

Back to the Roots, a Diaspora in Benin

On Thursday, July 20, 2023, I landed at Cotonou International Airport, "Cadjehoun Airport," in Benin. The immigration officers warmly welcomed the Haitians with big smiles and "welcome back home" greetings. Those who held Haitian passports, automatically classified as Beninese diaspora, were de facto exempt from entry visas to their ancestral land.

My journey to Benin was organized by the Haitian Medical Association Abroad (AMHE) to commemorate the 220th anniversary of the death of Toussaint Louverture, the liberating hero of the Haitian people. Joining nearly 300 Haitians, mainly from Canada and the United States, most of us physicians, we embarked on this pilgrimage tour to Benin with the theme: "Back to the Roots."



Modern building in Cotonou

In the baggage claim area, the appearance of the Beninese people, the rumbling of the carousel, and porters offering their services to passengers to identify and carry their luggage and bags loaded with goods, briefly made me feel like I was at Toussaint Louverture Airport in Port-au-Prince.



As I exited the airport, I woke up from my Port-au-Prince dream as I drove along the four-lane highway in each direction that cuts through the residential neighborhood of Cadjehoun, where most of Cotonou's government and diplomatic services are located. The modernity and cleanliness of the community quickly caught my attention.

The next day, we visited the Kingdom of Allada in Dahomey, where many Africans were enslaved in Haiti. The Kingdom of Dahomey was ruled by a powerful royal dynasty founded in the 16th century by King Houégbadja. In this absolute monarchy, the king, the first spiritual leader, held all the kingdom's wealth and had the right to life and death over all his subjects.

Leaving the Cadjehoun district, an American in our group exclaimed, "We're back in 'Little Haiti'." The transition was abrupt, without a smooth change. On the other side of the street, we found ourselves in the heart of



Typical shop in Cotonou

Port-au-Prince, but an improved Port-au-Prince, with adequate sanitary, road, and electrical infrastructure.

Many expected to be received in a royal palace, like Citadelle Laferrière. But alas! The kings had lost their political and economic power since 1894, following the establishment of colonial rule by the French. Their authority only extended to the limits of their "Royal Palace" and only over those who recognized themselves as descendants of royal lineages. The only powers that remained to them were those of spiritual leaders, which they practiced within the confines of their limited territory. Politicians sometimes used them as gatherers of electoral support or as mediators during specific social crises.



Aldy at Alladah palace



His majesty and his subjects

We were all gathered under a large tent in the courtyard of the Royal Palace of Allada, waiting for the arrival of His Royal Highness King Kpodegbe. Some of his subjects, all dressed in white, sat on the ground around the royal throne. At the same time, about twenty musicians and dancers entertained us with "rada" music - a deformation in Haiti of the name of the Arada kingdom - with its drumbeats, instruments, and typical greetings.

His Royal Highness King Kpodegbe, dressed in a long white robe, a golden helmet, and a golden staff, surrounded by a few subjects, appeared majestically and made his way to his throne. After the customary courtesies were exchanged, the president of the AMHE presented him with a Haitian flag. The king delivered a ceremonial speech where he extolled Toussaint Louverture and spoke, among other things, of President René Prével's visit to the Royal Palace. As for me, I managed to sneak near His Majesty just in time for a selfie. At the end, we had to pay our respects during the collection. Recommended amount: \$20!



Aldy's Selfie



Grand Temple of the Pythons

On the way back, our bus driver took a wrong turn on a dirt road in the middle of a cornfield. I felt like I was lost on a side road in Léogâne, Haiti, in the middle of a sugarcane field. The following day, on our way to Ouidah to pay homage to our ancestors, I was captivated by Savi, a former dependency of the kingdom and a stronghold of the Xwéla people's culture. This society has managed to preserve its customs and beliefs in a truly impressive manner, dedicating a special cult to the python within the majestic "Grand Temple of the Pythons."

Ouidah also houses the "Sacred Forest," where other deities reside, as well as the "Slave Auction Square," where slaves were sold before taking the "Slave Route" to arrive at the "Door of No Return." Along the way, it was planned for us to go around the "Tree of Forgetfulness," a ritual to welcome the souls of the slaves back to the homeland. Before their forced departure to America, the chained slaves were compelled to circumambulate the "Tree of Forgetfulness," nine times for men and seven times for women, to symbolically forget their country, culture, previous life, freedom, and families.



