

## CHAPTER THREE

# Gade nan mizè-a m tonbe: Vodou, the 2010 Earthquake, and Haiti's Environmental Catastrophe

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In overthrowing me, you have cut down in Saint-Domingue only  
the tree of liberty. It will spring up again by the roots for they  
are numerous and deep. – Toussaint L'Overture, 1803

I say your mother has called upon Bwa Nan Bwa  
Don't you see the misery I'm going through?  
Oh, my mother has called upon Bosou Bwa Nan Bwa  
Don't you see the misery I'm going through?  
Resign yourself Oh Resign yourself, Adyw!  
Don't you see the misery I've fallen into?  
– Vodou song to Bwa Nan Bwa

**I**n Alan Lomax's compilation of Haitian music – *Alan Lomax in Haiti*, released in 2009 by the Smithsonian Institution – there is a song performed by Francilia, a *Rèn Chante* or song leader in Vodou, dedicated to the *lwa* or spirit *Bwa Nan Bwa* (Tree in the Woods), asking him to look upon the misery his people are mired in. Francilia's plaintive Vodou song, with its poignant faith in the powers of the *lwa* to bring succour to their devotees in their wretchedness, reminds us that Haiti's faith in Vodou – already tested by the nation's severe environmental predicament – entered a period of crisis in the wake of the January 2010 earthquake and its aftermath of death, crippling injuries, and epidemic. Her song sadly underscores the reality that Haiti's severe deforestation, the loss of 98 per cent of its trees – of the *musician trees* and sacred *mapous* that filled its once abundant forests and formed the natural habitat for *Bwa Nan Bwa* – had been the most tragic expression of the economic, social, and religious quandary the nation of Haiti had faced before the January 2010 earthquake.

In the discussion that follows, I trace a somewhat circuitous route – from Haiti’s environmental predicament (the fate of its trees), through the ongoing cholera outbreak and the crisis of faith unleashed by the January 2010 earthquake, and back to the trust in the *lwa* conveyed by Francilia and her song to Bwa Nan Bwa – seeking to bring to the fore the connections between Haiti’s environmental crisis, its contribution to the deepening of the impact of the 2010 earthquake, and the nation’s foundational religious faith. In this I will be guided by emerging theories of postcolonial ecologies, which seek to analyse the history of environmental degradation in formerly colonized societies, its representations through art, literature, film, religion, and other cultural manifestations, and the environmental discourses that have emerged through decolonization projects. Postcolonial ecological theory is particularly interested in examining the impact of globalization and neoliberal policies on societies emerging from colonialism with degraded ecologies, and the ways in which the burden of colonial legacies of racism, exploitation, plantation agrarian development, tourism, to name a few, continues to impact postcolonial societies such as Haiti. Such an approach allows us to place the present crisis facing Haiti – ‘the longest neocolonial experiment in the history of the West’, as the late Michel-Rolph Trouillot described it (1990, 5) – within a complex and nuanced environmental framework. I seek to show how the new crisis ushered in by the earthquake manifests the vulnerability of postcolonial peoples like those of Haiti living in deeply compromised environments, how the environmental crisis has been linked to the development of Haiti’s cholera epidemic, and how the earthquake and to a lesser extent the epidemic have affected that vital relationship between *lwa*, serviteur, and the land in Haiti. Paul Farmer, in *Haiti after the Earthquake* (2011), describes the condition of Haiti after the disaster and the cholera outbreak as ‘acute-on-chronic’, interpreting the acute scourges of earthquake, cholera, and hurricanes as compounding the chronic conditions created by ‘five centuries of transnational social and economic forces with deep roots in the colonial enterprise’ (3). These chronic conditions have resulted in a deeply compromised environment that undermines the nation’s resilience to both acute and chronic conditions.<sup>1</sup>

It is impossible to understand the nuances of Haiti’s post-earthquake predicament without acknowledging the devastating role played by the too-aggressive deforestation of its land in pursuit of the development of

