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(RE)MEMBERING HAITI THROUGH MIZIK KLASIK

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The boundaries around what is Haitian and who is Haitian are under constant debate. Although we might understand notions of authenticity to be constructed, they still power the interactions and fire the imaginations of musicians throughout Haiti. The three brief ethnographic sketches that I present here demonstrate the fluid boundaries between Christian musicians and the music of Vodou, highlighting the ways in which Haitians negotiate these boundaries through a range of musical activities known collectively as *mizik klasik*. In doing so, they reconceptualize, reconstitute, and (re)member Haiti.

The Haitian Kreyòl term *mizik klasik* denotes a genre that incorporates both traditional melodies and Western European-style classical music into a Haitian art music repertory. It stretches from classrooms to performance spaces, and elicits a variety of reactions from students, teachers, and parents. The contemporary practice of Vodou is an aspect of Haitian culture that many Haitian Protestants, in particular, find discomforting. Yet as scholars have noted, composers of *mizik klasik* often insert references to Vodou into their work.¹ For contemporary Haitian students and their parents, these references can strain their relationship to the genre. As a dynamic and highly diverse set of spiritual practices, Vodou is an enduring portion of the nation's history and present. It has inspired rhythmic and melodic motifs in several other musical genres. However, its place within the "respectable" genre of *mizik klasik* is a point of contention. The consistent discrediting of religious practices with African origins has done lasting harm, and for some adherents of Protestantism or even those with membership in the figurative Church of Respectability, Vodou is the "evil" counter to their "good" faith.

A repertory that draws from elements of Vodou ceremonies necessitates difficult choices and cautious negotiations by musicians and audiences, who are caught between an array of contemporary beliefs and a heritage of *mizik klasik*. Repertory choices influence who participates within ensembles and,

more generally, who receives formal music education. By programming Vodou-referencing music, ensemble leaders open sites of cultural debate. Students, teachers, and parents can choose to engage or reject *mizik klasik*. These choices do more than reflect particular cultural or religious sensibilities. They also (re)member and remake Haiti.

I invoke author Toni Morrison's concept of rememory in order to think critically about the distance between my interlocutors and their perceptions of Haitian history and culture. In her novel *Beloved*, Morrison uses the device of rememory to describe the experience of remembering a memory.² It is a difficult reunion of the self with intentionally discarded knowledge. Haiti and its boundaries are undergoing a difficult, incessant reconstitution, the same sort of reunion or rememory described by Morrison. In addition to rememory's unifying properties, the word's gerund form—remembering—is particularly useful for thinking through the complex relationship of musicians with their nationality and belief systems. My own conversation partners have proven themselves careful students and sculptors of the meaning of Haiti, both locally and in a global context. In asking, through my research, who is Haiti and who is Haitian, I defer to the rich knowledge bestowed by their negotiations of identity. I also recognize the necessity of community in what has become highly individualized musical practice: to (re)member is to submit one's self to a congregation, whether that be *mizik klasik* or Haiti itself. To (re)member is to claim a group identity for the self, and to represent that identity.

Several means of identification are at play in the following ethnographic vignettes. For example, a composite of my own identities might include Black American, pianist, accompanist, and volunteer at l'École de Musique Sainte-Trinité. L'École de Musique Sainte-Trinité, hereafter referred to as EMST, is something of an institution in Haiti. Its influence stretches over Port-au-Prince, and its shadow over the rest of the country. Its legacy has informed the struggles and paths of numerous other Haitian music schools that followed its creation. As such, its camp is an ideal place to think through the origins and destinies of the practice of *mizik klasik*. It is fitting that the following three boundary negotiations took place at EMST summer camp in Cange, Mirebalais.

I began taking research trips to Haiti in 2011, under the auspices of a collective of music teachers now known as BLUME-Haiti (Building Leaders Using Music Education). These teachers volunteer for several music schools throughout Haiti, working with each program to supply instruments and staff-intensive summer music camps. For my first trip, I traveled to Jacmel to work with l'École de Musique Dessaix-Baptiste.

