Image-i-nation

Africa/nation, Identity, and the Nation(s) Within[1]

by

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> At the time of the French Revolution there was a belief that the institutions of small independent towns, such as Sparta and Rome, could be applied to our great nations of thirty or forty millions of souls. In our own day a still graver error is committed: the race is confounded with the nation, and to racial, or rather to linguistic groups, is attributed a sovereignty analogous to that of really existent peoples.[2]
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> One important religious feature or practice that has not received the critical attention it deserves, and that is relevant to the understanding of the concept of nation in Africa and its instantiations in the New World Diaspora, is the existence, permanence, and indeed cultivation of the phenomenon of double or multiple religious and cultural loyalties -- across geographical entities.[3]

This essay will explore an alternative West African concept of nation -- of which Ernest Renan, in the quotation above, would probably not have approved. I will note how the term 'nation' traveled to the New World, and became an adjective that modified not only persons, but also language. This topic raises issues of identity within and beyond contemporary Western notions of nationhood and, conversely, problematizes the popular view of the 'Mother Continent' held by some in its diaspora who espouse the vision of a romanticized, uncontaminated African culture to which they are rightful heirs (a view which, incidentally, also ignores the obvious fact that Africa is a continent of numerous and diverse cultures, not a monolith).

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[2] Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?," in Renan, *The Poetry of the Celtic Races, and Other Studies*, tr. William G. Hutchison (*Qu'est-ce qu'une nation*, 1882; tr. London: Walter Scott, 1896): 61--62, repr. in *Nations and Identities: Classic Readings*, ed. Vincent P. Pecora (Oxford : Blackwell, 2001): 163.

[3] Olabiyi B. Yai, "African Diasporan Concepts and Practice of the Nation and Their Implications in the Modern World," in *African Roots / American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas*, ed. Sheila S. Walker (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001): 246.

Clearly, this is a broad topic. However, I shall limit my West African examples largely to La République du Bénin (where I was a Fulbright Fellow in 2007--2008), especially as its ancient kingdom, Dânxomɛ,[4] is of great interest for having disseminated many aspects of its culture overseas via the transatlantic slave trade. In particular, I will refer to cultural markers of power in Bénin, those of religion and political dominion, remembering that separation of state and religion was foreign to traditional Dânxomɛ, to many subsequently exiled overseas and, later, to those colonized in France's Dahomey. Indeed, as Béninois scholar, Olabiyi Yai, reminds us "African worldviews and religions inform all other aspects of African life"; and, he continues, these "are expected to provide conceptual tools for other disciplines."[5]

I will close with a brief discussion of language and the Caribbean imagination -- in the New World location where, it is important to recall, the first captive Africans were brought -- and an example of its literature; for even today, understanding the disjuncture between the Western nations and traditional West African nations offers a key analytical tool with which to reexamine postcolonial literary practice in both the Old and the New Worlds.

La République du Bénin

Bénin has a particular presence in the Atlantic world: it is touted as the home of Vodou/Vodun,[6] a complex of West African religious practices brought by Fongbe-speaking people to the Caribbean (especially to Haiti and certain parts of Cuba), to Brazil and to the United States' Deep South. Bénin is home to forty-three different languages: in the New World. Some of these languages have made an impact on the culture and colonial languages that succeeded them, hinting at the presence of several ethnic groups and their cultural practices (especially Fongbe, the language of southern Bénin, which figures strongly and significantly in Vodou liturgy). Though it has had its share of colonial impositions, unpleasant governments, and a few military coups, the country is oddly stable when compared to its neighbors -- Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Chad, Burkina Faso, and so on. Remarkably, it is also the only West African country where an autochthonous religion, Vodun, is officially recognized. Nonetheless, Bénin is under-researched: given some infrequency in scholarly

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[4] This is the proper spelling in Fongbe, predominant language of southern Bénin and of that ancient kingdom. I use the Fongbe whenever it is possible. Please note that the Fon are a people and Fongbe is their language.

[5] Olabiyi Babalola Yai, "Introduction," *African Studies Quarterly* 1.4, special issue on "Religion and Philosophy in Africa" (1998): 1.

[6] In the Americas, the word 'voodoo,' which one might see in older documents, has been retired for the more favored spelling, 'Vodou.' It is variously spelled in Africa. I shall use 'Vodun' for the African varieties and 'Vodou' for the American, unless it is a direct quote. Though it appears to have arrived in the Caribbean via the Fon, its African range is and was much wider.

efforts, the same older sources are recycled in the literature again and again (in works by Herskovits, Maupoil, Bascom, Courlander, Verger, and so on) in a scholar's version of an island economy where inhabitants survive by taking in each other's laundry. This situation wants correction.

Historians will recognize Bénin, not as the source of the famous Bénin bronzes, but as the former French colony of Dahomey which was once dominated by the southern Fon kingdom of Dânxomɛ. Further, at the same time as European political philosophies seemed to be leaning in favor of devotion to monarch rather than republican polity, the Royaume de Dânxomɛ was also consolidating itself around an absolute monarchy. Robin Law's article, "'My Head Belongs to the King'," notes that this consolidation process required "consideration also of the sphere of ideology," for the transatlantic slave trade had profoundly affected the political order.[7] Where before the province of the previous Allada state was "an enlarged kin-group comprising a federation of essentially autonomous related lineages" limiting royal authority, Dânxomɛ based its authority on "the right of conquest rather than consanguinity or inheritance," and stressed a profound level of "absolute and unmediated authority of the king over his subjects" as the article title, from a Dânxomɛ citizen's statement, "My head belongs to the king," indicates.[8] Says Law:

> In Dahomian tradition [...] it is explained [as] alluding [...] to a royal prohibition of the *decapitation of deceased Dahomians*, being connected with a reform of burial practices, involving a ban on the beheading of corpses [...] attributed to an early king of Dahomey, Wegbaja.[9]

The prohibition's real intention was to prevent "veneration of the deceased by his own kinsmen,"[10] thus concentrating or monopolizing "ritual [religious] as well as political and judicial power in the hands of the monarchy."[11] Indeed, among Yoruba/Nagô[12] whose religion influenced that of the Fon, the seat of the soul is in the head.[13] Thus, the Fon citizen literally owed his head (the vessel of his

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[7] Robin Law, "'My Head Belongs to the King': On the Political and Ritual Significance of Decapitation in Pre- Colonial Dahomey," *Journal of African History* 30.3 (1989): 399.