1 In a review of Farmer’s book, Anthony P. Maingot argues that ‘in many ways, the year 2010 could well be said to represent a watershed in Haitian history’, with the compounding tragedies coming ‘on top of ongoing structural and systemic problems that have bedeviled the island for the past two centuries. The ravages of overpopulation, environmental devastation, inadequate food and health services, and perhaps most harmful of all, the inability or refusal of the political class to think and act outside its own personal and partisan interests did not start in 2010’ (2013, 228).

sugar plantations in the eighteenth-century Caribbean and the crippling burden of foreign debt the young nation assumed in exchange for international recognition after gaining its independence from France early in the nineteenth century, a debt paid partly through trade in precious tropical woods. Deforestation – through its role in the loss of Haiti’s topsoil, and with it the possibility of bringing agricultural production to anything approaching sustainability – has resulted in the nation’s acute vulnerability to natural disasters and exposure to outbreaks of diseases such as cholera, from which thousands have died since October 2010. Haiti’s acute deforestation illustrates, materially and symbolically, the close links between Haiti’s history of colonialism, racism, and environmental degradation, the high level of environmental risk faced by its population, and the future of the religion that has guided the nation’s history since its Revolution.

The immediate and extensive press coverage of the fate of Port-au-Prince following the January 2010 earthquake barely alluded to Haiti’s environmental crisis as a contributing factor to the deepening poverty that made facing the dire emergency brought on by the earthquake such a seemingly insurmountable burden. It did not require much depth of reporting, however, before the world got a glimpse into how central environmental concerns were to Haiti’s worsening economy and the crucial role deforestation had played in limiting the country’s potential to develop a stronger economic foundation, as subsequent reports have highlighted. Haiti had already figured prominently in Jared Diamond’s *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive* (2005) and David Guggenheim’s award-winning documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) as emblematic of the condition of a nation in environmental collapse. Both described Haiti, not as a victim of ‘a complex web of progress-resistant cultural influences’, as some argued after the 2010 earthquake (Brooks, 2010), but as ‘the canary-in-the-coal-mine of the Anthropocene’,<sup>2</sup> a dire warning to other nations of the dismal impact of acute deforestation in an era of climate change, global warming, and rising sea levels. Barely a few months before the earthquake, a report from the International Crisis Group, noting Haiti’s dangerously low capacity for resilience, had concluded that ‘reversing a decades-long trend of environmental destruction [was] essential to Haiti’s development, social and economic stability and, ultimately, security’ (Crisis Group, 2009). They argued that ‘concerted national effort and international support [were] required to stop deforestation and land erosion; reduce energy shortages and charcoal dependence; address rural and urban pollution, including the absence of a solid waste collection and recycling system and

2 The ‘Anthropocene’, a word coined in the 1980s by ecologist Eugene Stoermer and popularized by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen, is a geological term denoting the period of significant human impact on Earth’s ecosystems, accomplished chiefly through the burning of fossil fuels and leading to acute deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and climate change. See Paravisini-Gebert, 2015 and Chakrabarty, 2009.

strengthen an inadequate capacity to cope with natural disasters' (Crisis Group, 2009). Haiti, in short, lacked the conditions necessary for resilience, as measured through 'the magnitude of shock the system can absorb and remain within a given state, the degree to which the system is capable of self-organization, and the degree to which the system can build capacity for learning and adaptation' (Folke, et al. 2002). As the largely ineffective efforts to 'rebuild' Haiti after the earthquake have shown, this lack of resilience has emerged as a central obstacle to recovery.