During subsequent summers, I would work with Cercle de Musiciens Chrétiens Capois (CEMUCHCA) in Cap-Haïtien and EMST. With each of these programs, I teach music theory classes and give piano lessons. Much of my ethnographic data has been culled in the downtime between classes and lessons, speaking with Haitian and foreign instructors as well as students about their motivations to study and perform this repertoire.

The first source of friction between sensibilities that I present from the camp in Cange was actually imported from the capital. This past summer (2014), a special initiative took place in several music camps, funded in part by the Swiss government. A *rara* band based in Pétionville, an affluent suburb of Port-au Prince, toured several music schools, giving workshops and performances. *Rara* has been historically understood as a rural Lenten street festival, during which participants perform spiritual devotion to various *lwa* (Vodou deities) through song and dance.³ The *bann a pye* (foot band) Follow Jah is depicted in the following image, which was taken in advance of their arrival at the camp. The publicity poster was hung inside the Zanmi Lasante (Partners in Health) campus where the EMST camp takes place annually. This event was marketed exclusively to campers, and not publicized throughout the wider Cange community outside the high walls of the campus.

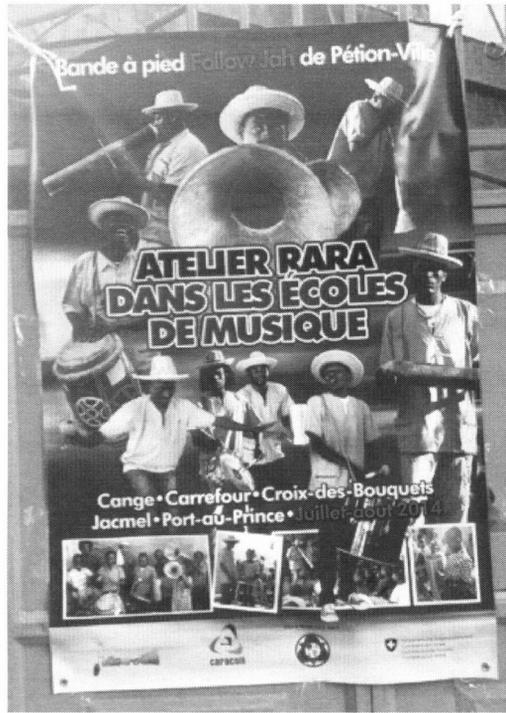
The press releases for this tour give the impression that Haitian children need to be brought in touch with their “roots” and that *rara* is the way to do it, thus situating *rara* as an authentically Haitian practice. One quote, in particular, illustrates this point. I have provided it here along with my own translation:

Nous sommes heureux d’offrir aux musiciens de Follow Jah la possibilité de faire la promotion de la culture haïtienne devant les étrangers qui viendront à Cange, et d’enseigner aux enfants présents l’utilisation de ces instruments liés à la tradition musicale haïtienne.

(We are happy to offer the musicians of Follow Jah the opportunity to promote Haitian culture before foreigners who have come to Cange, and to teach the children present the use of these instruments in the Haitian musical tradition.)⁴

Here the press release emphasizes the pedagogical aspect of these *rara* workshops. Foreigners are mentioned, but children are the focus, particularly in terms of the presentations. Follow Jah was to be the vehicle for this particular sort of cultural education. When they arrived at the St. Trinité camp in Cange, Follow Jah demonstrated what they term *rara modenn*, or contemporary *rara*, a *rara* that is unmoored from firm

FIGURE 1.
FOLLOW JAH PROMOTIONAL
POSTER.
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR



ties to Vodou. This is *rara* for fun's sake, without the spiritual work that might make some audience members uneasy. The tone of Follow Jah's forty-five minute presentation matched this intention. *Rara modenn* is also contemporary *rara*, *rara* of the present—another interesting rhetorical move to distance this music and the activities of the band from Vodou, which its detractors often represent as a field of practices situated exclusively in the past.

