

BHM 2021 Presentations

The role of religious leaders in the Caribbean resistance to colonialism (26 Oct)

Hilde Capparella:

HILDE CAPPARELLA: The presentation is-- sorry about it (wrong slide), so the presentation is going to explore the pivotal role of religious African-Caribbean leaders in the resistance to colonialism. In particular, I will focus on the role of women leadership.

This is actually the continuation of my last year presentation and Verene Shepherd discourse at the beginning of the Black History Month about the importance of decolonizing and reclaiming history. I hope this presentation will help to decolonize the negative meta narrative surrounding the African Caribbean religion to show that they are the encounter, a clash of African and European experience and history in the Caribbean.

During the Transatlantic slave trade, around 11 million people, especially from West Africa were deported from the continent. But due to the misery of the journey conditions, only nine million reached America and the Caribbean.

With today's presentation, I would like to erase the misconception that African history ended with the Atlantic slave trade once the enslaved passed the door of no return.

It's pivotal. It's very important to reverse such a narrative in order to decolonize history to demonstrate the enslaved people, despite in chains, were not silent or passive to the Western enslavement. On the contrary, the creation and development of African Caribbean religions demonstrate that despite the violence, the alienation of slavery, slaves always develop strategies of resistance against colonialism, creating a new American history, and also in order to retain their culture and their link to Africa.

Despite their tribal and linguistic differences, Africans in the Caribbean share similar beliefs and practices. For example, they share the notion of divinity, called communotheism, the concept of Ashe, that is a mystical power contained in object, people, in everything in existence, they believes in ancestral veneration, food offerings, possession, divination, herbalism and drumming.

However, all these practices were mostly forbidden in all the Caribbean islands because of the European colonialist's conviction that they were fomenting the slave's revolt. For example, in the French and Spanish islands such as Cuba, Haiti, and Martinique, the Code Noir was imposed since the enslaved arrival already in 1685, leading to a forced mass conversion to Catholicism.

Now, I don't want to repeat myself, but I believe that in order to understand how African people were able to retain part of their culture and use it to develop form of resistances in such a violent context, I must expand for a bit in explaining two main concepts-- the concept of monotheism-- communotheism, sorry, the beliefs of communotheism and of Nommo.

Communotheism can be viewed or lived in two ways. On the one hand, it's the capacity to see and live beliefs in a plurality of ways, also by embracing different faiths as one. On the other hand, communotheism is the belief that the ancestral spirits are participating in people's everyday life, influencing their life choices and experiences. Therefore, within African traditional religion, there is not a separation between the material and the spiritual world.

As I will explain later, this worldview is going to be pivotal in understanding African cultural resistance in the Caribbean because these beliefs lead the enslaved Africans to maintain a constant contact with Africa and the ancestors during the secret-- their secret night meeting religious rituals.

An additional concept that is important to understand is the concept of nommo. This concept come from the Dogon people of West Africa. It's the generative power of the spoken words.

Although the concept of nommo is mostly identified with the Dogon people, it can be found in the African classical texts with the same idea of using words to impact energy to change form, shapes, or conditions to make the work easier. One could see nommo as the power of opening the mouth of the Gods for which a priest, by employing certain chants and incantation, was able to activate the deities and their power. Therefore, by human utterance or through spoken words, human beings could invoke a kind of spiritual power.

Therefore, communotheism and nommo are philosophical African concepts which were vital to the development of African Caribbean religions, and along with dancing, drumming, and singing, they were all practices of Black resistance and liberation, or often preceding the enslaved revolts against the local colonial master. These men and women were believed to possess special divine power. Just give me a second. Yes. These men and woman were believed to possess special divine power over the visible and invisible worlds. They were often political and religious head of the Maroon communities. In fact, despite African religious practices were forbidden by the colonial hegemony, there were mainly practiced and

preserved secret by the enslaved in the plantation or among the different Maroons community. The Maroons were runaway slaves who lived in communities in the hinterland of the various Caribbean islands.

Let's now look, to the Atlantic revolts and revolution that took place in the Caribbean between 1760 and 1870. The oldest revolution, the majority of them, were carried by religious leader who were often Maroons leaders. However, as Verene Shepherd underlined at the beginning of the Black History Month, also common enslaved were not passive to enslavement, but contributors to the resistance against colonialists. Many tried to escape, other made revolts in the plantation, while others tried directly to kill the slave master. It's only recently, in fact, that historians and academics are starting to discover, recover, and reclaim these histories.

Let's look now at the different kind of revolution that took place in the various-- in different islands of the Caribbean during this time. Let's look first at Jamaica. Since the early Spanish and successive British occupation of the island, Jamaican history is characterized by many forms of resistance to colonialism. For instance, we know that already in 1728, the British fought a war with the Windward Maroons lead by Quao and a woman known as the Nanny of the Maroons. It's believed that she come from the Akan people of Ghana. Some historians believe that she was a queen in Africa. It came to Jamaica to free her people. While other believes that she was a slave, and then she escaped to join the Maroons.