The history of Haiti's deforestation could be traced – if one so wished – to the community of *boucaniers* (hunters and meat smokers) that first settled the western coast of Hispaniola and the Île-de-la-Tortue in the seventeenth century. The extent of the damage they caused, however, was negligible when compared with that inflicted on the land by the widespread cutting of trees to make way for the development of sugar plantations, a damage exacerbated after independence by the increasing fragmentation of small family farms as the population grew. The nation, nonetheless, entered the twentieth century with over 60 per cent forest coverage, making the catastrophic conditions prevailing today (less than 2 per cent forest coverage by 2006) a twentieth-century development with roots in the US Occupation (1915–34). In the American imaginary, Haiti emerges from that occupation as a despoiled, deeply Africanized terrain inhabited by zombies and other otherworldly creatures whose population is separated from modernity by their acute poverty and their faith in Vodou. But the Occupation, with its insistence on despoiling Haiti of its resources to meet its foreign debt left the island's environment in shambles, its ecological balance in a fragile state. It only reasserted the 'slow violence' that had been perpetrated on Haiti's land and people as a 'resource extraction nation', what Rob Nixon, in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, defines as 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all' (2). It also underscored the ultimately devastating failure of the state in providing alternatives to cooking fuel and its cupidity in allowing extensive logging operations to supply the urban demand for charcoal. The slow violence of the attack on Haiti's land – external as well as internal – has left the viability of the nation itself and the survival of its people marked by an urgency that seemed unimaginable in continental settings until the January 2010 earthquake brought it to millions of worldwide households with access to CNN's non-stop broadcasting. It is impossible to separate, however, the painful images accessible to the world since the destruction of Port-au-Prince from an environmental crisis that has brought the rural population of the country to the edge of desolation, initially pushing displaced farmers towards the fertile plains of the Artibonite in Haiti's central meseta – where thousands died during the disastrous floods of 2008 – and from there to Port-au-Prince and their catastrophic encounter with the 2010 calamity. The rapid growth of the population of Port-au-Prince in the past two decades can

be directly linked to the nation's ecological decline.<sup>3</sup> With only 2 per cent of the land covered in forests, some previously fertile fields are now desert-like. A significant portion of the topsoil has been washed to sea, where it has contributed to the destruction of breeding habitats for marine life bringing the small fishing industry into crisis. The topsoil is irrecoverable, as it takes 10,000 years to renew, and the resulting decreases in rainfall, which have significantly reduced agricultural production and access to clean drinking water, are irreversible in places where there is not enough topsoil left for the roots of new trees to dig in. This environmental deterioration has been the leading push factor propelling migration from rural areas to Port-au-Prince.

Given the centrality of the relationship between the land and Vodou, it is easy to understand how this process of protracted assault on the land would have important repercussions on the nature and practice of religious belief in Haiti. The land grants to former slaves made possible by the triumph of the Haitian Revolution resulted in a rural nation of subsistence farmers working small family farms. Organized around small villages that functioned as extended family compounds, known as *lakous*, they opened a space for the preservation of African-derived Creole religions (see Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 2011, 118–19). The growth of Vodou practices in the *lakous* meant that its rituals and beliefs grew out of the needs and concerns of specific rural communities and deepened the links between *lwa*, *serviteur*, and the land. Recognizing the importance of trees and forests for the sustainable husbanding of the land, in Vodou, the *lwa* or spirit known as *Loco*, the chief of *Legba's* escort, is known as 'he of the trees'. He governs the tree or temple centre-post (the *poto-mitan*) that serves as channel for the *lwa*, the divine life forces of Vodou, to enter into communion with their human *serviteurs* through the phenomenon of possession (see Paravisini-Gebert, 2005, 182). In *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, Maya Deren speaks of *Loco* and his consort *Ayizan* as the moral parents of the Haitian people, the first *oungan* and *manbo* (priest and priestess of Vodou), whose chief responsibility is that of imparting to humans the knowledge of *konnèsans* on which the future of the community depends, drawing belief and ecology into one vital connection. They are also Vodou's first healers, as it was *Loco* 'who discovered how to draw their properties from the trees and to make the best herbal charms against disease' and *Ayizan* who protects against malevolent magic (Deren, 1953, 148). [AQ\_01] Together they represent the central belief in Vodou that spiritual maturity rests on the understanding of the necessary balance between cosmic forces and the natural world.<sup>4</sup>

3 See Maingot for a discussion of how 'the tragic collapse of peasant agriculture in Haiti', the result of 'the disastrous erosion and loss of arable or at least exploitable land available to farmers because of rampant deforestation' has made an alternative source of employment as well as emigration 'absolutely necessary' (2013, 234–35).