[8] Law, "'My Head Belongs to the King'," 399.

[9] "'My Head Belongs to the King,'" 400, my italics. Wegbaja was Dânxomɛ's mythological, but not necessarily actual, "first king."

[10] This idea was also confirmed by one informant, Martine da Souza, whom Law and I have both variously used. Martine explained to me that the deceased could "let you know," if they were to be venerated; that is, if they were to become vodun.

[11] Law, "'My Head Belongs to the King'," 401.

[12] Nagô: both ancient Dânxomɛ and today's Bénin refer to Yoruba living in the kingdom/present nation as such.

[13] Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro--American Art and Philosophy*. (New York: Vintage, 1983): 4--16, 47.

soul and its contents) to the monarch-as-*patria*, rather than to his own lineage. As in Europe, nation became hostage to the imaginary of its absolute ruler.

This absolute authority was further secured through an ideology that was both political and crafted through religious metaphor. Edna Bay details the politically-driven manipulation of religious practice in Dânxomɛ under King Tegbesu (1740--74), demonstrably the Royaume de Dânxomɛ's first genuinely imperial leader, and his kpojito, Queen Mother Hwangile, long *before* the modern concept of the nation state had currency in Africa.[14] As European pressures arising from an increasing demand for slaves in its Caribbean and American colonies impacted upon Tegbesu (who still made a tidy profit from its activity), he and Hwangile (his kpojito or, roughly, Queen Mother) significantly rearranged traditional theologies and made sacerdotal arrangements synchronize with their secular counterparts in order to buttress royal power. "Core symbols," to use archaeologist Christopher Fennell's term, were intentionally manipulated by royalty rather than simply altered by the passage of time.[15] For example, the insistence on a distant *über-Gott* in the 'person' of Mawu (once a female spirit, she became recast as male) was the end result of one such manipulation that persists into present-day Vodun;[16] it sprang from Tegbesu and Hwangile's elevation of the divine twins Mawu/Lisa so as to dominate the spirits of traditional, pre-Dânxomɛ religion and to mirror their own shared rulership.[17]

If priests (or laypersons) resisted change, the Royaume of Dânxomɛ simply sold these dissidents overseas: according to Kristin Mann, "the ruling elite in the Fon kingdom of Dahomey [sic] used the slave-trade to exile political and military rivals and were themselves occasionally exiled through it."[18] With them went their out-of-favor, older beliefs and/or already creolized ideologies, both of

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[14] Edna G. Bay, "Belief, Legitimacy and the Kpojito: An Institutional History of the 'Queen Mother' in Precolonial Dahomey," *Journal of African History* 36.1 (1995): 1--27. The 'Kpojito' was not the king's wife but one of the preceding generation, chosen among his predecessor's wives. In Tegbesu's case, Hwangile really was his mother.

[15] Christopher C. Fennell, *Crossroads and Cosmologies: Diasporas and Ethnogenesis in the New World* (Gainsville FL: U P of Florida, 2007).

[16] Hounhougan Ghendehou, interviews with author from March -- June 2008. 'Hounhoungan' is a high priest.

[17] See Edna G. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard; Gender, Politics, and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey* (Charlottesville VA & London: U of Virginia P, 1998). One might also consider the impact of Christian missionary activity and its monotheisms which used, as V.Y. Mudimbe points out, an "adaptation theology" that looks into "traditional systems of beliefs for unanimous signs or harmonies which might be incorporated into Christianity in order to Africanize it without fundamentally modifying it." See his *Parables and Fables* (Madison WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1991): 13. In that theology, the Dânxomɛan Mawu becomes a synonym for the Judeo--Christian Almighty.

[18] Kristin Mann, "Shifting Paradigms in the Study of the African Diaspora and of Atlantic History and Culture," in *Rethinking the African Diaspora: The Making of a Black Atlantic World in the*

which then took root and were further adapted to the lives and cultures of captive Africans (in some cases, including Amerindians) in the Americas.[19] In effect, the seeds of Fon-based religions and philosophies (already 'impure' in the sense of reflecting multiple contributions, especially from the neighboring Yoruba) were regularly being sewn in parts of the Americas through the regulation of thought in Bénin. Key, here, is the idea that mixed ideation did not start in the New World, but is characteristic of African Old World thought as well.