It is important to underline that woman were and are very important among the Akan people, as their society is matrilineal. Therefore, among the Akan, the women were able to be spiritual and political leader of their community. It's reported The Nanny was a spiritual leader among the Maroons. This was a crucial characteristic of her leadership.

It's important to underline that the Maroons in Jamaica practiced Obeah. This religion derives from the African Bantu spirituality based on the worshipping of the ancestors. However, the word Obeah derives from the Twi language of the Akan, Fante, Wasa people, and from the concept of **obey or Obayifo** which means, 'that which can do work, but is not seen'. Furthermore, among the Yoruba people, Oba is also a king or a ruler.

These multiple ways to interpret Obeah showed the mixing and blending of various African cultures in the Caribbean experience, but also the similarities within the beliefs of this culturally different groups. Obeah in Jamaica developed differently than other parts of the Caribbean. It was an instrumental practice of resistance and revolt. In fact, it's recorded that Nanny was using Obeah as a weapon.

As Stewart underlined in her book, *Three Eyes For The Journey*, the white slave master were the very incarnation of moral evil which Obeah practitioners, such as Nanny, had the moral responsibility to contest and challenge.

Shuler underlines that Obeah in the eighteenth century Jamaica offered protection among the enslaved and the maroons, against 'death caused by the Europeans'.

The colonial literature around Obeah demonstrate that Obeah practitioners attempt to counteract slavery through any kind of approach to mystical power. This show how for Africa and the African Caribbean people, the understanding of good or evil was contingent to their necessities for freedom and liberation practices.

Furthermore, they believed and experienced the European slavery practices as the worst form of witchcraft. According to Stewart, the survival-- sorry, the surviving account describe the Nanny of the Maroons as an effective Obeah practitioner. Nanny was skilled in providing herbal remedies which were gaining the trust of her people. There is one mystical story of the Nanny that is narrated by Hart in his book, *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery*, which assessed that in the Maroon oral tradition, Nanny has the reputation of being personally invulnerable.

She is alleged to have turned her back to the fire of her enemy, being able by her work, Obeah, to catch the bullets.

As revealed by the CARGOmovement.org, Nanny was also an exceptional military leader.

During the 1730s, she led the Maroons to guerrilla war against various plantation owners.

This was known as the first Maroon war. It is believed that Nanny taught to the Maroons guerrilla tactics to defeat the British such as camouflaging themselves as trees. In fact, the Maroons did not fight the British soldiers face to face, but they just ambushed them.

Eventually, the British accepted that they could not defeat the Maroons, and they signed a peace treaty with them. We know the Nanny did not sign the peace treaty with the British, but historians can be sure whether this is because the British did not accept her as a leader because she was a woman, or because she refused to sign the treaty.

Now, let's pass to another Caribbean Island, Haiti. The events that happened between 1790 to 1804 on the western side of the island of Hispaniola, which is the modern Haiti, have been defined as the Haitian Revolution, the most intense revolutionary transformation to occur in modern history.

The role of Vodou is fundamental in understanding the historical transformation of the island, which was a slave-based plantation French colony. According to Asante, the Republic of Benin in West Africa is the home of the Vodou religion. Vodou is a word derives-- which derives from the Fon language, one of the languages of Benin, and the Vodou word means the spirit, but the same time, is used to denote the deities and the worshiping of the deities.

In Haiti, Vodou was the vital spiritual force that provided relief from the daily torture and degradation of slavery because it allowed Africans, despite the cruelty of colonialists and slavery to see themselves as independent beings. It can be said that above all, Vodou allowed the enslaved to keep a sense of human dignity and the capacity to survive.

As a great Haitian intellectual, Mars Price once wrote, "The Black victory toward colonialism in 1804 originate from Vodou." Unsurprisingly, from the start of the French occupation of Haiti, Vodou was forbidden together with the popular dance called the Calendas, which often served as a cover for Vodou gatherings. However, despite these restrictions, Vodou survived and thrived under slavery for more than 200 years. Because Vodou was outlawed in the colony, its proliferation and practices were often manifested in the context of marronage.

Moreover, Vodou, rampant attack on the plantation and poisoning creates in Haiti an atmosphere of terror among the White colonialists, which eventually resulted in fostering a sense of vulnerability, insecurity, even paranoia among the European population. Using Vodou as a weapon to spread terror among the Europeans was a very creative, successful practice, to the point that also today, people are scared, paranoid about Vodou when they don't even know what Vodou is.

