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## Some Breton and Muslim Antecedents of Voudou Drapo

by

LeGrace Benson

The drapo that appears in every Haitian Voudou *houmfo* is *drapo nasiyonal*, the flag of Haiti. Historians dispute the actual events that brought the red and blue drapo and its device of palm tree, cannons, anchor and drums into being, but the legends and esoterica move along in a deep current of real meaning.

When Aristide became President of Haiti, hundreds of murals appeared on street walls all over the country. A great number of them included the re-instituted red and blue national flag of liberation Dessalines had dramatically produced in 1803. With the stitching help of Catherine Flon, mambo of the Mérote Voudou *houmfo*, he ripped the white from the French tricolor and joined the red band for the slaves and the blue for the freedmen in equality at the hampe. Under this banner the warriors expelled the French and proclaimed an independent Haiti, January 1, 1804. *Drapo nasiyonal* appears in every *houmfo* not so much for political insurance, as is sometimes claimed, but as an assertion of identity as free Haitians. Even under the most repressive conditions, the mythos of the successful slave uprising remains present and potential.

Beyond this chief drapo are all the others, created to some extent in its aura, and even two hundred years later echoing its call to arms. It is true, as Patrick Polk and others have pointed out, the flags bear many resemblances to French military banners and to European flags implanted in Africa during the era of slave trade.<sup>1</sup> It is true also that the drapo function in the ceremony with certain military protocols, including mock battles, that appear to derive from the same sources. But there is more than the armies of Napoleon at work on these drapo and in their ritual deployment.

### The Matter of Islamic Africa

The two proto-heroes of the slave revolution, Mackandal and Boukman, both leaders of momentarily thwarted uprisings, were, according to contemporaneous witness, literate and knowledgeable Muslims.<sup>2</sup> General Jean-Jacques Dessalines, under whose leadership the revolution finally succeeded, if not Muslim, nevertheless evidenced influence from Muslim mysticism and magic. These were present in Haitian slave life just as Muslim mysteries and magic pervaded every West African locality where Muslims traded or had political hegemony. Dessalines created the flag in February 1803, months before its dramatic apparition in Archahaie on the eighteenth of May, reportedly after a ceremony in the *houmfo* he frequented.<sup>3</sup> Eighteen May is the day for honoring the African lwa (spirit), Aloumandia (or Allahmandia). The name is thought to be a form of "Allah."

Some scholars say that another hero, General Alexandre Pétion, put the palm tree, which for the insurgents was the tree of liberty, on the drapo.<sup>4</sup> His lwa was Ayizan, whose symbol was the palm. Ayizan, become a divinity, has historical root as a West African dowager queen whose strength and cleverness allowed her progeny to take over an older kingdom. The palm appears on the national flag and on a great many Voudou drapo not only for Ayizan but for other lwa as well. Whether or not it was Pétion who caused the palm to be placed on the national flag, the act was one that synthesized African and French militancies. A thoughtful reading of reports on the style and their actions of Haiti's liberation leaders suggests that their conception of the conflict into which they entered was not necessarily or simply a following of the notions of the rights of man articulated in the French Revolution and spread to Haiti: more personally and deeply it was a holy war—a *jihad*.

The drapo that appear next most frequently in houmfo are those of Sin Jak, St.-Jacques Majeur, the Santiago of Iberia and Spanish America, the Santiago whose chapel the Portuguese built in Elmina in Old Ghana in 1480. At that time, the peoples of the coastal districts were resisting the Muslims, and Santiago was conflated to Ogun, the powerful old deity of the Edo, the Yoruba, and the Fon. Ogun's beginnings are lost in antiquity and his endings are not in sight; he now assists car mechanics, soldiers and computer experts. The assimilated Santiago/Ogun as an emblem of resistance among the Yoruba who became Islamized at about the time of European colonization of Africa in the late eighteenth and through the nineteenth century is ironic but comprehensible: he is a figure of armed opposition rather than of religious dogma. Santiago/St.-Jacques/Ogun arrived on Hispaniola early, perhaps even as early as the Colombian landfall in 1492. As Sin Jak-Ogun he is the lwa who enables the oppressed to overcome; his great popularity will last until the revolution is fully implemented, they say.