4 For a detailed discussion of *Loco* and *Ayizan* and their importance to herbal knowledge and healing in Vodou, see Paravisini-Gebert, 2005.

I would like us to retain this vital connection at the forefront of our minds as I turn to the impact of the earthquake of 2010 and its aftermath of epidemic on religious practices in Haiti. Haiti's decreasingly fertile Artibonite Valley – an increasingly vulnerable environment – offers the most substantial hope for some measure of food security in Haiti, despite its slow recovery from the floods that devastated lives and crops during the 2008 hurricane season. Dependent on the waters of the Artibonite River – Hispaniola's longest – the region is an important producer of rice and other staples of the Haitian diet. The Artibonite and its valley, however, represent a deeply compromised environment. Deforestation along its trajectory has severely impacted the quality and quantity of the water flowing through the Artibonite River, and many of its tributaries in Haiti have dried up, leaving entire villages dependent on the Artibonite itself for most of their water needs. There has been a marked decline in the amount of fish in the river – now only tilapias can be found – and its banks no longer provide a suitable habitat for the American crocodile, which used to be abundant on its shores. Due mostly to inadequate waste management systems throughout Haiti, the Artibonite is heavily contaminated with high levels of bacteria, thus contributing to the lack of clean drinking water in the Artibonite District and beyond and leaving the population acutely vulnerable to water-borne illnesses. The Valley sustained what former President René Préval described as 'catastrophic' destruction in 2008, when four deadly storms battered the region in quick succession, causing fatal mudslides and widespread flooding (to which Haiti is particularly vulnerable because of the extreme deforestation of the hillsides) that led to 800 deaths and one billion dollars in damages, including the destruction of most of the region's infrastructure. The dire conditions caused by the summer storms of 2008 – thousands of injured and traumatized people living in makeshift shelters, with no food, water, or medical supplies – repeated themselves following the 2010 earthquake, when 160,000 people fleeing the destruction of Port-au-Prince were forced to resettle temporarily in the Artibonite Valley, an increase in the regional population that strained resources and compounded challenges in the removal of waste and the availability of clean drinking water, food, and cooking fuel.

The conditions in the Artibonite Valley in the early months following the earthquake in Port-au-Prince provided the ideal environmental conditions for an epidemic, conditions directly linked to environmental degradation. Fears of outbreaks of diseases such as typhus or cholera had been expressed within hours of the January earthquake, as bacteria can spread quickly amid malnourished, poor populations among whom diseases like malaria and tuberculosis are already endemic. The Artibonite Valley, slowly recovering from the 2008 floods and after January 2010 home to rising numbers of refugees from Port-au-Prince, became the epicentre of a cholera outbreak brought to the island, most ironically, by Nepalese peacekeeping troops that had arrived in central Haiti in October 2010, following upon a cholera outbreak in their homeland. Located at Meille (or Méyè), a relatively remote village about 2 km

south of Mirebalais in central Haiti, the MINUSTAH camp that housed the Nepalese troops stood above a stream that flowed into the Artibonite River, which became contaminated through a faulty sanitation system that turned the Meille tributary into a vector of cholera during the early days of the epidemic.<sup>5</sup> Given the environmental conditions in the Valley seven months after the earthquake, and with an increasing number of people dependent on the Artibonite for drinking, cooking, and bathing water, it was, as Dr Paul S. Keim, the microbial geneticist whose laboratory eventually determined the link between the Haitian and Nepalese cholera strains, described it, 'like throwing a lighted match into a gasoline-filled room' (Sontag, 2012, A1). The outbreak quickly overwhelmed existing health facilities in the area. More than 9,000 people had died from the ongoing outbreak and thousands more sickened as of December 2014, making this the worst such outbreak in the world in decades.

