



**STILL ON THE BATTLEFIELD WITH BOUKMAN:
REMEMBRANCE, RELIGION, RESISTANCE AND REVOLUTION**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

AS WE COME TO THE END OF JANUARY and move swiftly into February, the month when we focus most intensely on our history as a world community of African people, let us bridge the months by linking discussions of the Haitian Revolution and how we might better grasp and live the legacy of righteous and relentless struggle it offers us and the world. For January is the month of the celebration of Haitian Independence, the Haitian Revolution and the awesome and world-impactful liberation struggle the Haitian people waged to achieve this.

The 2018 theme for Black History Month, as given by Dr. Carter G. Woodson's organization, the Association for the Study of African American life and History (ASALH) is "African Americans in Times of War". It asks us to focus on "the roles of African Americans in every American war from the Revolutionary War era to that of the present war on terrorism". But here, I want to avoid limiting our discussion of war to only those the U.S. fought. Instead, I want to suggest a wider arc of our interests and concern. For as African people, we are everywhere still on the battlefield for a better world.

And I find no better example for analysis, honor and inspiration than the heroic and history-changing Revolution of the Haitian people 1791-1804. It was and remains a unique liberation struggle as the only revolution in history won by an enslaved people against their enslavers and who went on to build a state, the first Black republic. And it is also important to recognize it is worthy of praise and emulation in its: abolishing enslavement; aiding South Americans in their freedom struggles; defeating four armies; offering an early and instructive model of guerilla warfare; contributing to an evolving Black Liberation theology; and restoring the Native American name, Haiti, to the country in remembrance and honor of the indigenous people wiped out by colonial genocide.

At the center of the sacred narrative of the Haitian Revolution and liberation struggle is the decisive meeting at Bwa Kayiman presided over

by the Hougan (High Priest of Vodou) Dutty Boukman and the Mambo (High Priestess of Vodou) Cécile Fatiman. On August 14, 1791, they called the people together at this historic site to conduct a sacred ceremony to free the people's minds; strengthen their will to struggle for freedom; reaffirm their rightful belief in a Beneficent God of liberation who would guide and assist them; and to commit all to wage the struggle for liberation until it was won—regardless of cost, casualties and the sacrifices required. They took an oath to live free or die – *viv lib o mouri!*

Certainly, a defining moment in the meeting was the offering of a prayer by Hougan Boukman which had at least three distinctive aspects and emphases: *spiritual grounding, ethical distinction; and cultural and political commitment.* And it is these emphases that offer us a framework for waging righteous and relentless struggle ourselves in our time. It is important to note here that Boukman uses a prayer and religious and ethical discourse to call the people to arms and struggle rather than simply political discourse. This is done, not simply because he is a priest, but also because he recognizes and respects the anchoring and uplifting power of religion, rightly conceived and practiced in the lives and struggle of the people, as Min. Malcolm, Rev. King and Dr. Bethune would also later teach us.

In his prayer, Hougan Boukman first pays homage to God as the Creator and as controller of sea and storm, calling him *Bon Die*, Beneficent God, who gives us light to see and has the power to control and change the world. And he uses sun, sea and storm as signs and metaphors for this awesome Divine presence and power. Moreover, he speaks of a liberating God who sees the suffering of the oppressed and will "guide and assist" them in their liberation struggle. Here he, Mambo Fatiman and the hundreds gathered embrace a liberating God, who enjoins them to wage a liberating struggle to restrain and subdue their oppressor and end his oppression of them.

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They, thus, contribute to an emerging liberation theology in the midst of the Holocaust of enslavement which inspires and resembles other similar theologies among African Americans in the U.S. and other parts of the Americas.

Hougan Boukman also draws a clear line of ethical distinction between the God of the oppressed Haitians and the god of the oppressor Whites. He states that “the god of the white oppressors commands crime, but our God enjoins us to do good works”. Those crimes, which the oppressor says his god allows, blesses and urges are imperialism, colonialism and the Holocaust of enslavement. And the good works, the Haitian people are called to do, are not only living righteous lives, but also waging a righteous and relentless struggle for freedom in Haiti and the world. Therefore, he reaffirms the ethical character of the liberation struggle, not only against oppression, but to achieve and enjoy a lived and practiced freedom.

Finally, Boukman clearly calls for a cultural and political revolution, a radical and reordering change of the hearts and minds and social situation of the people. He realizes that Whites came not only with claims of racial superiority, but also religious superiority with an imagined mandate to rule and ruin the lives of the people in the name of their god. He, thus, calls on the people to “throw away the symbol of the god of the white oppressor and listen to the voice of freedom which is in the hearts of us all”.

Even when Boukman is killed in battle and other leaders want to compromise, the masses will not listen to them and demonstrated disrespect for their begging for reform of a system that needed to be uprooted and destroyed. They would accept no partial freedom, second-

class citizenship, hypocritical promise of integration, and ill-defined equality. They knew that freedom is not given, but must, as Malcolm taught, be taken, won in struggle and exercised in defiant and self-determined ways. They, thus, reaffirmed their vow to fight to the finish, to live fully free or die. But they fought for life, not death, a life of freedom, justice, good of all kinds and a flourishing only achieved in full freedom, freedom from domination, deprivation and degradation and freedom to realize themselves in their fullness.

Thus, with torch and weapon in hand they became that historic spark that set the fields and forts of oppression on fire, destroyed the wealth and power base of their enslavers, and stood ready to receive and repel the three other armies that would attempt to halt and reverse the rise of the revolutionary tide they represented and raised. But the enslavers could not stop them, for these Africans, fighting for their freedom, would not be denied their right to be free, would not compromise or reconsider, turn back or barter away their divinely endowed rights of life and freedom or forfeit or deface the future of their children.

NOW, AS HAITI STRUGGLES TO END the brutal occupation led by the U.S. and to improve the lives and future of its people, let us stand in active solidarity with them, turning Boukman’s and our prayers into righteous, radical and revolutionary practice. May the people of Haiti eventually win their struggle, be free again and flourish. May their forest reappear and thrive. And may their waters run clean again, rise and return as refreshing rain, producing rainbow signs of a new history of Haiti and humankind.

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