'Nation' and Nation[20]

In an optimistically titled chapter of *The Black Atlantic*, "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity," Paul Gilroy queries the same issues raised in Renan's famous statement. Gilroy says: "black intellectuals have persistently succumbed to the lure of those romantic conceptions of 'race,' 'people,' and 'nation'," whereas nationality, and the emphasis given to "conspicuous differences of language, culture, and identity which divide the blacks of the diaspora from one another, let alone from Africans, are unresolved."[21] This does not mean that Gilroy is an unabashed occidental nationalist; rather, he suggests that an overriding identity appears to trump the more intimate one: "the dependence of those black intellectuals who have tried to deal with these matters on theoretical reflections derived from the canon of occidental modernity -- from Herder to Von Trietschke and beyond -- is surely salient."[22] Skipping over the black Caribbean, black Latin America and Brazil, Gilroy focuses on the US ("America") and Britain when discussing the diaspora. He cites W.E.B. DuBois' admiration for Bismarck for having spectacularly united a "mass of bickering peoples" and "foreshadow[ing] [...] what American Negroes must do."[23] He then describes Martin Delany and Frederick Douglass, as those "whose lives and political sensibilities can *ironically* be defined through crisscrossing of national boundaries," but who seem "to share the Hegelian belief that the

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Bight of Benin and Brazil, ed. Kristin Mann & Edna G. Bay (London & Portland OR: Frank Cass, 2001): 3.

[19] Robin Law notes that Tegbesu's father and royal predecessor, "Agaja," had "many priests and worshippers of these cults, sold out of the country as slaves." The cults referenced were those of "Sakpata, the earth deity, and the gods of the rivers and the silk-cotton trees." See Law, "Ideologies of Royal Power: The Dissolution and Reconstruction of Political Authority on the 'Slave Coast,' 1680--1750," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 57.3 (1987): 322.

[20] With profuse apologies to scholar Olabiyi Yai, I use quotation marks for the West African word, and leave the statist word unbracketed, only to distinguish the two.

[21] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge MA: Harvard U P, 1993): 34.

[22] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 34.

[23] *The Black Atlantic*, 35.

combination of Christianity and a nation state represents the overcoming of all antinomies."[24] Clearly, Gilroy's statements affirm a tension between identity and occidental nation.

On the West African side of the Atlantic world, Dr Olabiyi Yai -- Nagô, French educated, a Babalaou (Ifa priest) born in Bénin, and now Chairman of UNESCO's Executive Board -- offers an Afro-cosmopolitanism as counter-paradigm for the kind of boundaries of nation drawn by Europe during the African continent's colonial period. Not unlike Gilroy, Yai interrogates the idea of nation which Europe *imposed* artificially on colonized lands, separating peoples in and from their former homelands. Yai qualifies his rejection of this western project by citing Africans' routine border crossing, cultural blending, and multiple affiliations -- most frequently found in West African religious practices and all, he asserts, testifying to African cosmopolitanism as well as to the limitations of the nation state. Indeed, even Gilroy himself dismisses the idea of pure Africanisms blended only in the New World; rather, he suggests an inclusive, heterogeneous Atlantic culture that evolved over time.

Few nation states in the West have offered Africans and their descendants a desirable alternative to a strong, resistant affiliation with one another.[25] Not as citizen, *citoyen*, but as members of a 'nation' -- that is, "[religiously inspired or affiliated] peoplehoods [...] which link them with specific places in Africa," -- captive Africans and their descendants were hard pressed to renounce their ancestors.[26] Rather, in the early struggle for a better life, they were often sustained by their remembered rituals (including homage to their ancestors) and remembered beliefs.[27] Because Africa's polytheistic practices suggest that multiple allegiances do not necessarily equal subsumed or divided ones, and that lateral sets of allegiances do occur, Yai suggests a paradigm for New and Old World identification with 'nation' as a non-statist marker that coexists with an interest in the nation state, rather than an annoying mindset which modernism must eradicate. Further, 'nation' as a framework for African alter-identity serves as a paradigm for a critique of the nation, as Gilroy and Yai have shown in their interrogation of occidental modernism.

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[24] *The Black Atlantic*, 35, my italics.

[25] J. Lorand Matory, "'The English Professor of Brazil': On the Diasporic Roots of the Yoruba Nation," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41.1 (January 1999): 72. According to Matory, Gilroy suggests that "shared cultural features [among] African diaspora groups generally result far less from shared cultural memories of Africa than from these groups' mutually influential but culturally neutral responses to their exclusion from the benefits of the Enlightenment legacy of national citizenship and political equality in the West."

[26] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 75.

[27] In Old World Vodun, as suggested in fn[3] on page 3 of this essay, one's deceased relative can become a spirit or Vodun. Thus ancestors themselves have a place beyond mere lineage (Martine da Souza, Interview with author on 2 March 2008). In addition to this spiritual influence, there was interchange between later arrivals, both captive and non-captive (Brazil is exemplary in this regard).

It is important to remember, too, that if the historical Africanity of the Old World has been denigrated by colonialism, it has also been aggressively denied or hidden by plantation culture in the Americas. In the diaspora and in Africa, as Greg Carr puts it, "the severing of African memory from the African cultural and social body" is secured, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o tells us, by "planting European memory in Africa."[28] At the site of the earliest New World colonies, the Caribbean, this same denial/occultation fuels its writers' and artists' efforts to re-member that Africanity. Aimé Césaire's *Tempest*, says Joseph Khoury, uses Sycorax to signify the African context in the Caribbean; and, he explains, Caliban challenges Prospero with "[Caliban's] recuperation and full affirmation of his mother, a metaphor for history."[29] Further, Khoury points out that, to counteract the fact that "Prospero degrades her" in celebrating Sycorax' death, Césaire has Caliban declare

> (Dead or alive, she was my mother, and I won't deny her!): Anyhow, you only think she's dead because you think the earth itself is dead [....] It's so much simpler that way! Dead, you can walk on it, pollute it, you can tread upon it with the steps of a conqueror. I respect the earth, because I know that it is alive, and I know that Sycorax is alive. Sycorax. Mother.[30]

Bajan poet and scholar, Kamau Brathwaite, refers to Sycorax as the woman "who still carries within herself, [...] in a submerged manner, the very essence of the native culture," and who holds on to "the secrets of a possible alternative culture for the Caribbean."[31] Surely this submersion is an apt metaphor for the occultation of Africanity on the historical stage, in and out of Caribbean texts, as well as the poet's own journey in his creative work. Moreover, Brathwaite locates Sycorax as the one who provides Caliban (standing, in turn, for the displaced, colonized African) with the key to liberation in "his own mother's language." [32] Thus Brathwaite calls attention to "nation language," Sycorax and, by extension, Caliban's mother tongue:nation language not only gives a more

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[28] Greg Carr, "Translation, Recovery, and 'Ethnic' Archives of Africana: Inscribing Meaning beyond Otherness," *PMLA* 127.2 (March 2012): 361. "Planting European Memory in Africa" is the subtitle of a chapter in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2009).

