Boukman's Prayer

Hérard Dumesle

(*Events described:* 1791)

At the outset of the 1791 slave uprising that grew into the Haitian Revolution, one group of insurgents met in a forest called Bois Caïman to perform a ceremony grounded in religious traditions from Africa. A mythologized narrative of that ceremony has become an important component of Haitian national memory. According to the mythologized narrative, participants gathered on a dramatically stormy night, sacrificed a pig, and committed themselves to the revolution by an oath. The ceremony is said to have been led by Boukman Dutty, an insurgency leader whom 19th-century tellings came to identify also as an oungan (Vodou priest), and by a mambo (Vodou priestess) who, since the late 20th century, has been identified by the name Cécile Fatiman.

One early contribution to the emerging mythology of the Bois Caïman ceremony was a narrative poem published in 1824 by Haitian politician Hérard Dumesle. In Dumesle's version of the story, written in classical French alexandrines (rhymed couplets), an unnamed priest sacrifices a bull and then, in prophetic ecstasy, delivers a short speech, or "oracle," to the revolutionaries. As a folkloric touch to the poem, Dumesle provided, in a footnote, a line-for-line translation into Haitian Creole of the speech he had composed for the priest in French; thus, Dumesle explained, readers could have "the sense of the oracle, in the language in which it was spoken." Dumesle cast the Creole translation, too, in alexandrines, so that it could be read into the poem in place of the French version of the priest's speech. However, those Creole lines now circulate independently of Dumesle's poem, sometimes embellished, under the informal title "Boukman's Prayer." They are widely misconceived to be the actual words of Boukman Dutty, uttered during the Bois Caïman ceremony. Thus, despite being a literary invention, Boukman's Prayer has become integral to the way many Haitians recount the history of their nation's founding.

What follows is an unrhymed English translation of Boukman's Prayer, made from the Creole text in the footnote to Dumesle's poem. For reference, Dumesle's Creole text is reproduced on the next page, with its original spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Notes on the English translation, including some alternative translations, are presented as endnotes.

God,[a] who made the sun, which shines upon us from on high,
who lifts the sea, who makes the thunder roar,
God is there—do you hear?—concealed in a cloud,
and from there he looks upon us, he sees all that the whites do!
The whites' God commands crime, while ours desires good deeds;[b]
but that God, there, who is so good, ordains for us vengeance.
He will guide our arms,[c] he lends us aid.
Cast away the image of the whites' God, who thirsts for our tears.[d]
Listen to liberty, it speaks to[e] the hearts of us all.

Bondié qui fait soleil, qui clairé nous en haut,
Qui soulévé la mer, qui fait grondé l'orage,
Bon dié la, zot tandé? caché dans youn nuage,
Et la li gadé nous, li vouai tout ça blancs faits!
Bon dié blancs mandé crime, et part nous vlé bienfèts
mais dié lá qui si bon, ordonnin nous vengeance;
Li va conduit bras nous, la ba nous assistance,
Jetté portrait dié blancs qui soif dlo dans gié nous,
Couté la liberté li palé cœurs nous toùs.

a *I have used the English word* God*, capitalized, to translate both the terms* dié *(from French* dieu*, "god") and* Bondié *or* Bon dié *(from French* Bon Dieu*, "Good God").* *Bondié is the name of the supreme deity in Vodou, who occupies a realm above or beyond that of the* lwa*, or spirits, with whom practitioners of Vodou normally interact.*

My decision to consistently capitalize God*, even when referring to the cruel deity of the whites, is driven by the fact that Dumesle makes no distinction between how he refers to the whites' deity and how he refers to the deity who wills liberation for the enslaved. There are instances in which he refers to each deity as* dié*, and there are instances in which he refers to each deity as* Bon dié.

b *Thus runs one way of interpreting this line. However, an alternative interpretation of the Creole phrase* part nous *yields a translation in which the entire line is about the whites' God:*