Many Haitians publicly express the view that *rara* and, by extension, “rootsy” practices that might include *Kanaval* and Vodou are quintessential Haitian culture. Privately, however, they might contradict that idea, allowing more room for a broader range of cultural activity and religious identity in a conception of the Haitian nation. Gage Averill theorizes that

Haitian identities are being formed partly in the representation of Haitians and things Haitian to an external world (primarily to a Euro-American audience), in the misrepresentations that arise between these cultures (e.g., exoticism, primitivism, demonization, and ethnic stereotyping), and in the projection of these representations and misrepresentations back onto Haiti.⁵

This sort of nuance in identity formation is instinctively understood by most of my interlocutors, but difficult to articulate in encounters such as the ones that follow. One teacher and administrator pulled me aside a few days in advance of Follow Jah's presentations in Cange. She wanted to make sure that I, as an ethnomusicologist, understood the importance of *rara* in Haitian culture, and that I would be ready with my camera. Ever the educator, she asked seemingly naïve and leading questions of the performers at the presentations, though I was unsure if this was for my benefit or for the students'.

Follow Jah deployed several mechanisms, both verbal and auditory, to foreground Vodou's historical context rather than its contemporary reality. The "modern" way that Follow Jah framed their activities creatively maneuvered around the different audiences that they would greet during their tour, and the diversity within those audiences. For example, EMST is a program affiliated with the Episcopal Church of Haiti. Many of its students readily identify as Christian, but Christianity is not a prerequisite for participation. Accordingly, audience members were diverse in religious affiliation and spiritual practice. If Follow Jah had attempted to eliminate Vodou from *rara*, they would risk accusations of inauthenticity. And if they had not addressed the topic proactively, it would have emerged during the Q&A period. In fact, it still did, as a priest asked yet another suspiciously naïve question regarding the relationship of *rara* to Vodou. The leading question seemed intended to force the performers to make an unequivocal statement separating *rara* from Vodou, but instead, their leader launched into a long history of the genre and its relationship to spiritual praxis. By emphasizing the historical context of Vodou, Follow Jah sidestepped the thick web of tensions around Haitian musical culture.

The scruffy band, a group of about twenty young men accompanied by their tour manager, a French ethnomusicologist, completely changed the soundscape of the camp for the few days they were in residence. Their rehearsals coincided with the camp's ensembles, and I would hear the nasal *vaksin*, horns made of bamboo, hocketing between my own playing of the choir's parts. Each of their wind instruments was tuned to a single pitch, so they always rehearsed in concert and at maximum volume. The students did their best to feign nonchalance, as if I was the only person walking around campus in search of the source of this sound, but they dropped all pretenses Saturday morning when it was time for the workshops. Several drummers skipped their rehearsals in order to sit and listen to the same session over and over again, enthralled by the performers, who were uniformly dressed in loose-fitting chambray shirts and straw hats intended to give a *peyizan* (peasant-farmer) air to this group

from one of Port-au-Prince's wealthiest suburbs. After the weekly Sunday concert ended, students and volunteers raced out of the back doors of the chapel to follow the band, now attired in orange polo shirts, into the rain as they played.

I'd like to contrast this rendering of a *rara* separated from its spiritual work with another "cleaned up" performance. During the third week of camp, the combined choruses performed "Marassa Éyou," a song by mid-twentieth-century Haitian composer Werner Jaegerhuber (1900–1953), who was known for adapting folk songs. Programming Jaegerhuber's music necessitates careful negotiations of the boundary between sacred text and secular performance, and his work tends to trigger (re)membering processes among Haitian musicians.

I wondered what resonances this song had for its theologically diverse performers, especially because during the previous summer, I had witnessed an uproar in Jacmel over the programming of another song that, like "Marassa Éyou," contained references to Vodou but lacked a specific spirit invocation. In that case, members of the ensemble actually refused to perform, and the conductor was forced to alter his original program. In this case, Jaegerhuber's song would be performed, but not without a cautious negotiation of its meaning on the part of the performers. When I asked the conductor, he emphasized the song's focus on the poor, and connected this to many students having personal experience with poverty. He then turned around and proceeded to reiterate this explanation to the students, perhaps to avoid any confusion on the matter. I have provided the original transcription of the song's text here and provided a translation, in order to illustrate the following discussion.⁶ Note that I have left the word "marassa" untranslated, because it remains unclear what is appropriate.