To review quickly the several ways Muslim influence came to St.-Domingue and Haiti:

1. The first Muslims in the New World were the Malinke who arrived in Brazil in 1312 under the leadership of Abubakri of the royal house of Mali. There has been a continuous presence in Brazil to the present as well as influences radiating out to the coasts of central America, northern South America and the Caribbean.<sup>5</sup>
2. Ship's manifests and inventories of plantations show heavy importation of Islamic Mande peoples to Hispaniola, especially in the early eighteenth century.
3. Muslim influence pervaded West Africa as a result of trade networks and political or cultural hegemony reaching as far back as 900 C.E., with Muslim amulets and divinations actively used by peoples not otherwise Islamic.
4. Muslim immigrants came in large numbers into the Caribbean, including Haiti, during the nineteenth century. Mostly from India, the Hindus of that migration spoke disparagingly of the Muslims among them as "Madingas," thus implying a West African continuity not in India, but in the Caribbean.

Although the number of Muslims among the slave population was small, and although it was nearly impossible to set up the *ulama* system of education under plantation conditions, there is much evidence from the eighteenth century forward of efforts made to preserve Muslim heritage.<sup>6</sup> Slaves made ink from citrus and mimosa and used dried palm leaves for pages to create copies of the Qur'an. It is reported that such books were so highly prized that people would rescue them from burning cabins. It is documented that during the revolution, some insurgents wore amulets thought to protect them from bullets, or were they to be killed anyway, assured their return to Lan Giné, the African homeland. Islamic imams made and distributed such amulets for exactly this purpose throughout West Africa.<sup>7</sup> It seems reasonable to presume that the repository of so much else of African heritage, the Voudou houmfo, would likewise preserve the valued Islamic remnants. A look at certain drapo seems to confirm this possibility.



Photo by Dr. Halvor Jaeger. Courtesy Jaeger Collection  
Drapo by Clotaire Bazile, Port-au-Prince, circa 1977.

The drapo motifs that show the strongest visual congruencies with Islamic designs are the repeated squares, often diagonally divided, as borders, especially for Sin Jak drapo. It is true that repeated squares and lozenges are a motif found all over the

world, and certainly on French military banners; but there remains the density and elaboration of the motif. The resemblance of some of the earlier drapos to number squares on Qur'an boards is striking.<sup>8</sup> When we recall that such mystical square diagrams were on battle amulets, furthermore that the *imams* used the washings from the boards as healing potions for animals and humans, appearance of the squares on the drapo, at the site of a religion focused on winning freedom and curing sickness should almost be expected.

The mystical quadrille appears on flags and vèvè (symbols drawn on the ground at the beginning of a Voudou service) for Ogun Badagris and Papa Zaka. It appears as well on the vèvè for the lwa (spirit) Boussou Sinbi, a lwa of the "Fanmi Senigal," again from Islamic territory, and on the costume for this lwa both in Haiti and in the Islamicised Senufo district of Côte d'Ivoire, where it is known as *Kâgba*. Motifs other than the magic squares also appear; for example, exact replicas of Islamic divination symbols appear on drapo for Sin Jak.

Most scholars of Voudou regard the Islamic contribution as marginal, and this is clearly the case for cosmology and theology. However, some of the valued symbols, especially those tied to healing and *jihad*, tenaciously hold their place in the vèvè and on the drapo.

### **The Matter of Brittany**

To the drapo of *jihad* coupled with French military design, add the third factor of Roman Catholic church banners conceived of in those times as the battle oriflammes of the Church Militant. Christians of the era of exploration and domination show abundant evidence in their tracts, sermons, prayers, hymns and mission activities of a pervading conception of militancy –the church at war against the Devil and all his works in "heathen" cultures.

