

The Search for an Early Afrikan Presence in Ayiti Prior to 1492

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Introduction: The Importance of Ourstory and Ancestral Memory

History, or rather “Ourstory” as expressed by Professor Bayyinah Bello, is a complicated tale with numerous twist and turns. These twists and turns within ones narrative, story, or “truth” is dependent on the perspective of the ones who tell the story. As Afrikan/Black nations begin to tackle the current challenges of our times it is imperative that our next generation of youth have a long historical memory. The next generation of youth must have a long historical memory of our history as Afrikan people in order to combat the root causes of the global virus known as racism/white supremacy.

Much is even less known when dealing with the “story” or rather “memory” of the early Afrikan presence in the western hemisphere and other parts of the globe prior to the Euro Christian invasion, colonization, and enslavement of Afrikan people in the 16th century. As a result, there is a need for an educational revolution that will seek to highlight these erased memories of the Afrikan past. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to seek and provide possible answers on the question of an early Afrikan presence in the island and nation of Ayiti (Hayti/Haiti) prior Columbus arrival to the island December 6, 1492. This paper shall also briefly discuss factors leading to an increase of the Afrikan population during Spanish colonization.

It is imperative to first discuss the importance of ancestral historical memory. This is essential because human memory operates much like the memory of a computer. A computer with low memory will function at a low compacity. But a computer with high memory will function at it optimum speed and we must understand that our minds work the same way. One

master teacher and pioneer scholar in the study of our ancestral Afrikan memories and “ourstory” is Dr. Chancellor Williams.

In his younger years, Chancellor Williams was a student of the great Afrikan master teacher Dr. William Leo Hansberry. After undergoing Dr. Hansberry tutelage, Williams would follow in his teachers footsteps as a scholar and would eventually release his magnum opus titled *The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of a Race from 4500 B.C. to 2000 A.D.* (1971). His text would be produced at the height of the Black Power Movement (late 1960s to mid-1970s) in the United States. Williams book was written at this time when many young Black/Afrikan students, educators, and scholars were finally beginning to make the link between the way Black/Afrikan history was taught and the way their history was perceived by others as well as themselves. During this pivotal era Williams wanted his book to serve as a reinterpretation of the history of Black/Afrikan people.

He explains in his introduction that his book was intended to be a general rebellion against the avert as well as subtle message, from liberal white scholars and their dislocated “Negro” disciples, that Afrikan people belong to a race of nobodies.¹ In other words, it was the same avert and subtle racist message pushed by Eurocentric forbearers, such as the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel who would problematically and boldly state that Black people have no worthwhile history or civilization to point to with pride. As a result, Williams begin his book with a direct and profound question: If Afrikan people were among the very first builders of human civilization and the Afrikan motherland is the birthplace of human

¹ Chancellor Williams, “The Preview,” *The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of a Race from 4500 B.C. to 2000 A.D.* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1971), p. 17.

civilization, then what has happened to us as a people that we as a race are now placed at the bottom of world society?²

Williams burning question would be followed by other renowned Afrikan intellectual warriors and scholars who shared similar sentiments and which to place Afrikan people in their rightful and proper historical context. In the case of this essay, it is important to first highlight the early contributions to the research on an early Afrikan presence in the western hemisphere. One important contributor includes the Russian American historian Leo Wiener pivotal text *Africa and the Discovery of America* Vol. I-III (1922).

Dr. John Henrik Clarke reminds us that we cannot ignore Wiener work who was at least honest in his research approach and admitting to an early Afrikan presence in Pre-Colombia. Clarke reminds one that Wiener's work at the time was a "pioneering effort" that opened readers' eyes to new information/perspectives that were ignored, or simply, not previously considered.³ Wiener approach would later create a field of study popularized by the great Guyanese scholar Dr. Ivan Sertima and his magnum opus *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America* (1976).

Sertima follows a line of scholars of Afrikan descent such as Legrand Clegg, Ronald Davis, Carter G Woodson and J.A. Rogers who paved the way to reclaim "ourstory" as Afrikan people. Others would also in turn follow Sertima example such as the late scholar and ancestor Dr. Runoko Rashidi whose written works include, but are not limited to, *The African Presence in Early Asia* (1985), *Black Star: The African Presence in Early Europe* (2012), and many others.

