed his tracks as far as the lagoon, but they never saw him again, nor did they hear anything about him.