Priests and religious were among the first arrivals from Europe. In what became St.-Domingue as France dominated the western half of Hispaniola, more and more of them arrived from the Breton ports of Nantes and Brest. In the so-called "tunnel period" of Haiti between her declaration of independence and the Concordat signed in 1860 with the Papal See, some seventy percent of all missionaries came from Brittany. In colonial times, the religious were accompanied by sailors, colporteurs, adventurers, managers for absentee landlords and small entrepreneurs seeking their fortunes in the richest colony of the world. Missals and crucifixes arrived in the same ships as books of magic and alchemy, full of magic number squares, owing something to Arabic influence. Such books have a continuous presence on the island from 1700 to the present –the same versions are sold on the streets of Port-au-Prince to this day, and have a place on many a Voudou pè. So the Bretons, high and low brought their efficacies high and low: whatever would win or cure from the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of this world.

The priests also brought special objects and ceremonies peculiar to Brittany, among them the Maypole, which until very recently was a feature of Karneval, joining as easily to old Taino ways as it had to old Celtic, Druid ways. They set up the same kind of *calvaires* (sculptural representations of the Crucifixion) that appear all over Brittany all over Haiti, most frequently at crossroads, as they had in Brittany. They held special observances for the saints, especially for St. Anne, the patron of Brittany, often coupled by Haitians with Ayizan,; and for St. John Baptist. Such special occasions took on the characteristics of the Breton observance of the so-called “Pardons,” with services, prayers, and processions out into the fields or to the shore, accompanied always by banners splendidly embroidered with gold and silver threads, beads and sequins on fine velvets and satins, gadrooned in gold braid, a depiction of a saint usually at the center.

At these services in Brittany, the first ritual takes place inside the church, with a visiting priest serving in an honored function, just as a visiting mambo or houngan fulfills a special role in a Voudou ceremony. Subsequently, there is a procession of banners and crucifixes into a large *parvis* outside the church, the emblems are oriented to compass points –so too in a Voudou service--, followed by the “kissing” of the banners, gestures seen in Voudou ceremonies as well. In great probability the Breton actions mirror a Druidic ceremony of earlier times. After a time, the procession recommences to parade throughout the countryside, stopping at certain special locations for hymns and prayers of rogation and benediction, the banners marking out the sacred space. Eventually all return to the church for concluding vespers. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the procession path was marked with designs made of flour, charcoal and flower petals, like vèvè. The *via sacra* thus created under the banners is once again similar to certain Voudou ceremonies. The splendid *drapeaux* from many churches would be returned to their homes later and remain either on display or in special cabinets and closets, as do the Voudou drapo. The banners of Brittany and those of Voudou have not only their devotional splendor in common, but also the saint displayed in the center. Military banners are more apt to carry simple, quickly identifiable emblems.

The Voudou drapo that does carry a simple emblem in the center is usually that of the Iwa Ezuli represented by a heart. The Breton priests and religious taught veneration of the Sacred Heart to their Haitian flocks.



