

to prosper on the back of a slave population that reached roughly half a million by the end of the eighteenth century. However, despite the tortures and despite the atmosphere of fear, the slaves in Saint-Domingue rebelled, resisted and fought back.

6-a -The Slaves Fight Back: Daily Resistance, Suicide, Infanticide, and Poisons

The Africans brought to Saint-Domingue did not wait to get there to begin fighting back. There were rebellions in the *trunks* where they were packed before being sold to be taken across the Atlantic; rebellions on the slave ships were also frequent. However, once in Saint-Domingue, any hope of going back home was practically lost for the African slave. Resistance took, then, other forms. Against the violent attempt to turn them into animals, the slaves claimed back their humanity in unspoken but quite eloquent ways. We begin with the most innocent ones.

First, was the collective resistance of the African slaves who clung to their culture. Since they came from different tribes, they did not always speak the same language and did not share the same traditions. At night, despite the legal interdiction to assemble, the Africans met to dance, exchange stories, sing their pain and suffering, and worship their *lwas*. Our Vodou and our Haitian Creole are two main legacies of that silent struggle. (see Vignette 2-1).

Most masters did not care to clothe their slaves. Many slaves, nevertheless, through countless sacrifices, saved enough to buy themselves some decent clothes and dress like human beings. Others, despite the risks of harsh punishment, would leave their quarters to go see their sweetheart on another plantation, and “forget” to come back on time, staying away from their plantations for days. More interesting were those slaves who, in that Saint-Domingue where many masters were illiterate, managed to learn to read and write. These slaves were probably not thinking of resistance. However, compared to the mass of those who accepted their condition and never dared take a shot at the brighter sides of life, they certainly showed a measure of courage and the ability to strive for higher ground.

Other slaves went further; they refused to be slaves in the first place. And, short of a life in liberty, they wanted no life at all. Once again, that form of resistance began on the slave ships. Captives starved themselves to death, refusing to eat any food. The captains had to torture them in order to force them to eat. Others threw themselves into the sea with their chains; still, others knocked their heads against the partitions on the ship or held their breath until they died, suffocated.

**_ To Understand Better
2-1: Vodou, Creole and... Krik-Krak**

How would life be if it were not for the lakou?

How would life be if it were not for Vodou?

— *Boukman Eksperyans*

The slave population of Saint-Domingue came from many different African tribes. “These transplanted people came from all classes and stations of life. Some were criminals condemned and sold by their own tribesmen; others were prisoners captured in intertribal raids or by Arab slave hunters. There were men of royal blood among them, as well as artisans and tribal scholars. [...] In [Saint-Domingue], they were thrown into a common mould.” (Courlander, in Arthur & Dash)

The masters were required to baptize and educate their slaves in the Catholic Religion. But this religious education was reduced to the bare minimum. At night, away from the masters and protected by the darkness of the night, the slaves continued to practice their religions brought with them from Africa. As the years went by, given the superficial instruction of the slaves in Catholic doctrine, these different religious practices, combined with elements of the Catholic faith, gave birth to our Vodou. (Ever wondered what the saints of the Catholic Church—Saint James, Saint Patrick or even the Virgin Mary— were doing in the Peristil*?) On a given plantation, the slave population was usually a mix of tribes speaking different languages. That was a way for the masters to prevent them from communicating with each other and to keep them divided. The encounter of these multiple languages with the French spoken by the masters gave birth to the Haitian Creole language.

In Creole, have come to us, through successive generations, the *kont* (folktales) Haitian children have enjoyed and continue to enjoy today. It is during these nights that they began to take shape as the multiple traditions of the slaves met with some French cultural elements and mixed into what was to become our Haitian culture.

In Saint-Domingue, slaves committed suicide in many ways. A Negress who had just arrived on a plantation in the present-day Artibonite Department showed an unusual nostalgia. “She could be seen, wandering around the banks of the Ester river, stopping to measure the depth of the water, and sighing as she raised her eyes to heaven and struck her breast [...] One morning, that woman was found, drowned with her two children tied to her waistband to spare them, as well as herself, slavery” (Descourtilz). That woman belonged to a “good” master and she had not yet experienced life in slavery.