

Early accounts of the Bois Caïman ceremony (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, the ceremony was 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.

Below are selections from two of the earliest published accounts of the Bois Caïman ceremony. French colonist Antoine Dalmas was a physician on the plantation where participants in the Bois Caïman ceremony made their first strike; his account claims to report the findings of an investigation that colonial authorities conducted immediately afterward. Dalmas wrote his account while living in the United States, to which he fled during the revolution. Céligny Ardouin, a Haitian politician and historian, was born during the revolution; his account of the ceremony may be based on information told to him fifty years after the event by Paul Ali, a former slave who had taken part in the 1791 uprising. As a freeborn man of blended European and African ancestry, Ardouin belonged to Haiti's post-revolutionary social elite, a fact pertinent to his attitude toward the slaves and their ceremony.

1. Account by white colonist Antoine Dalmas (*written 1793-94; published 1814*)

The blacks' revolt broke out on 20 August 1791 on one of the estates of M. de Galliffet, called La Gossette, starting with a murderous assault on the manager, M. Mossut. The particulars that follow are a summation of the depositions that several negroes gave the next day before the seneschal of Le Cap, who traveled to the scene to launch an inquiry. It was discovered that an elderly negro named Ignace—who, it is well to note, was set apart from the others by his exemption from any kind of work, due to his requiring special care—had known for some time of the conspiracy. In a long conversation he had, on the very eve of the revolt, with a free negro from Grande-Rivière (a participant in the Ogé affair who had eluded the authorities),^a the latter told him: “The hour of vengeance is coming; tomorrow night, all the whites are to be exterminated. We are counting on your promises and on your influence. M. Mossut will be one of the first victims [...] No more delays, no more fears. The conspiracy extends everywhere, leaving the whites no refuge or hope of salvation. All will meet the same fate—and if some elude our blades, they will not escape the fire that is going to reduce the plain to ashes.”

The principal leaders had agreed on the elements of the plan a few days earlier, at the Lenormand estate in Morne Rouge. Before carrying out their plan, they celebrated a kind of festival or sacrifice in the middle of an uncultivated woodland on the Choiseul estate, called Caïman, where the negroes gathered in very great number. A pig, entirely black, surrounded by fetishes and loaded down with offerings, each more bizarre than the others, was the sacrificial offering to the

^a The “Ogé affair,” as Dalmas calls it, was a failed uprising in late 1790 by free Haitians of color seeking equal political rights with whites. Colonial authorities put down the uprising and executed its leader, Vincent Ogé, but did not succeed in apprehending all of the insurgents.

all-powerful spirit of the black race. The religious ceremonies performed by the negroes as they cut the animal's throat, the greed with which they drank its blood, the value they placed on possessing a few of its hairs—a sort of talisman, which they believed would render them invulnerable—all serve to typify the African. It was natural that a class of people so ignorant and brutish should preface the most dreadful assaults with the superstitious rites of an absurd and bloodthirsty religion.

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2. Account by Haitian historian Céligny Ardouin (*written 1841; published 1865*)

Toussaint [Louverture] chose as co-conspirators his most intimate friends: Jean-François Papillon, Georges Biassou, Boukman Dutty, and Jeannot Billet. The conspirators met and decided on their respective roles. [...] Boukman and Jeannot, being bolder, took charge of leading the first uprisings. [...] A news sheet was printed which falsely reported that the king and the national assembly had granted slaves three days a week for themselves and had abolished whipping as a form of punishment, but that the colonial assembly and the middle-class whites refused to enact this law from France. An ingenuous young man of color was persuaded by Boukman to read this news sheet at a secret meeting of slaves held on 14 August at the Lenormand estate in Morne Rouge [...] Boukman told the conspirators that they were awaiting the arrival of new troops from Europe, coming to enact the new law, at which point the slaves would rise up to ensure that the law was indeed put into effect, and that he himself would give the signal for the uprising from the Turpin estate, where he was a supervisor. The claim that new troops were coming, who would act in concert with the slaves, was nothing but a ruse invented by the leaders of the conspiracy to win over the slaves, because those timid men still feared their masters' strength and power.

Boukman had recourse also to the fearsome influence of fetishism. He led those credulous men to the forest called Caïman, located on the Lenormand estate. There a priestess plunged the knife into the entrails of a black pig; the victim thrashed, the blood flowed, the conspirators drank it greedily. Kneeling, Boukman swore with a dreadful oath to lead the uprising, an oath commanded by the priestess; after him, the others present, likewise kneeling, swore to follow him and obey his orders.

Sources:

1. Antoine Dalmas, *Histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue* [...] (Paris: Mame Frères, 1814), 1:116-118, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433081700050>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

2. C. N. Céligny Arduoin, *Essais sur l'histoire d'Haïti*, ed. Beaubrun Ardouin (Port-au-Prince: T. Bouchereau, 1865), 17-18, <https://books.google.com/books?id=d6VDAQAAMAAJ>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts translated into English, edited, and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Spelling of names regularized across the texts. Punctuation and typography (italics) modernized, Americanized, or otherwise emended for readability.

The use of lowercase for the racial labels *blacks* (= *noirs*), *negroes* (= *nègres*), and *whites* (= *blancs*) reproduces the usage of the source publication. The governmental terms *king*, *national assembly*, and *colonial assembly* have been left lowercase in the English translation, as the corresponding French terms are in the source.

See also: On the historiography of the Bois Caïman ceremony, see David Patrick Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 81-92.



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