Tree of Forgetfulness

"So, I decided to immerse myself in the Beninese crowd to get to know them better. I truly felt like



Ballad in Cotonou

I was in Haiti, unable to explain why the customs and traditions of the two countries resemble each other so much, even in the most insignificant details. I observed a beautiful girl rejecting the advances of a suitor. She stared him down and made a sharp, "tchuiipsss" sound [a strong sucking noise made by inhaling air through the teeth and mouth] while slowly raising and turning her head from right to left. After her embarrassed admirer left, she explained that it is "sucking a tamarind - the longer it lasts, the better." She further explained that Beninese women have an array of words and manners to express their "tchuiipsss,"

depending on their mood, ethnic group, and even the alphabet used: in Fongbé, notably "é xwè nyè, é xwè apì, é dè còn," or in French, "é houé gnon, é houé apì, é dé tchon." I noticed these expressive "tchuiipsss" sounds among Haitian and Jamaican women as well, but not among African-American women. Just like Haitians, Beninese often avoids expressing their opinions

categorically. The desire to please their interlocutors often echoes the famous phrase of a Haitian deputy: 'I'm neither for nor against, but quite the contrary.' A matter of marronage!

On the morning of July 22nd, our group was supposed to start its journey to the Royal City of Abomey very early. However, our driver's watch was operating on Beninese or Haitian time, rather than universal time. After a long journey of nearly 4 hours, we went straight to the “Royal Palace.” After the customary ceremonies, musicians invoked the deity Sakpata (the deity of earth and fertility) by playing a captivating rhythm, the Agbotchébou.

I was standing near Dumarsais Mécène Siméus, also known as Dumas Siméus, a former candidate



Siméus possession crisis

for the presidency of Haiti, when I noticed that he began to be subtly shaken by slight spasmodic contractions. And suddenly, Siméus darted through the middle of the amphitheater, spun around, staggered, lost balance, froze, swayed, froze again, spun, lost balance again, stumbled, and finally fell to the ground on his back. Simeus’s stay in Benin undoubtedly corroborates the

Beninese saying: “No matter how long a cat stays in the West, it will always meow.” [A leopard cannot change its spots]

Upon returning to the hotel, I asked a Beninese friend, a doctoral student in history and archaeology with a focus on heritage, to interview Siméus. After confessing that “Benin ran in his veins,” Siméus invoked his ancestral deities in their original Fongbé language, unaltered and without an accent: Agbéto-woyo, Adantoxu, the deity of the sea, and Dan gaga hwèdo, the deity of wealth and opulence, symbolized by a serpent. These deities have also taken residence in the pantheon of the voodoo temple in Pont-Sondé, Haiti, where his late father officiated as hougan until his death at 98 years.

Dumarsais Mécène Siméus, also known as Dumas Siméus, was born in 1939 in Pont-Sondé within Haiti's Artibonite Valley. The journey of this son of illiterate rice farmers will be punctuated with exceptional achievements. He was named Dumarsais after his father's friend, Dumarsais Estimé, who later became president of Haiti. Dumas Siméus pursued education with determination, earning a degree in electrical engineering from Howard University in Washington, DC, and obtaining an MBA from the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business. Climbing the corporate

hierarchy, Siméus eventually served as President of Beatrice International Foods, then a \$2 billion multinational US Corporation with operations and subsidiaries in 25 countries. He finally launched Siméus Foods International, a company that boasts an impressive annual revenue of \$155 million. In 1999, he took a philanthropic step by founding Org. Sové Lavi, a nonprofit foundation aimed at offering medical assistance, education, and clothing to the Haitian population. Notably, both, Simeus and I had the privilege of participating in the Florida Governor Jeb Bush's Haiti Advisory Group from October 2004 to February 2005. This collective effort formulated 24 recommendations, addressing Haiti's security, economic growth, and disaster preparedness.



Siméus and Aldy

This trance, Siméus' spontaneous and unforeseen possession crisis, might undoubtedly be a form of catharsis, wouldn't it? Because he stated: "I live with voodoo, it's the landmark and foundation of my life. Upon arriving in Benin, I'm automatically connected, and I knew that this is where most of our ancestors from Haiti come from. In Benin, I am at home."



Siméus in trance

What is vodou for the "Danxomènou"? It's a form of spirituality, a space of social cohesion, an understanding of the universe, a culture, and a worldview. This social practice incorporates the customs and traditions of the Aja-fon and Yoruba peoples of Benin. All the baggage and dormant energy my colleague carries within him awakened and connected him with his ancestors at the Royal Palace of Danxomè.