[29] Joseph Khoury, "'The Tempest' Revisited in Martinique: Aimé Césaire's Shakespeare," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 6.2, special issue on "Postcolonial Revisions of the Early Modern" (Fall--Winter 2006): 28.

[30] My translation. The original French version is quoted in "'The Tempest' Revisited in Martinique: Aimé Césaire's Shakespeare," 28.

[31] Kamau Brathwaite, "An Alternative View of Caribbean History," in Brathwaite, *The Colonial Encounter: Language*, ed. Anniah Gowda (Mysore: U of Mysore, 1984b, 44), quoted in Silvio Torres--Saillant, "The Trial of Authenticity in Kamau Brathwaite," *World Literature Today* 68.4, special issue on "Kamau Brathwaite: 1994 Neustadt International Prize for Literature" (Autumn 1994): 705.

[32] Brathwaite, "An Alternative View of Caribbean History," quoted in Torres--Saillant, "The Trial of Authenticity in Kamau Brathwaite," 705.

authentic identity to its speakers; it also gives them a creative voice which colonially imposed languages do not and cannot offer.

From the Transatlantic Trade to European Colonialism

As in other West African kingdoms, in Dânxomɛ slavery was good business. Much of it was conducted with Brazil, Cuba, and the Anglophone and French colonies of the Caribbean. Transported to the New World, captives' commodified bodies were uniformly and colonially labeled by European slave dealers and their customers as "African." As merchandise, these same people were further sorted, renamed and recategorized (often misidentified) by New World colonial slave traders and given group names that arbitrarily related to ethnicity, place/port of origin, and so on. A not uncommon practice among Africans and slaveholders alike was to choose "ethnic or place name designations as surnames. Thus we read of [in Latin America] Pedro Angola, married to Victoriana Angola; Francisco Biafra, the husband of Luisa Manicongo; Lucia Arara, the wife of Pedro Congo, and so on."[33] Africans also gathered and got organized "among themselves on the basis of ethnicity all over the New World," for they were designated members "of specific sociocultural groups, or what could be called in some cases ethnicities, and what in point of fact were called *nações* in Brazil."[34] The word *nações* in Portuguese, *naciones* in Spanish, or *nations* in English, was altered semantically and conceptually in its non-European, creolized context; enslaved Africans "responded to enslavement as members of *nações*, often rebelling on the basis of ethnicity, form[ing] cooperative ventures such as the *irmandades* (brotherhoods) on that same premise."[35] Long before the nineteenth century, in Mexico and Peru, "the view of Africans as members of particular *naciones*, like the Brazilian *nações*, was fully elaborated."[36] In short, "Africans in the New World were very much aware of who they had been in the Old World, and engaged patterns of

[33] Michael A. Gomez, "African Identity and Slavery in the Americas," *Radical History Review* 75 (Fall 1999):117.

[34] Gomez, "African Identity and Slavery in the Americas," 113. Among those from Dânxomɛ -- or those who were transported as captives of Dânxomɛ -- who appear in the New World were 'Jeje' (Fon in Brazil), Arada or Arara (originally referring to the pre-Dânxomɛan kingdom of Allada from which Dânxomɛ royalty came), Nagô (the Fonbe denomination for Yoruba living within their borders, still used in Bénin today), Lucumi (another name for Yoruba), and Mina (see Law, "Ethnicities of Enslaved Africans in the Diaspora" for a further discussion, as this is both the name for a language in southwestern Bénin *and* some suggest, refers to the infamous slave port, Elmina, located in present-day Ghana). An important Haitian Vodun spirit, Gede may very well reference the Gedevi, or children of Gede, who were conquered by the Dânxomɛan kings when they took Agbome as their capital. The Gedevi whom I met in Bénin still honor a spirit named "Gede," though s/he/it is quite different from the Haitian Gede and far more chthonic.

[35] Gomez, "African Identity and Slavery in the Americas," 113.

[36] "African Identity and Slavery in the Americas," 116.

collective behavior that sought to recapture and reinforce Old World realities."[37] The words they chose (*nation, nações*, *naciones*) were affected by the overall conceptual field in which these terms were fitted and by the contexts of use in which they appeared. However, "nation" -- ethnicity/locale plus African-based religion -- as applied to persons from the African continent did not translate well into an encroaching European-derived statist discourse.[38]

By the end of the nineteenth century, the international slave trade officially ceased, and the Berlin Conference (1884--85) divided up Africa into distinct spheres of European and (briefly) Ottoman commercial influence. European-imposed boundaries cut through the older, more fluid borders of nation as defined by Africans. In 1889, Dânxomɛ became Dahomey; in 1894, the last Dânxomɛan king, King Behanzin, was sent into exile on the Caribbean island of Martinique via Marseille "with his five wives, his favourite son, Ouanilo, and a daughter, Kpo Tassa."[39]