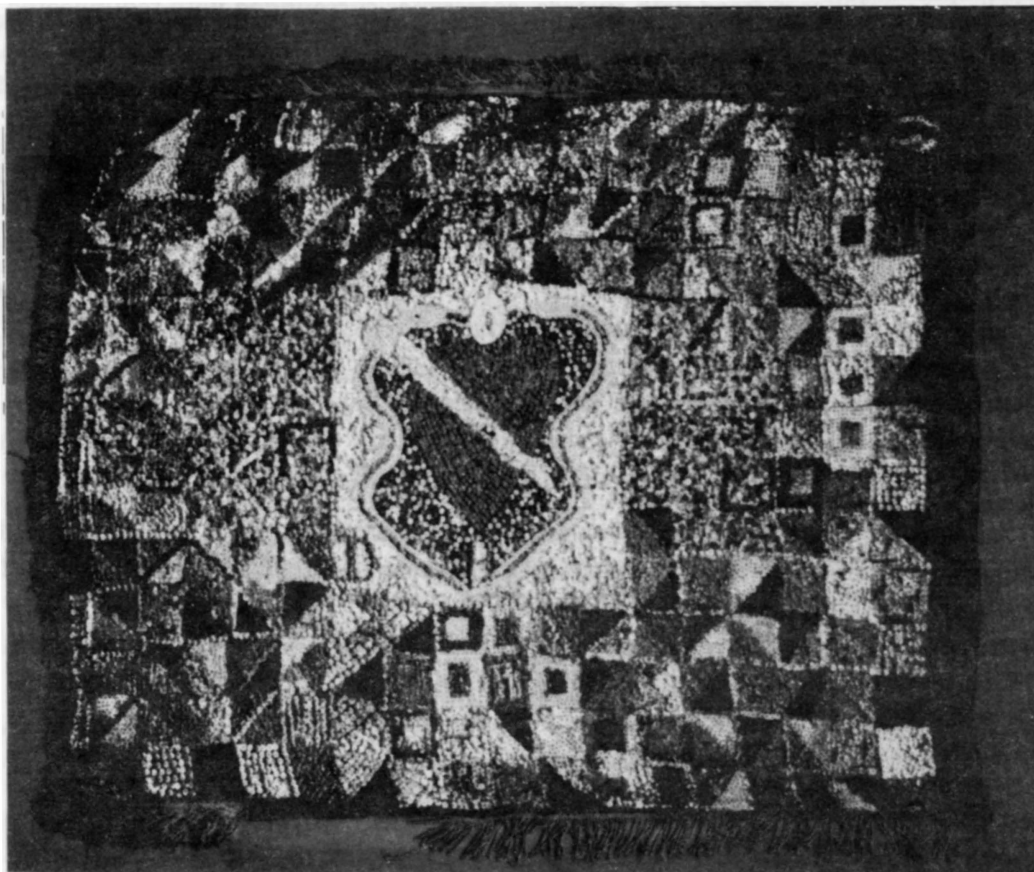


Photo by Dr. Halvor Jaeger. Courtesy Jaeger Collection  
Anonymous drapo in so-called "old-style," date unknown.

Anne Sauvy<sup>9</sup> tells how the sacred heart became a primary teaching aid in Brittany. Michel Nobletz in the sixteenth century promulgated the images throughout Brittany, and even now they appear in every mission where there are Breton priests and religious. The Breton missionary who eventually became the Archbishop of Haiti at the time of the Concordat was among those who tried to have Nobletz canonized for his work with the image of the Sacred Heart.<sup>10</sup> Louis Maximilien, writing on Voudou, tells how the emblem, of Hermetic origin during the Middle Ages, became venerated in the Roman Church, and from thence came into Voudou.<sup>11</sup> It is, like Sin Jak-Ogun, the sign of an essential of human character rather than a sign for religious dogma. Where Sin Jak-Ogun is the emblem of resistance and war, the Heart of Ezuli is the emblem of all forms of human love. We have on drapo what the Greeks and Romans understood as *eros* and *thanatos*, love and war, Venus and Mars, Sin Jak-Ogun and Sin Mari-Ezuli. (Perhaps it is not beside the point to remark that Miryam, the Virgin Mother of Jesus is honored in the Qur'an, Surah 19.)

The Breton hearts were sometimes banded to indicate stages in the ethical progress of a Christian soul toward the pure love of God. Sometimes the entire poster was

quadrilled with hearts centered in each square. In Haiti, Ezuli's heart is sometimes quadrilled, sometimes pierced with swords, sometimes surrounded with reduplicated squares like those of Islamic hatumere (amulets) and Qur'an boards. It is an adding up of emblems of power and might: the magic squares of the *grimoire* books brought in by the sailors and adventurers unaware of the Arabic esoterica embedded in them; the sacred heart of Jesus and Mary brought in by Breton religious; the Islamic amulets brought in by enslaved Africans: drapo emblems to carry the whole freight of power from Africa and Europe, mystical religions and efficacious magic.

Other drapo may also echo Brittany. Small votive ships hang from the ceiling near the sanctuary of many a Breton chapel and from many a Haitian hounfo. In Haiti, such ships are emblems of the sea lwa, Agwe. The emblem appears in vèvè and on drapo<sup>12</sup>. What is different from the Breton votives is the word "imamou," clearly a survival from Islamic heritage. For Breton sailors and for those brought to Haiti in the ships they manned, such an emblem would carry a complex emotional cargo.