Ethan Budiansky, writing within weeks of the diagnosis of the first cases of cholera in Haiti, argued for our consideration of Haiti's catastrophic levels of deforestation as one of the central causes of the spread of the epidemic. In conditions of severe deforestation and high biodiversity losses, as is the case in Haiti, he argued, the soil becomes hard-packed, reducing its ability to absorb water during heavy rains; hillsides become eroded, sending sediment into streams and lakes; stagnant pools of water form that are havens for bacteria (see Budiansky, 2010). Haiti's critical deforestation has been linked to severe reductions in water levels in rivers throughout the country, particularly among the tributaries of the Artibonite. Streams that flowed high enough a mere decade ago to make wading treacherous if not impossible are now slow trickles due to deforestation in the highlands. Many tributaries have dried up completely, compromising access to water in affected communities and forcing a dependence on the Artibonite, however distant from their villages, as their principal water source. The bacteria that cause cholera and other diseases can spread quickly as untreated sewage contaminates ever-diminishing water sources, leaving the population vulnerable to potentially deadly outbreaks. In the case of Haiti's cholera outbreak, Hurricane Thomas, a late-season storm that struck Haiti on 5 November 2010, exacerbated conditions. It caused deadly floods that dispersed the waters of the Artibonite beyond its banks, spreading the bacteria and deepening the impact of the outbreak.

The world learned (albeit most superficially) about these struggles with the 'acute' and the 'chronic' circumstances of Haitian life through intensive coverage of the earthquake and the cholera outbreak from television, blogs, commentators, magazines, photojournalists, and celebrities who brought attention to the plight of the beleaguered population through visits to Port-au-Prince and appeals for donations. The dominant narrative that emerged from those covering the earthquake – and would be repeated with the news of the

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Artibonite's role in spreading the cholera bacteria throughout the river's valley, see Piarroux, et al., 2011.

spreading of the cholera outbreak – was that of the Haitian people as ‘the most resilient people on earth’ (Edwards, 2011). The ubiquitous references to the resilience of the Haitian people rarely included any context except the background of poverty and chaos that framed all such representations. They became resilient by virtue of their endurance in the face of circumstances that the viewer would find unendurable: inadequately built housing and overcrowding in Port-au-Prince; seemingly intolerable levels of poverty, illiteracy, and food insecurity; the absence of a functioning government. Coverage did not extend to the analysis of how the Haitian people found themselves in their present predicament. In what Elizabeth McAlister called ‘the dehistoricization of the victims and the depoliticization of the disaster’, audiences learned little or nothing about Haitian poverty as the result of the US-supported policies of the Duvalier dictatorships, or of ‘international debt and inequitable trade deals’, or of ‘international banking institutions’ neoliberal structural adjustment programs and the subsequent collapse of the Haitian agricultural sector that stemmed from US imports’ (2012, 30).

The media’s discourse on resilience (a term poorly understood by reporters) stemmed from a naive notion of the Haitian people’s ability to recover, to bounce back, from the multiple misfortunes fate had inflicted upon them – from the ‘acute’ rather than the ‘chronic’ – through strength gained from a history of confronting adversity. This image of the Haitian people as Sisyphean heroes fated to roll their immense boulder up the hill of poverty and privation separated their sufferings from their history, relegating their poverty to a *natural* condition. It was a depiction developed alongside a parallel and contradictory discourse of helplessness built on media stories of Haitian reliance on outside help – from photographs and video footage of long queues at food distribution centres run by international NGOs (many of them with religious affiliations) to reports on how a variety of foreign technical experts were needed for tasks as important to recovery as the removal of debris from collapsed homes and planting the season’s crops to forestall a food crisis. The Haitian people moved from relentless resilient workers to hopeless victims sometimes within the same television report, as opposite poles in a problematic binary that could be used to justify both a continued NGO presence and the possibility of leaving the resilient Haitian people to their own devices as circumstances demanded.