In 1904 Dahomey became a colonial province of French West Africa, part of *France Outre-Mer*. Then, while earlier missionaries had made a negligible impact in Dânxomɛ, what Kenyan writer and critic, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, has famously called the "colonisation of the mind," began in earnest through standardized education, culture, and language imposed from the outside, and administered by the metropole.[40] In time, and more so as a generation of Western-educated native elites and returning World War II soldiers agitated across the continent for separation from the metropole, the nation *state* appeared as the model of modernity and nationhood.[41] When independence became a reality in the mid-twentieth century, that same generation of elites, acculturated into the imposed culture and well-disposed to doing business with their former colonizers, took over. Dahomey became an autonomous republic separate from French West Africa in 1958. In 1960, Dahomey became fully independent; and, in 1975, it was renamed the People's Republic of Bénin, then, in 1991, the Republic of Bénin, all the time with elites hewing to the model of the nation state. Although from the early stages of colonialism, colonial 'subjects' were acculturated -- some might say, also bullied -- out of their allegiance to prior flesh-and-blood ethnic, linguistic, and religious

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[37] "African Identity and Slavery in the Americas," 118.

[38] Olabiyi B. Yai, "African Diasporan Concepts and Practice of the Nation and their Implications in the Modern World," 246.

[39] Behanzin was allowed back to the continent, to Algiers, "where he soon died of pneumonia, on 10 December 1906." See Peter Morton--Williams, "A Yoruba Woman Remembers Servitude in a Palace of Dahomey, in the Reigns of Kings Glele and Behanzin," *Journal of the International African Institute* 63.1 (1993): 115..

[40] Famously, Ngũgĩ's *Decolonising the Mind* elaborates on this. He is emphatic about the effects of colonization. In the Central Africa of V.Y. Mudimbe, the emphasis is on missionary activity in the Bantu-speaking parts of what is now the Congo. The major impact was achieved after colonization, however.

[41] Dr Jonathan Allen, personal communication with author (3 January 2012)

identities, a number of ordinary Béninois retained identification with the 'old nation.' Furthermore they adhered to nation-state citizenship as merely the latest layer over a palimpsest of more traditional identities, as a kind of conceptual antidote to being identified as merely a subject of the former metropole. Among elites and in the urban areas of the New World, the idea of 'nations/nações/naciones' seems to have disappeared with emancipation.[42]

African nation/nation language

Clearly, extrapolating a counter-hegemonic definition of nation is fraught with difficulty. Multiple loyalties consistently worry political monocultures, in or out of the West. If nothing else, however, the forced exchanges noted earlier in this essay and used by Tegbesu and Dânxomɛ's subsequent kings to enforce political, cultural, and religious orthodoxy, shaped the kind of Vodun culture and the kind of Fongbe[43] brought by Vodun's devotees to the colonies, first to Saint Domingue (now Haiti) and then to other parts of the Americas. We know that in the Old World, colonialism alienated local people from their own cultures, people, and native languages; and though it did not necessarily wipe out local languages, colonialism denied them the means of becoming fully themselves through the expansive use of language. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has said:

> Language [...] also the producer of a community [...] enables humans to negotiate effectively their way into and out of nature and indeed that which makes possible their multifaceted evolution. It is in that very negotiation that a community comes to know itself as a specific community different from others.[44]

In Bénin today, there is a curious absence of literature in the local African languages -- curious because the oral tradition is so rich.[45] Béninois novels, and to some extent, books of poetry, are few and overwhelmingly written in French. On the other hand, in the Americas, more recent Caribbean culture has a rich literary tradition, despite the loss of African languages. Bénin's Old World deficit is oddly reminiscent of the situation in the early Anglophone Caribbean colonies, where work

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[42] The old, pre-nation state definition survived only among the peasantry in the most remote places. See also Edward Kamau Brathwaite's discussion of Miss Queenie in *Kumina, Savacou Working Papers* 4 (Mona: University of the West Indies, 1982), 56--57, 59.

[43] For example, classic Fongbe, spoken by Gedevi, is different from the way non-Gedevi, Fongbe speakers use the language.

[44] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "Europhonism, Universities, and the Magic Fountain: The Future of African Literature and Scholarship," *Research in African Literatures* 31.1 (Spring 2000): 2.

[45] See Olabiyi Babalola Yai's critique of Herskovits's *Dahomean Narrative* and its distortions of that rich oral tradition in "The Path is Open: The Herskovits Legacy in African Oral Narrative Analysis and Beyond," *PAS Working Papers* 5, ed. Jonathon Glassman, Jane I. Guyer & Mary F.E. Ebeling (1999), http://www.africanstudies.northwestern.edu/docs/publications-research/working-papers/yai-1999.pdf (accessed 2 April 2015).

written in the English of the day was elevated (some might say "affected") but bloodless, if we are to believe Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott's scathing review of the Anglophone Caribbean collection, *Caribbeana: An Anthology of English Literature of the West Indies, 1657--1777*. Walcott's "Frowsty Fragrance" notes acidly, among other things, that ancestors of today's Caribbean writers were illiterate and disenfranchised and, at that time, that the literature of the master was revealed, but that of the masses was not.[46]

What African captives transported into New World colonies before the infamous "Scramble for Africa" was the idea of "nation" as a means of self-identity and psychic resistance; and if we are to believe Mann they were already accustomed to a flexibility -- a way of adapting -- at 'home' (certainly in West Africa).[47] Indeed, Yai asks us to consider that flexibility as sourced in an inherent cosmopolitanism[48] in West Africa's concept of nation, similar to Law's pre-Dânxomɛ "enlarged kin-group," a polyethnic but autochthonous cultural adaptation that a centralized Dânxomɛ began tampering with in the eighteenth century.[49] Further, we can speculate that not only the polyvalent, African version of nation confounded Europe's colonizing project, but so did West Africans' well-known polylingualism.[50] To the extent that African 'nations' were constituted on the basis of common language, clearly many enslaved Africans taken from the western Slave Coast in the eighteenth century would have had in effect a choice of ethnicities, being able to communicate with both Akan-speakers (and/or Ga-Adangme speakers) and Gbe speakers.[51] Just as clearly, such identification might include religious affiliation.