² Ibid, p. 18.

³ John Henrik Clarke, "Introduction" in *Africa and the Discovery of America* by Leo Wiener, (Buffalo: EWORLD Inc., 2011), p. I.

Thus, in following the tradition of these intellectual warriors, the next two sections seek and asks several important questions. (1) Is there evidence of an early Afrikan presence or civilization in Ayiti prior to Columbus arrival in 1492? Finally (2) What was the context of the Afrikan presence in Ayiti during enslavement and the colonization of the island in the 1500s? This paper hopes to not only seek answers but provide some more assistance to the gaps in “ourstory” as Afrikan people in the world.

The Afrikan Presence in Ayiti Prior to The Euro-Christian Chatel Slave Trade

The renowned Ayisyen (Ayitian/Haitian) anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds young scholars of the power of a story. There is much power in who tells the story and the story of Afrikan people in Ayiti is indeed a story “so slippery at the edges that one wonders when and where it started and whether it will end.”⁴ Therefore when dealing with the historical narrative it is important to recognize that power itself works together with history. Trouillot explains that in history power begins at the “source” and that the play of power in the production of alternative narratives or perspectives begins with the joint creation of facts and sources.

Trouillot gives two simple reasons for the creation of facts and sources stating that: (1) facts are never meaningless and however minimal become facts because they matter in some sense to people and (2) facts are not created equal because the production of historical traces are also the creation of silences. In other words, some historical traces or rather “facts”:

Are noted from the start, others are not. Some are engraved in individual or collective bodies; others are not. Some leave physical markers; others do not. What happened leaves traces, some of which are quite concrete-----buildings, dead bodies, censuses, monuments, diaries, political boundaries-----that limit the range and significance of any historical narrative⁵

⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “1. The Power in the Story,” *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 29.

In addition, the use of language, mythology, and cosmology/spirituality is also essential in expanding the range and significance of the historical narrative. It is for this reason why the story of Afrikan people in Ayiti should not just start in Ayiti but also in the Afrikan motherland, the origin of humanity. Evidence from numerous scholars and oral accounts detail that West Afrikan empires and civilizations, such as the Ancient Mali Empire and its former Mansa, Abu Bakr (Bakari) II, sailed across the Atlantic ocean to the Americas at least 180 years before Christopher Columbus “so-called discovery.”

In this sense the oral tradition and mythology becomes critical to the story because certain mythologies are not just fictional stories but also a story of how a people or nation came into being. Professor Bayyinah Bello the renowned Afrikan intellectual warrior, Vodouvi/Vodouisant, and “Ourstorian” provides a connection around the oral accounts of Mansa Abu Bakr II travels and the mythology around the origins of the early Afrikan presence in Ayiti prior to the Euro-Christian invasion. Bello is correct to point out that Ayiti is first and foremost land of the Taino Arawak people who named the island. She goes on to masterfully illustrate and state that:

This particular island bore the name Ayiti for over four thousand years prior to Eurochristian thieves and criminals. In those days the island bore three names: Ayiti, Kiskeya and Boyo. Twelve ethnic groups and a group of Afrikans, mainly from Egypt, Phoenicia, and Mali shared it. The most recent ones came with the expedition of the Malian (king), Mansa Abu Bakari II, brother of his successor to the Malian throne, Mansa Musa, in 1311. That was before the so-called Africa and America suffered the barbarous system of slavery established by Eurochristians in these continents.⁶

Although many would challenge Bello narrative she backs up her information through the use of Arab, French and other primary sources, linguistics and oral traditions within Ayisyen

⁶ Bayyinah Bello, “Author Note,” *Sheroes of the Haitian Revolution* (Bowie: Thorobred Books, 2019), p. 1.

vodou and other Afrikan cosmologies to frame the beginning of Afrikan peoples early presence and story in Ayiti. It is for this reason Bello and many other scholars highlight the potential travel and trade between ancient civilizations on the Afrikan and American continent. There indeed is evidence of such trade between Nile Valley civilizations such as ancient *Kmt/Kamite/Kemet* and *KAS/Kush* (current Egypt and Sudan).