The whites' God commands [of them] crime, while he desires from us good deeds

Some reproductions of Boukman's Prayer in Creole emend part *to* pa*, which can be translated thus:*

The whites' God commands crime and does not will good things for us

The translation that I've favored ("The whites' God commands crime, while ours desires good deeds") resembles the equivalent line in the French version of the priest's speech, which Dumesle's readers saw on the same page as the Creole text. The French reads:

Leur culte engage au crime, et le nôtre aux bienfaits
Their [the whites'] religion preaches crime, and ours good deeds

c *The word in Dumesle's Creole text is* bras*, which means* arms *in the literal sense of the body part, not as a synonym for* weapons*—though it takes that meaning here, too, by metonymy.*

d *A more literal translation of this line would be:*

Cast away the portrait of the whites' God, who thirsts for the water in our eyes

e *Dumesle's Creole text has no preposition here. Other English translations of Boukman's Prayer insert* in*, so that liberty speaks from within the hearts of the enslaved. I've chosen instead* to*, based on the equivalent line in the French version of the speech, which reads thus (ellipses in the original):*

Puissante Liberté! viens… parle à tous les cœurs…
Mighty Liberty! Come... Speak to every heart...

Source: Hérard Dumesle, *Voyage dans le nord d'Hayti, ou Révélations des lieux et des monuments historiques* (Aux Cayes, Haiti: Imprimerie du Gouvernement, 1824), 88, https://digitallibrary.usc.edu/asset-management/2A3BF1QDW4JYD. USC Digital Library, University of Southern California. Licensed for reuse under Creative Commons Zero 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.

English translations and annotations by John-Charles Duffy. Capital letters at the beginning of poetic lines in the source publication have been converted to lowercase in the translation for readability. Punctuation emended in line with modern conventions. The use of lowercase for the racial label *whites* replicates the usage of the source publication, where *blancs* is lowercase in both Haitian Creole and French.

See also:

Dumesle's French poem, accompanied by an English translation in rhyme, with Dumesle's Creole text reproduced in an appendix (rather than in a footnote), is available in Doris Y. Kadish and Deborah Jenson, eds., *Poetry of Haitian Independence*, trans. Norman R. Shapiro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 92-99, 225-226.

A historically significant reproduction of the Creole text, extracted from Dumesle's poem, appears in Victor Schoelcher, *Colonies étrangères et Haiti: Résultats de l'émancipation anglaise* (Paris: Pagnerre, 1843), 2:99, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433081700027. Schoelcher appears to have been the first author to misattribute the text to Boukman. Schoelcher reproduces Dumesle's text with emendations, the most significant being that where Dumesle had ***la*** *ba nous assistance* (there lends us aid), Schoelcher has ***li*** *ba nous assistance* (he lends us aid), which reads more intelligibly than Dumesle's text; that emendation has been adopted in Duffy's English translation. In addition, Schoelcher capitalizes *Dié* (God) throughout and, in the final line, replaces Dumesle's *li* (he/she/it) with *qui* (that/which). Subsequent authors have often reproduced Schoelcher's version of the text.

On the historiography of the Bois Caïman ceremony, including a discussion of the historicity of Boukman's Prayer, see David Patrick Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 81-92 (esp. 89-90).

Apologists for the historical authenticity of Boukman's Prayer (that is, who want to argue that the prayer's Creole text was actually composed by Boukman, then passed down orally until Dumesle incorporated it into his poem) need to explain a peculiarity in the prayer's rhyme scheme. The prayer is composed as rhymed couplets—except for the first line, which stands alone, not rhyming with any other line in the prayer and giving the prayer an odd, not even, number of lines. However, that odd first line *does* make a rhymed couplet with the line that immediately precedes the prayer in Dumesle's poem. This peculiarity is readily explained if Dumesle composed the prayer as part of his poem. The peculiarity is harder to explain if the prayer is supposed to have originated as a standalone composition by Boukman.