This polarized depiction of resilience and helplessness was deployed primarily through the discourse of religion. Whether Haitians derived their strength to persevere through their faith in Vodou, or whether the earthquake provided an opportunity to help Haitians move away from a demonic religion, the impact of the double blow of earthquake and cholera was articulated almost immediately in the press through the nature of religious belief in Haiti. In the weeks immediately following the earthquake, a battle of sorts was reported by the international press – played out chiefly in IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps – between Vodou practitioners and Christian missionaries (many of them provided with ample capabilities for



much-needed disaster aid). The 'dominant conjecture', Karen Richman has argued, was that 'the earthquake tested Haitians' faith in their Vodou gods because these gods failed to prevent the disaster', leading to large numbers of conversions to Christianity as many were 'pushed by disappointment and pulled by admiration for the modern messages and aid proffered by the ubiquitous Christian non-governmental organizations, whose minions rushed to assist in the rescue and recovery' (2012, 149).

The silencing of Vodouists in the months following the earthquake led many to believe that it (and the ensuing cholera epidemic) had given the advantage to Haitian Pentecostals and US missionaries in the war of religion being waged in Haiti.<sup>6</sup> Visiting Port-au-Prince in August 2010, I was struck above all by the silence of the drums – by the relative absence of signs that were commonplace before of Vodou faith in action. During the entire visit I only saw one *ounfo* (temple) being prepared for a gathering of believers – and that was in Croix-des-Bouquets. When religious song soared in the air of the numerous IDP camps, it was chiefly that of Protestant hymns about the salvation provided by Jesus and it was principally through deafening loudspeakers. As Haitian film director Jacques Roc would later recollect, 'on the day of the quake', which in Haiti has come to be known as *goudougoudou*, 'Jesus was the most popular spirit in Haiti'. Marie José Nzengou-Tayo, also a witness to the earthquake, described the people surrounding her in the minutes after the earthquake struck as invoking God and Jesus: 'By the time we had left the car, we could see people running from the slums like mad ants, literally, some screaming the name of Jesus, some begging God's forgiveness, *yo t ap depale*' (99). She described the night that followed, under a sky that had never been 'so beautiful', as marked by prayers:

Charlie, Martine's brother-in-law, commented that it was as if God were mocking us; several indignant voices immediately hushed him. Someone started to pray as if to make up for the blasphemy. The rest of the night would be punctuated by even more prayers, chants, screams, and preaching coming from the neighborhood. I counted thirteen aftershocks, some accompanied by sounds of landslides from the other side of the gully. (Nzengou-Tayo, 2011, 101)

As Haitians, Roc and Nzengou-Tayo's accounts of the immediate responses to the earthquake conflate Christianity and Vodou, eschewing the Vodou/Christianity binary that marks foreign assessments of religion in Haiti and characterized the approach of US missionaries to conversions and the distribution of aid after the disaster. For Roc, Jesus was (perhaps temporarily) 'the most popular spirit' in the broad Haitian pantheon, while Nzengou-Tayo describes appeals to God and Jesus followed by prayers and chants whose addressees are not identified. Max Beauvoir, the 'Ati' or supreme leader