Despite exile, then, we see linguistic traces of Dânxomɛ (and a wider Africa's) presence in Haiti, Cuba, Brazil, and perhaps even in the US south. Yoruba also arrived with Nagô captives, and classical Yoruba still appears in the liturgy of Brazil's Candomble.[52] Even earlier, when the original

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[46] Derek Walcott, "A Frowsty Fragrance," *New York Review of Books* 47.10 (15 June 2000): 57-61.

[47] Mann, "Shifting Paradigms in the Study of the African Diaspora and of Atlantic History and Culture," 7.

[48]Yai, Olabiyi B. "African Diasporan Concepts and Practice of the Nation and Their Implications in the Modern World," 248. Interestingly, the pre-nation state city states of the republican ideal in Europe also touted a cosmopolitanism that was then left in the dust when the 'real' nation state began to emerge. See Maurizio Viroli, *For Love of Country: An Essay on Patriotism and Nationalism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

[49] Law, "'My Head Belongs to the King'," 399.

[50] If we believe critics like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, both still confound Europe and the United States' neo-colonizing projects.

[51] Robin Law, "Ethnicities of Enslaved Africans in the Diaspora -- On the Meanings of 'Mina' (Again)," *History in Africa* 32 (2005): 255.

[52] Dânxomɛ regularly raided Nagô/Yoruba communities for 'stock' to sell overseas. Classical Yoruba persists in the Candomblé houses of Brazil, according to C. Daniel Dawson, scholar and former director of the Caribbean Cultural Center in New York City (personal communication,

inhabitants of Allada (Alladanou), then of Agbome (the Gedevi) were conquered by very aggressive Fon in what is now Bénin, a more formal but older Fongbe was transferred to the New World as dissidents and the defeated were sent overseas via slave ships; and, combined with some Bantu languages and Amerindian influences, Fongbe appears in Haitian Vodou's liturgy.[53] To this day, it structures Haitian Kreyol expression among the common folk of that region. Indeed, though African languages were fragmented and submerged in the overseas colonies -- to use Kamau Brathwaite's metaphor of Sycorax -- they were not without substantial influence.

I will close briefly with some remarks on literature, as the contrast of (some might say the conflict between) a secular, modernist understanding of a political identity from an older, multi-layered ethnic and religious identity has significance regarding culture in Dânxomɛ's diaspora, and may be paradigmatic for still other African cultures. In this regard, Kamau Brathwaite writes of Haitian writer René Depestre, whom he sees as suffering a certain mental colonization:

> it seems even more acute with francophone 'colony' writers than with the anglophones -- not that we don't have our own too acute problems too -- because of the pressure, presence and reality/effects of the French metropolitan policy of physical/cultural assimilation.[54]

As evidence of Depestre's at least partially colonized condition, Brathwaite cites the Haitian author's *Rainbow for the Christian West* in which he uses the infamous Dânxomɛan slave port and Beninois tourist town of Ouidah[55] as a synedoche for the transatlantic trade and in order to testify to the fact of Haiti's denial of its own history during the time when 'Papa Doc' -- François Duvalier -- was in power. Brathwaite quotes Depestre's comments (in the Joan Dayan translation) regarding the denial of slavery, describing them as "brilliant witty negatives of irony":

> The Black Slave Trade did not take place. It is the invention of a mad historian. There is no small beach in Africa named Ouidah where cargos of black cattle set out towards America[...]

2004). Dawson has also noted that Candomblé houses regularly sought -- and received -- sacerdotal staff from Africa throughout the period of slavery in Brazil.

[53] Timothy Landry, initiated Vodou priest, in on-going conversations with author (2008).

[54] Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "Helen & The Tempest-Negre: René Depestre's *A Rainbow For the Christian Wes*t," *Caribbean Quarterly* 30.1, special issue on "*Poets and Poetry*" (March 1984): 44.

[55] In the 1990s, Ouidah was recreated as a monument to the transatlantic slave trade -- not without inaccuracies. It is an odd mix of testament to slavery's terrors and invented nostalgia for a monolithic African homeland.

> Their desolation [about enslavement] did not cross the sea. [...] They were not branded with a red-hot iron. No one ever counted their teeth or felt their testicles. They were never probed, weighed, and hefted![56]

For Brathwaite, Depestre's use of irony (above) is not enough; what bothers him most is Depestre's use of French: Haiti's colonizers spoke French; their Haitian slaves and descendants spoke and speak Kreyol, whose grammatical structure, while an artifact of Dânxomɛan influence and ancestry, is also infused with its speakers' folk culture. As creolized languages persist, the Caribbean writer, according to Brathwaite, is compelled to visit Caribbean culture in a new way; and to use the colonial language, Brathwaite says, indicates a negation of the folk culture which figured so importantly in the early achievement of Haitian independence in 1804. Though Depestre deploys Haitian "vodoun" culture to enable his narrative, the use of French creates "a problem of centre, style and final allegiance" and "despite the generosities of at least the first 3/4 of *Arc* [*Rainbow*]," he has never been able "to come to grips with all that creole (nation) involves; above all with the question of language."[57] Lacking a solution to what a counter-definition of nation involves -- that would be evident in the culture of Kreyol -- the postcolonial Caribbean writer must return to this problem again and again. Finally a question which arises out of Depestre's and many Caribbean writers' years in exile (and goes beyond the chronology of Depestre's work) is: whether in or out of exile, what language does the Caribbean writer use? Is such a dilemma, then, ultimately -- and only -- about language or is it also about imagination? Can one even separate the two?