It's in this atmosphere of slavery and violence that Dutty Boukman emerged as the man who ignites the flame that will formally announce the start of the Haitian Revolution. Boukman, a Vodou priest, known as Zamba Boukman to his follower, during a memorable raining thunder-filled night, on the 14 of August 1791 with Cecile Fatiman, a Mambo Vodou priestess, lead the Vodou ceremony in Bois Caiman. There, Boukman delivered a passionate call to arms, and together with Cecile Fatiman, is believed to have invoked the African deities and ancestor to support them in the revolt. It's alleged that in order to do so, they must have invoked at first the spirit of Papa Legba.

Papa Legba is the most important Loas in the Vodou pantheon. He is the guardian of the crossroad and the closer to Le Bondye, which is God. He is the only one able to connect the practitioner to the other Loas, or to God to let them help you. Papa Legba is invoked with chants before to start any Vodou ceremony, to call for the assistance and protection of other Loas. Therefore, after I've invoked Papa Legba, it's believed the Boukman was possessed by the spirit of Ogun during the revolution. Ogun is the spirit of war.

While Cecile Fatiman is believed was possessed by his (Ogun) wife, the female Erzuli. The Loa Erzuli manifests in two ways-- as Erzuli Frieda and Erzuli Danton. The member of the Rada Vodou, entitled Erzuli Frieda with the title of Mambo, like he was Cecile Fatiman. However, she also manifests as Erzuli Danton.

By the picture, you can see that she has on the right cheek two parallel vertical scars.

Although some Vodou devotees attribute these facial marks to Erzuli Danton African origins, others sustain that it was while fighting against the White colonialists, during the Revolutionary War, that Erzuli Danton face was wounded. This belief is held to underline that she was possessing Cecile Fatiman during the revolts, and therefore actively participating to it. Sometimes, Erzuli Danton is also represented with her nose chopped off. This also is believed by many to be the result of a wound suffered in combat. Therefore, is through personal, spiritual power and leadership and that Dutty Boukman and Cecile Fatiman were able to preserve the Vodou ritual and the relationship between the African spirit and the enslaved community to light the first fire of the slave revolt in 1791 through which Haiti become the first Black Republic in 1804.

A further religious leader of the Atlantic revolution was La Mulatresse Solitude. What is known about her life is mostly a legendary story. Everything to know about her comes from a few lines written by Lacour in his book, *Histoire de la Guadeloupe*.

Guadeloupe was a French island, as such, enslaved were constricted to convert to Catholicism up to the eighth day of their arrival in the island. However, the book of Lacour tells de la Mulatresse Solitude escaped from Palermo camp and joined the Maroon community where she learned and practiced African spirituality. She fought in first line for Black liberation which was achieved in the 1794. However, in 1802, when Napoleon reintroduced slavery, she fought against for freedom by the side of Louis Delgres, a mulatto officer. She survived the fighting, but she was imprisoned and arrested, and sentenced to death. She was pregnant when she was in prison. She was hanged one day after giving birth on the 29th of November 1802.

Another spiritual woman that fought for Black liberation against colonial slavery was Breffu, the Queen of St. John. The historian Green explained that the first generation of enslaved Africans in St. John had a clear sense of African identity, it follows all the social African religions and culture.

The article of Johnson plays light in the life of Breffu. She was called the Queen of St John's because it's believed that while in Ghana, she was the queen of the Akwamu Kingdom, part of the Akan kingdom. But also, because she leads the slave insurrection in St. John in 1733.

The story tells that in November 1733, enslaved Akwamu in St. John's, led by Breffu, started planning a rebellion against the plantation owner, Pieter Kroyer in Coral Bay. With the support of Christian and other slaves, Breffu empowered over 150 slaves to stand up for their rights, rebel against their master, and take over the plantation.

On the 23rd of November 1733, the rebellion against their master started as planned. The slaves, after successfully entered Fort Fredericksvaern, killed the majority of the soldier, managed to take over the Fort, and fired the cannon as an indication of conquest. At the same time, in the plantation, Breffu and other slaves waited patiently for the signal from the fort. The successful firing of the cannon indicated that slave in their plantation could kill their masters.

Therefore, together with Christian, Breffu raced into the home of their master, Pieter Kroyer, and murdered him and his wife. Other slaves followed, taking all the ammunition and gunpowder that they could carry, and they could find. A few slaves' master managed to escape off the island on their boat. The Akwamu people took control most of the whole island. But Breffu-- with Breffu as their leader, they were successful until the 1734 when the French military had finally agreed to help the Danish regaining the island and their lost plantations.

It's recorded the day in April 1734, during a ritual, Breffu with 23 other Akwamu rebels, committed suicide to prevent being captured again. Their bodies were found at Browns Bay minutes after the suicide ritual.

A few weeks later in May, the Akwamu were defeated by the French military, and by the end of May, many survived plantation owners regained their properties. The last Akwamu rebel were killed in August 1734, officially ending the 1733 slave insurrection in St. John's.