Vodou ceremony in Benin

What is vodou for the Haitians? Vodou, which translates to "spirit" or "deity" in the Fon language of the African Kingdom of Dahomey (now Benin), emerged as an Afro-Haitian religion spanning the 16th to 19th centuries. Vodou represents the amalgamation of West African spiritual beliefs and Roman Catholicism, a convergence recognized as religious syncretism. Its primary adherents are in Haiti, the Caribbean, and New Orleans. Vodou's comprehensive worldview encompasses philosophy, medicine, justice, and religion, all grounded in the fundamental tenet that everything

possesses a spiritual essence. Humans, as spirits, inhabit the visible realm, while the unseen realm is populated by invisible entities such as angels, ancestral spirits, and recently departed souls. These spirits are thought to reside in Ginen, a mythical land analogous to cosmic Africa. Parallel to Christianity, Vodou adherents hold the belief in a singular God and a retinue of spirits that aid in the governance of humanity and the natural world.



Vèvè: religious symbol of the lwa(spirits)

As a Catholic, it was impossible for me not to draw a connection between imeus' crisis of possession by the African spirit Sakpata at the Palace of Abomey and the event of the descent of the Holy Spirit during Pentecost, as described in Chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles. In the Upper Room, the apostles and Mary were gathered to celebrate the festival of Shavuot when suddenly, "a loud noise from heaven came, and it seemed like a violent wind filled the house where they were sitting. Then, tongues resembling flames of fire appeared and separated, resting on each of those present. All of them were then filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in foreign languages, each speaking according to the gift that had been granted by the Spirit." Although the two situations differ in their origins and cultural implications, they share a certain dynamic of spiritual reception and expression that, in both cases, not only perhaps underscore the universality of divine experiences but also transcend human limits manifested through distinct beliefs and cultural contexts.

On this Tuesday, July 25th, our pilgrimage to the ancestral land came to an end, and our delegation was ready for the 352-kilometer (218 miles) journey from Cotonou to Accra, Ghana, by bus at precisely 7:30 AM. However, there was a small visa challenge to overcome, even though we were told before departure that we could obtain our visas at the Togo-Ghana border. Collection of passports and \$245 in cash from about 150 pilgrims to complete the formalities at the Ghanaian embassy in Cotonou! 2:00 PM: Pilgrims summoned in person to the Ghanaian embassy! 2:30 PM: Call for help to the U.S. embassy in Cotonou! All pilgrims would have their visas before the embassy closed: courtesy of the Ghanaian embassy! 11:30 PM: Mission accomplished! Midnight: Transfer of crews and passengers from the 7 Beninese buses to the 7 Ghanaian buses!

Meanwhile, my Beninese friend had come to visit me. We chatted about everything and nothing, especially about Benin. The current president of Benin, Patrice Talon, elected in 2016, was in his second term. According to my friend, President Talon is steering the country towards development - a fierce fight against corruption, capital flight, the squandering of foreign exchange, and extravagance at the highest levels of the state. The president has also revitalized the public administration and the private sector. All these measures have started to bear fruit. "Be cautious," he says, "corruption is deeply rooted in Africa. For example, even though the public administration is highly digitized, a civil servant can intentionally delay the delivery of services ordered by the user, who in turn decides to expedite the process."

In his development plan, the President of the Republic of Benin has decreed "School for All," compulsory, secular, and free. He has also decreed 10 years of free education for girls, from primary to third-grade high school. As a result, the completion rate of primary education increased from 54.11% in 2020 to 65.41% in 2021. To further improve these statistics, he has set up canteens in all rural schools so that children eat a balanced, hearty, and hot meal every day.

Benin and Ghana were colonized; Benin by France, and French remained the official language, whereas in Ghana by Great Britain and English the official language. The two countries, on the Atlantic coast share almost the same culture. However, Ghana practices matrilinearity, where the eldest son of the King's sister succeeds him. In contrast, in Benin, the social system is patriarchal, and the throne succession passes from father to son.

2:00 AM sharp: Departure for the Togo border! 4:00 AM: Arrived at the Togo border. Being typical Africans, the Togolese started to drag out the process. No ink to stamp passports, no seals, no...! Eventually, the leaders of our group finally understood the game.