Although Brathwaite analyzes Depestre's relationship to this dilemma in 1984, he had coined the term "nation language" even earlier.[58] Significantly, and even before he wrote "History of the Voice" in 1979), Brathwaite described the formation of what many linguists call "creoles," but which Brathwaite himself later dubbed "nation languages." These are, as Maureen Warner-Lewis tells us,

> largely stocked by the vocabulary of a European language, even though a noticeable segment of their lexicon derives from Native American, African and Asian sources. Meanwhile, *their syntax or grammar -- that is, the sequencing of words in sentences and idiomatic formulations -- is as strongly influenced by the syntactic practices of western and west-central African languages as by the conventions of western European languages* Creole languages then, embody features which attest to their origin in the

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[56] René Depestre, *Rainbow for the Christian West*, trans. Joan Dayan (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), 211, cited in Brathwaite, "Helen & The Tempest-Negre," 40.

[57] "Helen & The Tempest-Negre," 45.

[58] Sources vary: even the *Encyclopedia of Latin American and Caribbean Literature*, which listis the term and credits Brathwaite with its origin, does not provide a date for that creation. See Gay Wilentz, "Nation Language," *Encyclopedia of Latin American and Caribbean Literature: 1900--2003*, ed. Daniel Balderston & Mike Gonzalez (New York: Routledge, 2004): 379.

> economics and cultural contacts among Africa, Europe and the Americas.[59]

The presence of nation language in Haiti is not, as scholar Lois Wilcken would have it, a retention of African language features as "keepsakes."[60] Rather, this presence is an integral part of the complex pattern of arrivals and departures, new alliances, births and, sadly, deaths that accompanied the journey and subsequent interactions of captive Africans and, later, common laborers from Africa who created Caribbean culture and its language(s). Critical to Brathwaite is not only the question of how one aligns with Caribbean culture, but also how one uses its language, particularly in creative work. To Brathwaite, Depestre appears to temporize, to be linguistically unwilling to relinquish the idols of European culture. Haiti is a creolized state. It is not France:

> Michael Dash points out that it was not until 1955 that we find Depestre [...]'tentatively indicating that an important process of creolisation had taken place in Haiti' [...]. The point is, that Depestre, despite Dessalines, despite Price--Mars despite perhaps too Jacques Roumain, and the so-called revolution of 1946, was still (if Dash is right) having to set out *tentatively* on his own to discover himself and his culture [...] a journey which culminated in **Arc-en-ciel** (1967).[61]

Depestre's journey, Brathwaite believes, was incomplete: his "ikons" (called "idols" above), which are still those of the New World Afro-elite -- Mozart, Van Gogh, Helen -- do not include any mention of Charlie Parker, Erzulie, Nok Sculpture, to pick a few at random from Brathwaite's lists.[62] The concept of *nasyon*, as distinct from nation state, is not carried in the language or culture of the colonizer, nor is it simply a transfer, intact, from Africa to the Americas. While Africans also combined ideas across ethnic groups, the process of creolization in the Americas -- especially as African languages that went there were sometimes lost or, at best, not retained intact -- rendered

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59 Maureen Warner-Lewis, "The Rhythms of Caribbean Vocal and Oral-Based Texts," in *Caribbean Culture: Soundings on Kamau Brathwaite*, ed. Annie Paul (Kingston: U of the West Indies P, 2007): 56, my italics.

60 Lois Wilcken, "The Sacred Music and Dance of Haitian Vodou from Temple to Stage and the Ethics of Representation," *Latin American Perspectives* 32.1, special issue on "Religion and Identity in the Americas" (January 2005): 195. She remarks that Vodou's songs "are in Haitian Kreyol, with a generous salting of Fongbe, Yoruba, Kikongo and other *keepsakes of Voudou's African ancestry*" (195, my italics). First, to refer to the appearance of complex tonal languages as "keepsakes" appears patronising and not especially aware of the ways in which language changes. Secondly, while Yoruba and central African Kongo pracitices have contributed to vodou, other practices -- Santería, Candomblé, the more specific Kongo-derrived religions -- should not be confused with the Old World African religion, Vodun.

61 Michael Dash. *Literature and Ideology in Haiti 1915-1961* (London; Macmillan, 1981): 176, qtd in Kamau Brathwaite, "Helen & The Tempest-Negre," 45. It is notable that the rainbow is symbolic of Damballah, the old pre- and post-Dânxomɛan spirit, Dan. In Haiti that symbol becomes associated with a metaphorical bridge to Guinée.

62 Kamau Brathwaite, "Helen & The Tempest-Negre", 46.

rich and varied cultures which were not carbon copies of Old World ones. Slow to acknowledge the creolization process, Depestre, Brathwaite insists, should have taken a huge step and *written* in nation language, the language needed to reflect the cultural reality or realities that produced it.Instead he seems to have decorated his work with folk materials pertaining to *nasyon*, but kept at least one foot in the imposed culture.