Now, nobody knows what kind of ritual Breffu undertook before to suicide, but for sure, it was a ritual to save her soul. This is because among the Akan people, there is a belief in evil ghost called the Samantwentwen. This is the spirit of one who died with a kind of evil death, such as suicide. It's believed that such spirits are denied entry into the world of the dead because their destined time in the world was wrongly cut short.

However, the Akan also believed in the Okra, which is the divine power from God that is immortal. It's like the divine spark within the soul, that everybody else. They give life. It's belief among the Akan that during that, the soul must obtain permission from God before to leave

the body. In order to obtain this permission, a certain destiny had to be fulfilled in life. Therefore, it's believed that Breffu with her fellow did the ritual which allowed them to suicide with the permission of God, having tried to fulfil their destiny to liberate their island from slavery.

Forms of revolts-- forms of revolt against colonialism through religious expression did not end with the abolition of slavery, or during emancipation. Actually, they continued through the time, until the 20th century where we have ceased to the advent in Jamaica of Rastafari in the 1930s.

When Rastafari, the King of Ethiopia, was crowned emperor, King of King, the conquering Lion of the tribe of Judah, many Jamaicans saw in his coronation the fulfilment of the Book of Revelation, of Marcus Garvey's prophecy about the coming of the Black Messiah for black liberation.

The first Rastafari community was called the Pinnacle. It was founded around the 1940s by Leonard Howell. The Pinnacle was a community created on the Maroons' principle of self-sufficiency, self-determination, and to vis-a-vis the British colonial occupation of Jamaica.

This first Rastafari community was different in contrast to how the movement developed nowadays. At that time, within this community, Rastafari were playing Kumina drumming, practiced Kumina religion. Kumina is a further religion that developed in the eastern part of Jamaica, is the result of the post-emancipation influx of Bantu-speaking people of Central Africa.

The most salient and significant aspect of Kumina worshipping is possession. As in many other Caribbean religions, drumming, singing, act as a facilitator for possession. Despite with the advent of the Black Faith in the 1960s, the Rastafari movement took distance from these African sorts of practices, they were still performing at the Pinnacle.

The many anthropologists who studied the Rastafari movement have always portrayed the Rastafari as a patriarchal religion, but recently-- a recent study carried out by Alhassan, Barnett, Dunkley, Tafari-Ama, are showing the religious woman played a great role in building the Pinnacle community. These scholars underlined that the Pinnacle women were fundamental to the community because men were often in and out of prison for marijuana possession, that at the time it was illegal. Therefore, this woman helped not only the Pinnacle occupation, but also its stability. They raised the children, they build the houses, they worked the land, they were cooking, helping, the internal macro economy by selling their products to the local market.

Furthermore, these authors underline's that women were engaging in communal spiritual practices, such as healing, and dancing for the ancestors. And their activities were pivotal for the movement foundation and formation.

In his book, *Women and Resistance in the Early Rastafari Movement*, Dunkley underlines that in the early motion of the movement, there were more women than men living at the Pinnacle.

He also emphasized that these women entered the movement as a single woman, or single mothers. They joined the Pinnacle independently, not through a male partner. This new study on the early Rastafari movement showed also that the Pinnacle was founded not only on African principles and practices, but also on Pan-African practices, but also pan-African principle, for which women were equal to men. These women joined and embraced Rastafarianism especially because it gave them the opportunity to become activists and set in practice their anti-colonial worldview.

In conclusion, I hope this presentation contributed to show how African-Caribbean religious practices have helped the slaves to survive psychologically, in such a violent context, and give them a sense of dignity. I hope it also helped to look at the African experience in the Caribbean, not only as people subjected to slavery, but people that actively fought and contrasted in any sort of way colonization and slavery. African-Caribbean religion are the essence of the African European history encounter and clash in the Caribbean, and the women that practiced them were pivotal for the development of form of resistance and revolt.

All these religious leaders, through their belief, found the strength to rebel to slavery and made Caribbean and European history. I hope this presentation helped to understand the importance of study the Afro-Caribbean religion, development, and history as a praxis for decolonization.

Again, I wonder why these religions are not studied, and are still stigmatized within the academia and among the public when they are the outcome of European, and African history in American. By neglecting this history, Europe is neglecting people and culture. Studying these religions, these women, and their dynamic resistance against colonialism show that half of the story has never been told. I think it's time to discover and reclaim these histories, because they are the testimony that the worst form of witchcraft was and still be, slavery.

These are the reference, the resource that I used. So, if you want to if you would like to expand your study and knowledge regarding Afro-Caribbean religions you can rely on them. Thank you very much. I hope you like it.

SPEAKER: That's great. Thank you, Hilde.