6 For discussions of this 'war of religion', see Butler, 2008 [AQ 16]; Germain, 2011; and McAllister, 2009.

The violence that characterized relations between Vodouists and representatives (both local and foreign) of a number of Protestant churches and organizations working in Haiti, ultimately centred less on religion than on differing approaches to interpretations of history and spiritual beliefs. The discourse (intensified after the 2010 earthquake) of blaming Vodou for the ills that plague Haiti and its people – from their acute poverty to the earthquake and cholera epidemic – seeks to mislead Haitians into believing that ‘their faith is the source of their plight’ (Germain, 2011, 247). This ironic shifting of the burden obscures the history of colonial and postcolonial environmental mismanagement that underlies the realities of Haiti’s slow but steady economic and environmental decline since Independence. Moreover, foreign religious-based deployment of considerable funds earmarked for development projects to combat the effects of deforestation, food insecurity due to soil erosion, and access to potable water – from pipes and water treatment systems to seed distribution and health care – alters significantly the flow of capital, especially in rural communities, where material benefits derived from these projects reinforce the superiority of Protestantism to Vodou practices whose priests have little access to the means to facilitate infrastructural improvements. Felix Germain, writing about Christian missionaries in Haiti, has pointed out how ‘missionary endeavors in Haiti, and for that matter throughout the poverty stricken Global South, capitalize on material deprivation and insecurity to advance their theological agenda. Overtly, or covertly, they trade food, services like education and health care, and even emotional and psychological support for “their God,” significantly altering the local ‘geo-religious landscape’ in the process (Germain, 2011, 250, 258). The fact that a significant portion of these funds derive from donations from abroad – only a tiny portion of which reached survivors of the earthquake – underscores the differing levels of power available to local Vodou or Catholic priests in comparison to their foreign Protestant counterparts and their local followers (See Richman, 2012, 161). Conversion to Protestant forms of Christianity, as access to significant funding would imply, would translate into economic growth, an escape from poverty, and quite possibly migration to the USA (see McAlister, 2009). The decades-long struggle for the hearts and souls of the Haitian people had already led many to convert to Protestantism before the earthquake and epidemic severely shifted the religious panorama in Port-au-Prince and the Artibonite Valley, pointing to Vodou not only as the source of the problem but also as a stumbling block in the development of the conditions necessary to increase Haitian resilience to natural disasters. As Germain argues, ‘besides claiming that Vodou has no spiritual foundation and in fact angered God, who unleashed his fury in the form of the earthquake, many Christian leaders embrace a discourse criticizing the sociopsychological foundation of the Afro-Haitian belief system, asserting that it actually promotes fatalism. In other words, in addition to being the cause of the earthquake, they claim that Vodou may also hinder the recovery effort’ (2011, 256).

This allusion to resilience brings me back to Francilia and her plaintive song to Bwa Nan Bwa, a song that pleaded to the *lwa* both for succour and agency. Of the many ironies embodied in the story of Haiti's environmental plight, the earthquake that devastated its capital and the cholera epidemic that drained it of resources and hope, the most cruel is perhaps the religious discourse of blame that charges its *lwa* with the responsibility for multiple forms of devastation whose roots are buried deep in colonization, slavery and exploitation. As Claire Payton has argued, 'there are powerful implications to the misrepresentation of a religion practiced by millions of Haitian, including material consequences for the earthquake recovery process and the future of the country more broadly' (2013, 248). The often oppressive foreign religious presence in Haiti has been funded in part by funds drawn from generous international donations earmarked for recovery and reconstruction efforts. Their deployment of funds away from Vodou practitioners underscores the latter's perceived inability to exercise agency and influence the nature of the solutions proffered to address present and future crises. If Vodou is redefined, as it has been since the earthquake, as the cause of environmental collapse and epidemic outbreaks in Haiti, then, as Kate Ramsey has argued in a different context, its practitioners 'cannot be entrusted with setting the terms of development agendas in their own communities, much less with helping to shape the vision of a new Haiti' (2011, 22; quoted in Payton, 2013, 248). This has been, indeed, the result of the chaotic efforts of an avalanche of religious and lay NGOs that has emerged as a new kind of imperialism in Haiti, one that once again has displaced local businesses and institutions, ultimately weakening the local economy and the state, forestalling the urgently needed measures to address the lingering crises created by the earthquake and the cholera outbreak (the acute) and the worsening impact of an environmental crisis that is expanding to include rising sea levels and climate change (the chronic). Protestant religiosities have promised Haitians, drawing on Ephesians 6, that prayer warfare against the demons of Vodou would have a transformative effect on their country: 'people would be healed, crops would grow, social unrest and division would resolve, and the group or nation would finally experience abundance and prosperity' (McAlister, 2013, 226). These will be difficult goals to reach in as deeply compromised an environment as Haiti's.

