

Haitian history – the story of Bois Caiman



A couple of years ago our Christian Men's Breakfast group was honored with the visit from a Haitian minister, in the US, at the time, to raise funds for church building in Haiti. He relayed some remarks to us, in effect saying that Haiti was under a curse because of a voodoo pact it's leaders had made to get their independence a couple of centuries ago. I hadn't thought too much about those remarks until recently, when I asked a friend who has some pretty direct connections to Haiti. He referred me to "Bois Caiman" and suggested a Google© search would shed some light on Haitian history, and the background of what our preacher guest had told us. I thought the matter is interesting—read this and judge for yourself.

According to <http://www.haitianmedia.com/index.php/42> (the website calls itself, "the #1 Haitian Journalist"):

Bois Caiman is site of the voodoo ceremony presided over by Dutty Boukman on August 14 1791. It is widely accepted as the starting point for the Haitian Revolution. Some scholars, however, have deemphasized the role of the Bois Caiman ceremony in sparking the Haitian revolution or have even gone so far as to question whether the event even took place. Whatever the ultimate disposition of these claims, no one can deny that the historical memory Bois Caiman has political and spiritual resonance for many Haitians to the present day.

Dutty Boukman was the papaloo, or vodoun priest, who conducted the ceremony at the Bois Caiman in late August,

1791, usually understood to have been the opening of Haitian Revolution. Boukman prophecied that Jean FranÃ§ois, Biassou, and Jeannot would be leaders of the slave revolt that would free the slaves of Haiti. Boukman is thought to have been of Jamaican birth.

Soon after the revolt began Boukman was apprehended by the French authorities and beheaded. The French publically displayed Boukman's head in a move caluculated to dispell his aura of invincibility that Boukman had cultivated (in keeping with the tradition of earlier Haitian rebels). While the rebellion was temporarily quelled in northern Haiti it continued in other parts of Haiti and soon became unmanageable.

According to Haiti Progres. This Week in Haiti,, Vol.16 no.20,
5-12;11 August 1998

(<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/43a/520.html>):

Exorcizing Boukman

The origin of the 13-year Haitian revolution is traced to a voudou ceremony held at Bois Caiman, near the northern city of Cap Haitien, on the night of Aug. 13-14, 1791 and presided over by a slave and voudou priest named Boukman. Now 207



years later, a band of right-wing Protestants has launched an evangelical crusade to posthumously convert Boukman to Christianity.

Pastor Berthony Paul, Pastor Joel Jeune, and preacher Gregory Joseph, a former police attache, have threatened to lead their congregations, which they call Haiti Protestant Vision, to Bois Caiman to hold a Protestant service to exorcise the spirit of Boukman.

But their crusade so far has been foiled by a coalition of Haitian popular organizations as well as by Haitian authorities. On July 8, the Ministry of Culture issued an order prohibiting the Protestants from assembling in the Bois Caiman area. The three Protestant leaders were arrested on Aug. 2 when trying to defy the order.

More recently, Pat Roberson stirred the controversy, as reported by ABC News. According to their online article, "Pat Robertson Blames Earthquake on Pact Haitians Made with Satan" (<http://blogs.abcnews.com/politicalpunch/2010/01/pat-robertson-blames-earthquake-on-pact-haitians-made-with-satan.html>)

On the Christian Broadcasting Network's "700 Club" today, after a lengthy interview with a missionary who talked about helping the victims earthquake in Haiti, Rev. Pat Robertson had some interesting thoughts as to why the earthquake struck the impoverished nation:

"And you know, Kristi, something happened a long time ago in Haiti, and people might not want to talk about it.

"They were under the heel of the French, uh, you know Napoleon the 3rd and whatever, and they got together and swore a pact to the Devil.

"They said, 'We will serve you if you'll get us free from the French.'

"True story.

"And so the Devil said, 'Okay, it's a deal.'

"And, uh, they kicked the French out, you know, with Haitians revolted and got themselves free.

"But ever since they have been cursed by, by one thing after another, desperately poor.

“That island of Hispaniola is one island. It’s cut down the middle. On the one side is Haiti on the other side is the Dominican Republican.

“Dominican Republic is, is prosperous, healthy, full of resorts, etcetera.

“Haiti is in desperate poverty.

“Same island.

“They need to have and we need to pray for them a great turning to God and out of this tragedy I’m optimistic something good may come. But right now we’re helping the suffering people and the suffering is unimaginable.”

Robertson’s tale stems from a legend that Jean Jacques Dessalines, who led the Haitian revolution against the French Army, entered into a pact with Satan disguised as a voodoo deity in exchange for a military victory, which finally happened in 1803.

Apparently, Pat Robertson has faced a good deal of criticism for expressing his position on the transactions as Bois Caiman.

And finally, there’s the post widely circulated on the Internet, and attributed to a doctoral candidate in Carribean History at the University of Florida. See <http://www.fivethirtyeight.com/2010/01/qualified-defense-of-pat-robertson.html> (I’ve confirmed this person exists, but I couldn’t find the source document from him, so I won’t mention his name):

Contrary to most people’s reactions to Pat Robertson’s remarks on Wednesday, his reference to Haiti’s “pact with the devil” did not appear out of thin air... [T]his was a reference to the Bois Caiman ceremony at the beginning of the Haitian Revolution in 1791. This is not strictly a mangling of

history on Robertson's part. His comments come straight out of a blend of theology and history that, at the grassroots, pervades Haiti's political discourse. Labeling the event at Bois Caiman a satanic pact touches on the most potent part of a vibrant oral tradition, a national myth that attempts to explain Haiti's relationship with God and the world...

...[As it was explained to me by others] Aristide, as a poor Catholic priest, was involved in Voudou and had used the more violent lwa to build his political support. Once the first two hundred years of independence ended with the bicentennial on January 1, 2004, the devil's hold on Haiti would loosen and Aristide's support would vanish. I heard similar stories from other residents of Petit-Goâve and later from Haitians in the United States. Voudou had been responsible for independence, and it was responsible for Haiti's inability to find a place on the world stage, for the reigns of the Duvaliers, for the ineptitude of Aristide, and for the natural disasters that plagued the country. All of this, they said, would change once the bicentennial came.