While waiting, I asked a doctor from the delegation, a native of Aquin, about which street in Aquin the unpaved road perpendicular to the main highway resembled. - "This street is a faithful copy of Port Saint Louis Street in Aquin," he replied. To be sure, I sent a photo of the street to my friends in Aquin for verification. - "Rue du Poste Gaille" - "Rue Derrière Fort" - "Rue...".



Local street in Togo

Finally, the immigration officers stamped the passports and the customs formalities were completed. The crossing of Togo took us about an hour. At the Togo-Ghana border, the Togolese immigration officers, with their ink-drenched stamps, managed to stamp nearly 300 passports in record time: around 25 minutes. Cultures can be stubborn.

In the Ghana immigration hall, Ghanaian soldiers were waiting for our delegation to coordinate the process with immigration officers. Kudos! All formalities went smoothly and promptly. Before departing for Accra, a Ghanaian government official apologized to the delegation for the previous errors and misunderstandings.

Nothing noteworthy for the rest of the journey except for numerous stops to answer our “nature-calls” in the great Ghanaian outdoors! A Ghanaian woman from the hotel shared her secret for managing these long bus journeys in Ghana: "Avoid eating and drinking 24 hours before the trip." Our bus arrived at the hotel in Accra on Wednesday, July 26, around 10:00 PM. Approximately 27 hours of bus travel to cover the 352 kilometers (218 miles) that connect Cotonou, Benin to Accra, Ghana!

July 28 brought us to Elmina Castle, a fortress built by the Portuguese in 1482 in Ghana! This fortress was one of the leading centers of the transatlantic slave trade on the Guinea coast of West Africa. I relived the sordid history of the slave trade and the atrocities suffered by our captured ancestors, crammed like sardines into ships bound for the colonies. Fortunately, this practice was abolished in 1814.

I imagined those hot, dark, long, narrow dungeons crammed with captive men and women, dehydrated and branded, like cattle, by applying a fire-heated iron to their skin. They could only see a faint ray of sunlight through a miniature window carved into the wall. I pictured the captives sleeping on the muddy stone floor in unsanitary conditions. I could barely pass through the small tunnel that leads to the room that gives access to the "Door of No Return." I couldn't believe



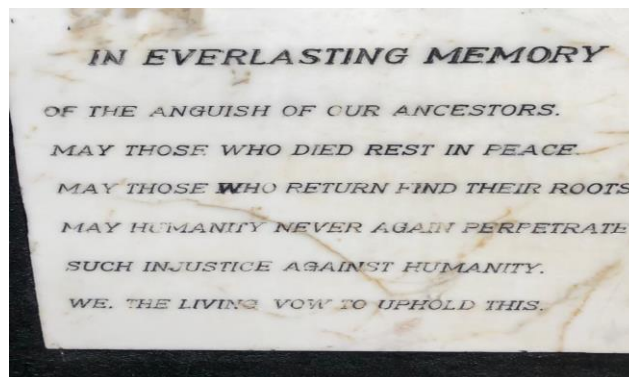
Female slaves dungeon

that human beings could inflict so much pain on other human beings. I will always remember the plaque on the wall of Elmina: "In eternal memory of the anguish of our ancestors. May those who died rest in peace. May those who return find their roots. May humanity never again commit such injustice against humanity. We, the living, swear to respect this."

Yet, in the state of Florida, where I reside today, our governor and some politicians from other states in the United States have passed laws and public policies to whitewash teaching about race and discrimination in public schools.

On July 30th, my pilgrimage came to an end. These engraved memories will strengthen my ties to my roots and remind me of the importance of preserving our cultural heritage. The recollections of this spiritual and educational adventure in Benin and Ghana will enrich my perspective as a member of the Haitian diaspora. It's often said that tradition and modernity are like two complementary paths that converge into one; yes, I witnessed this during this journey, and Haiti can and must take this path. It's just a matter of will, but above all, an interest in the Haitian people who survived the hell of slavery.

I was waiting for my Uber taxi to take me home on the sidewalk at Miami International Airport. Aldy, Aldy, someone called from across the street. It was an old friend. - Where are you coming from? - From Benin! - Yeah, weren't you afraid because their voodoo is stronger than ours. - No, I went to the source to attain a higher degree. - Yeah, do you remember my troubles with Ti Joseph and the spell he cast on me... Thankfully, my Uber taxi arrived just in time; I hopped in. And the rest is history.



The plaque on the wall of Elmina

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Weston, Florida, USA, August 28, 2023