Indeed the word and the context in which 'nation' and its variants appear in the Caribbean continue to carry specific cultural matter. In reference to Haiti, Lois Wilcken notes that the "word *nasyon*, variously pronounced *nachon* or *nanchon* in some parts of Haiti, peppers the song repertory of Haitian Vodou."[63] She goes on to "re-center" the concept, however, in the metropole, seeming to skip over crucial details of its history: "both English and Haitian Kreyòl (Creole) adopted the French *nation*, which the last derived, in turn, from the Latin *nasci*, to be born."[64] Yet contrary to what Wilcken asserts, neither *nasyon*, *nachon* or *nanchon* was born in imperial Rome nor the Caribbean; and here enters the confusion of political status with multiple and, I would venture, deeper identities. Wilcken correctly states that "enslaved Africans of colonial Haiti adopted the concept into their evolving spiritual beliefs and practices and adapted it for their own revolutionary ends," but she would benefit from locating that process more precisely, not *solely* in the Caribbean: "Successive generations of Vodou practitioners, largely descendants of the enslaved black laborers, have refined the word *nasyon.*"[65] Indeed, Haitian devotees used the image of St. Patrick to represent the spirit, Dan (who then gradually became Damballah) and thus protected their Old World -- in some cases pre-Dânxomɛan[66] -- beliefs. In what is now Bénin, Dânxomɛan beliefs were themselves 'creolized,' in the sense of representing combined beliefs from the Yoruba (called N̂ago if living in Bénin) and the Alladanou, before and after Fon conquests by Tegbesu's predecessor, King Agaja, as well as under Tegbesu.[67] In Abomey itself, otherwise incongruent symbols or phrases were sometimes adapted and reshaped to fit the need to adapt a practice, to fit the understanding of one or another group, or to protect concepts which would otherwise alarm masters and other powers. The worship of pre-royaume Sakpata became ameliorated by the inclusion of concepts of Shosanna, a less politically threatening incarnation of the same spirit in Yoruba terms, the symbolic purchase of enemies' vodun after the latter's defeat (Hu, sea spirit of the Huedans comes to mind), and the

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[63] Lois Wilcken, "Vodou Nation: Haitian Art Music and Cultural Nationalism," *Latin American Music Review* 28.1 (Spring--Summer 2007): 161.

[64] Lois Wilcken, "Vodou Nation," 161.

[65] Wilcken, "Vodou Nation," 161--62.

[66] That is, beliefs retained from the period before Dânxomɛ was consolidated as a kingdom under Fon kings. I am thinking, in particular of Tegbesu.

[67] Edna G. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard*, 56—60.

adaptation of the myth of the ancestral king as offspring of a leopard and an Allandonou Princess.[68] Cultural borrowing and incorporation of other *nasyon*'s symbols, icons, and practices had been going on -- and is still continuing -- in the Old as well as the New World.

Perhaps the definition of nation slips once more through our fingers: Michael Largey (the author whose book Wilcken reviews) conflates *nasyon* with class in the case of "free mulatto proprietors," a statement which Brathwaite, above, flatly contradicts.[69] However, Wilcken is correct in stating that nation carries a religious inflection, and her review suggests that aspects of Vodun, "Vodou music," served as a focus of resistance to colonialism. She herself seems to suggest disagreement with Largey's association of *nasyon* with free mulattos: she refers to a neo-colonialist occupation on the part of the US (1915--34), where the US marines actively collaborated with mentally colonized Haitians to suppress Vodou practice at the time of US occupation, especially with Roman Catholic members of the "mulatto" class .[70]

Let us conclude by mentioning another Depestre novel in which the more familiar nation state features as a key referent. Published in 1979, René Depestre's *Le mât de cocagne* (in a later English version, translated as *Festival of the Greasy Pole*) deals with the resistance of fallen *mulatto* politician Henri Postel to the regime of 'Papa Doc' Duvalier (1957--71). Key to that resistance is Postel's climb up a thinly disguised *poteau mitan* (the center pole in a Vodou temple) with the aid of powerful Vodou spirit, Iroko (who also figures to this day in Béninois Vodun belief and practice). The pole is simultaneously read as the central pole on the Haitian flag, topped with the cap (one wonders to whom the head beneath belongs?) of Haitian revolutionaries. No doubt, as a Marxist and, as Brathwaite has indicated, a French-educated intellectual, the writer was ambivalent about what the Bajan author has called "vodoun" culture;[71] yet in his creative work, Depestre did not seem to be able to reference Haitian nationhood without it. With his mulatto protagonist, like Largey's suggestion of a mulatto *nasyon*, Depestre stops short of mentioning West Africa: was he even aware of how deeply the roots of his "voudon" images reached? (All the way back to Dânxomɛ and before, in my opinion.) Depestre published this book well after the first stirrings of the sixties ' African independence movements, with their attendant concepts of modernism and, in

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[68] Wives of the Leopard, 82, 84, 92; Robin Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving Port;1727 – 1892*. (Athens: Ohio University Press; Oxford: James Currey, 2004*):* 90. Law dates this from his own fieldwork there in 2000.

[69] Wilcken, "Vodou Nation," 162.

[70] Janna Evans Braziel, "Re-membering Défilée: Dédée Bazile as Revolutionary Lieu de Mémoire," *Small Axe* 9.2 (September 2005): 74.

[71] Brathwaite, "Helen & The Tempest-Negre," 34. Brathwaite first introduces the idea of vodou as a culture on p. 34; but he scatters the concept throughout the essay. Brathwaite also usest he spelling "vodoun" throughout his essay. I use the quotation marks to indicate that it is an alternative spelling as, currently, "Vodun" is used in West Africa; "vodou," in Haiti.

several cases, discomfort with--and rejection of--traditions like vodun. Though hardly opposed to independence for African nations, what Brathwaite suggests is that Depestre's lack of awareness, if genuine, was part of the obliterating effect of colonial French education and its claim on its subjects' allegiance to the French nation over *nasyon*. I suggest that these issues plague the postcolonial world to this day and beg for more discussion.

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