Certain colors on drapo that may owe something to Breton liturgical practices include white for the marriage of Ezuli with her devotees; black for the gède/Baron spirits of death; and violet or purple for Gran Brigit, another lwa of the gède family, wearing the penitential color for Advent and Lent, seasons of special observance for Christians and Voudouisants simultaneously. *Toukolé* (all colors) on drapo, some garments, apparently continue a tradition found in many West African locales, and by some accounts seem to be related to keeping evil at bay.

### **The Matter of Haiti**

Drapo, their associated vèvè and ritual actions richly skein back into European and African ancestral homes of today's Haitians. They emerge from ineffably complex systems people devise for coming to terms with the human condition: entraining a procession to alter the physical space; undergoing a possession to alter the perception of self; meditating, dancing, praying. Breton and Muslim survivals on the Voudou drapo have taken on different meanings from those in the original settings, yet they preserve some of the same poetry of splendor, of the powers of color and scintillations, of a thing that constantly changes and stays the same; a piece of cloth that marks out a sacred space to deal with the timeless and formless invariants of the human plight. Parading the drapo at a certain time a certain place *rive nan baye ent syel ak té*—arrives to where the gates of heaven open on an aperçu from the ordinary into the extraordinary.

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- <sup>1</sup> Polk, Patrick, "Sacred Banners and the Divine Cavalry Charge," in Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou, Donald J. Cosentino, ed. Los Angeles:UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995. Pp. 325-347.
- <sup>2</sup> See especially, Madiou, Thomas, Histoire d'Haiti. Port-au-Prince:Editions Henri Deschamps, 1989(1847). Tome I, p. 35.
- <sup>3</sup> Fombrun, Odette Roy, Le Drapeau & Les Armes de la République d'Haïti. Port-au-Prince:Editions Henri Deschamps, 1987. P.34ff.
- <sup>4</sup> Desquiron, Lilas, Racines du Vodou. Port-au-Prince:Editions Henri Deschamps, 1990. P.141.
- <sup>5</sup> Celebration of this event took place in Mali in 1992 as an alternative to the excitement about the Colombian quinqucentenary, reported by Robert Lacville, "Sail of the Centuries to America," Manchester Guardian Weekly, 28 February, 1993. Abdullah Hakim Quick discusses the historic evidence for this early and continued presence in Deeper Roots: Muslims in the Caribbean Before Columbus to the Present. Nassau:AICCLA, 1990. See also Bastide, Roger(trs. Helen Sebba), The Black Religions of Brazil. Baltimore and London:The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978(1960). See especially Chapter 7, "Black Islam in Brazil."
- <sup>6</sup> LeFrau, G., "Le Noir d'Afrique," a nineteenth century essay cited by Jean Fouchard in Les Marrons du Syllabaire. Port-au-Prince:Editions Henri Deschamps, 1988. P.20.
- <sup>7</sup> Bravman, René A., Islam and Tribal Art in Africa. Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1974. Bravmann provides substantiation for the pervasion and endurance of Islamic traditions throughout the region, describing situations that seem to support a parallel supposition that such influence could be sustained in Brazil or Haiti, or elsewhere.
- <sup>8</sup> Prussin, Labelle, Hatumere: Islamic Design in West Africa. Berkeley and Los Angeles, London:University of California Press, 1986. Prussin includes a great many illustrations of Islamic design relevant to the topic of Islamic preservations in Haiti, as well as extended discussions of use and meaning.
- <sup>9</sup> Sauvy, Anne, Le Miroir du Cœur, Quatre siècles d'images savantes et populaires. Paris:Les Editions du Cerf, 1989.
- <sup>10</sup> Cabon, Père A., Mgr. Alexis-Jean-Marie Guilloux, Deuxième Archevêque de Port-au-Prince. Port-au-Prince:Archevêque de Port-au-Prince, 1929.
- <sup>11</sup> Maximilien, Louis, Le Vodou Haïtien. Port-au-Prince:Imprimerie Henri Deschamps, 1982. P. 51.
- <sup>12</sup> Concerning a specific drapo for Agwe as well as those for several other lwa, I have benefited from discussions with Clotaire Bazile, houngan and drapo-maker of Haiti. Harvard doctoral candidate, Anna Wexler, very generously provided this opportunity for me. I am grateful to her also for the knowledge and insights she has shared, based upon her extensive work with drapo and drapo makers.