Moin cé pitite, moin pas gain caï pou moin
 Marassa éyou,
 Moin pas gainnin papa, moin pa gainnin maman
 Marassa éyou
 Éyou, éyou, éyou
 Marassa éyou
 Moin pas gainnin papa, moin pas gainnin maman
 Marassa éyou
 I am a child,
 I don't have a home
 Marassa éyou
 I don't have a father,
 I don't have a mother

Marassa éyou
 Éyou, éyou, éyou
 Marassa éyou
 I don't have a father,
 I don't have a mother
 Marassa éyou

The song's text lends itself to more than one interpretation, and I certainly received more than one when I began to ask around. One respondent was certain that the text WAS an invocation, that the singer is begging the twin *lwa* known as *marassa*. Another was ambivalent about its actual meaning, making a fascinating general assessment: "Well, you know it's old. And all that old stuff is Vodou. It's Haitian." A third transformed "éyou" to "and you" and claimed that it was a discussion between orphaned twins, a sort of "Brother, where art thou?" if you will. Perhaps more significant than the possible meanings is the work that these explanations perform. They are interpretive performances.

Just a couple weeks later in Jacmel, prominent soprano Karine Margron performed the same song with the orchestra at L'École de Musique Dessaix-Baptiste. An insistent murmur ran through the audience, and Margron claims that she could see the proverbial pearl-clutching from the stage.⁷ Perhaps most important here are the pressures that performers feel to signify on an ideal of respectable Haitianness. These significations and performances are also part of the boundary negotiations occurring between Haitians about what constitutes Haiti and Haitianness.

It would be disingenuous to insinuate that music camps in Haiti are always tiptoeing around the idea of Haitianness. As a matter of fact, the aforementioned rehearsal of "Marassa Éyou" contrasts to what happened with the previous week's concert, which featured the choral music of Sydney Guillaume. Guillaume is a Haitian American composer in his early thirties. Born in Port-au-Prince, he left the country with his family at age eleven to be raised in Miami, and earned a degree in composition at University of Miami's Frost School of Music. Now based in Los Angeles, he visited the EMST summer camp in 2013 as part of his first trip back to Haiti. He brought his own original compositions for the choral groups, who instantly set about these pieces with the air of handling important business. Guillaume's pieces are unabashedly contemporary and often feature lyrics in Haitian Kreyòl, with Haitian thematic material.

In particular, the lyrics for "Blogodop" pull us full circle into a celebration of *rara*. This translation is provided by Guillaume and his collaborator, Louis M. Celestin.

Bliye touman mizè lakay ou
Vin danse ake tout kè'w
Vin soulaje tout fant konsyans ou
Vin ogmante filing nan bann nan
Vin devide tout mwèl nan kò'w
Vini danse, vin kadanse
Forget your worries at home
Come dance with all your heart
Come and soothe all the cracks of your conscience
Come and add to the groove of the band
Come and bare your soul
Come dance, come feel the rhythm.

The performers fully committed to Guillaume's repertoire, smiling and joking at cultural insider references. In the week leading up to this performance, I heard snatches of his melodies from every corner of the campus, so intent were the students on delivering this message accurately. Two tenors pushed and pleaded until they were allowed into this advanced ensemble because they did not want to miss the opportunity to sing his music. And after so much murmuring about the *dyaspora* composer, the audience warmly received him as one of their own. More cameras and phones and tablets were raised to catch each subsequent song, and the chapel was imbued with the sense that we were witnessing something valuable, that we were hearing Haiti's heritage.

These very different environments—a presentation, a rehearsal, and a concert—demonstrate a few of the central tensions in the performance arena of *mizik klasik*. In performing these repertoires of Haitianness, several choices are available; for performers, it can mean deciding genres, determining whether or not to perform, and selecting repertoire. By any means, and by all these means, Haiti is constantly being remembered and remade in a sonic constitution that uses all its parts: Vodou, Christianity, but most importantly, people.

Notes

- ¹ Largey, *Vodou Nation*.
- ² Morrison, *Beloved*.
- ³ McAlister, *Rara!*
- ⁴ "Haïti – Culture," *Haiti libre*.

- ⁵ Averill, “‘Se Kreyol Nou Ye’/‘We’re Creole,’” 169.
- ⁶ This transcription uses an older Haitian Kreyòl orthography, common to Werner Jaegerhuber’s time.
- ⁷ Margron, interview.

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