The Haitian people, in the midst of these multiple crises, continue to rely on powerful spiritual forces that established the grounds for the emergence of the nation. Karen Richman has argued that the many religious conversions witnessed in the wake of the earthquake and cholera outbreak may not entail a radical break from Vodou, as 'even the assertive, separatist stance of some Protestants cannot disguise how firmly their congregants remain within a fundamentally integrated spectrum of mystical techniques and strategies to hold illness and misfortune at bay', a system that in all likelihood will 'outlast the changes in religious costume tried on in the wake of the catastrophe of 12 January 2010' (Richman, 2012, 160, 161). Haitians, accustomed to drawing from multiple spiritual traditions when assessing their reality, have continued

to appeal to overlapping and cross-denominational spiritual resources when confronting the significance of the earthquake and its aftermath. Until recently a nation of subsistence farmers, they have a deep understanding of the ills that plague the land and the reasons behind the cessation of rains in certain parts of the countryside. Haitians have, moreover, a literary tradition to remind them of the causes and possible remediation for abused land. Jacques Roumain had his protagonist offer his life in Christian-like sacrifice in return for the discovery of the source of water that could revitalize the land on which his village depended in *Masters of the Dew* (1946). Marie Chauvet's *Fonds-des-Nègres* (1961) offers the local *oungan*, the significantly named Papa Beauville, as the repository of modern notions of agrarian management gleaned from the city's agronomists (from the need to contain soil erosion through the belief that the land is still recoverable through careful husbandry).

All around Haiti, there is renewed hope in moments of public affirmation and spiritual epiphany that point to the continuity of the reciprocal relationship between *lwa* and *serviteur* in Haitian Vodou that sustains the connection to the land and its improbable renewal. We had one such moment in the public funeral in Port-au-Prince's Champs de Mars for Lénord Fortuné, 'Azor', drummer and singer for Racine Mapou, who died in July 2011 after performing at the religious festival at Saut d'Eau. The mass wake presided over by Michel Martelly filled the entire area of the Champs (with its importance as a national symbol) with the drums and songs of Vodou. Equally important has been the yearly affirmation of the popular pilgrimage to Saut d'Eau on 16 July, day of Our Lady of Mount Carmel – a veneration of the Virgin and Erzulie (Ezili) fused into a unique ritual, marking the 'integrated spectrum' of religion of which Richman speaks. This pilgrimage to the waterfall at Saut d'Eau marks a celebration of the waters and of curative baths that are essential to Vodou.

Among the descriptions from believers that appeared in the press during the celebrations of 2011, I want to single one out – the narrative of an epiphany that encapsulates the transformations that makes faith possible. The narrative describes a young woman singing to the waters, echoing Francilia's poignant song to Bwa Nan Bwa: 'The spirit that is here in the yard, come and grant me my chance ... Erzulie Freda bring me luck. If there is a spirit in the yard, I will name its name and adore it' (Charles, 2010). As she sang, the pitch of her voice began to crack. She seemed to be in a trance, her lithe body falling onto the rocks. As others watched – now believing that Erzulie had possessed her – revellers rushed to her side, whispering their demands in her ears, sure they were speaking to the goddess.

The touching simplicity of this transformative act of faith reminds us of the enduring strength of the *lwa* and their ability to instil hope in a beleaguered population living in a deeply compromised environment that nourishes little hope for renewal. Francilia's faith in Bwa Nan Bwa, like the faith of those surrounding the young girl in her temporary embodiment of one of Haiti's most beloved spirits, speaks of a capacity to endurance rooted in an African-derived religiosity that may continue to sustain the people of Haiti through

worsening environmental conditions despite the war being waged against their core beliefs.

Haiti's predicament reads like a cautionary tale for the rest of the archipelago, as it is impossible to disconnect present crises of environmental and epidemiological despair in Haiti from a history of mismanagement of the islands' environments linked to slavery, racism, the plantation, and the exploitative essence of colonial development. What postcolonial ecological studies can offer, as I hope this example shows, is an approach to understanding the roots of such problems as the means to reach culturally and historically sensitive solutions to a worsening environmental quandary.

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