By Examining navigation and shipbuilding, cultural analogies between Afrikans and other indigenous groups they encountered in ancient America; the transportation of plants, animals, and textiles between the continents; and the diaries, journals, and oral accounts of the explorers themselves, scholars over time have built a pyramid of evidence to support the claim of an Afrikan presence in the Americas centuries before Columbus. Ugandan scholar Sanya Osha sums it up nicely stating:

Weiner documented that Christopher Columbus's noted in his journal that his naval contingent found "Black skinned people had come from the south-east in boats, trading in gold tipped spears" (1920). There was said to be no remarkable antagonism between black Africans and indigenous Americans during the period (Chenqu 2014). In Diop's words, "relations between Africa and pre-Columbian America were relatively constant" (1987: 209).⁷

Sadly, there is a lack of further primary evidence and oral accounts to further expound upon these early relations. The final section shall now look at the large introduction of Afrikan people and their interaction with the remaining Taino population at the height of the European slave trade in the 1500s.

The Afrikan Presence in Ayiti During the European Colonial Enterprise

⁷ Sanya Osha, "Classical Afrocentricity," *Dani Nabudere's Afrikology A Quest for African Holism* (Oxford: CODESRIA, 2018), p. 92.

From 1495 until the mid-1500s, Columbus aided by his brother, Bartholomew, would launch a series of military offensives against the Taino alliance forces. At the time Columbus and the Spanish have already renamed the island to Hispaniola and have expanded their colonial enterprise. Early Taino resistance throughout the first half of the sixteenth century galvanized enslaved and runaway Afrikan people to join them in combating the Spanish. Forced to mutually toil side by side in mines, plantations, construction projects, and private homes within the colonies, Taino and Afrikan people formed tightknit alliances throughout the first half of the sixteenth century. Although the dominate historiography dates Afrikan and Taino contact to the fifteenth century, the scholarship discussed in the previous section, signals an earlier interaction.⁸

It is therefore not surprising that there are cases of the intermixing and resistance of both Afrikan and Taino people against the Spanish in the 1500s. According to Ana Ozuna, the most notable example of Afrikan and Taino resistance occurred in the Bahoruco Mountains from 1519 to 1533.⁹ This was a maroon community/free society of both Afrikan and Taino people who were under the leadership of cacique Guarocuya aka Enriquillo.¹⁰ Enriquillo, the son of cacique Magicatex, would be one of the few remaining Taino cacique in Ayiti to resist the Spanish colonial authorities. He would first remove himself and several others from the plantation and overtime establish a free society far from the reaches of the Spanish authorities.

For nearly a decade he and his followers would establish communities within the remote and barely accessible south-central mountains of Ayiti.¹¹ Enriquillo and his Bahoruco community would be notoriously known for raiding Spanish settlements to seize arms and tools. They would

⁸ Ana Ozuna, "Rebellion and Anti-colonial Struggle in Hispaniola: From Indigenous Agitators to African Rebels," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 11, no.7 (2018): 80.

⁹ Ibid, (2018): 81.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ida Altman, "The Revolt of Enriquillo and the Historiography of Early Spanish America," *The Americas* 63, no. 4 (2007): 587.

also elude the numerous Spanish patrols and militias sent out to eradicate them.¹² As a positive consequence, Enriquillo community would attract the attention of both enslaved Taino's and the initial group of enslaved Afrikan's which he welcomed into the community. Once again the account of Enriquillo resistance is another early example of the intermixing between Taino and Afrikan people. A similar historical phenomenon would also occur when one examines the intermixing between the Afrikans and Caribs who would eventually become the Garifuna people in Saint Vincent.

By 1521, enslaved Wolof's, mostly Afrikan Muslims from the Senegambia region, also contested their enslavement and would seek to unite with the Bahoruco maroons established by Enriquillo.¹³ Despite of the numerous Afrikan and Taino insurrections, Spanish authorities "ceaselessly" requested for increased numbers of enslaved Afrikan people to meet the labor demands of the emerging sugar plantations throughout the colony.¹⁴ Overall what is clear is that both the Afrikan and Taino enslaved people of Ayiti severed the power dynamics of the Spanish colonial regime at the time. Overtime the Afrikans would fully liberate the island and repel not just the Spanish but also the British and French military powers. As we continue to uncover our deep Afrikan past, future scholars will help provide a framework for both "ourstory" and victory.

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¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 11, no.7 (2018): 82.

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