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# Haiti's Drums and Trees: Facing Loss of the Sacred

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**Abstract.** The *tanbou* (drums) are routinely imagined at the center of Haitian experience and provide necessary access to the spiritual forces of the universe. Yet deforestation and climate change have seriously threatened the trees from which these instruments are made. The life story of octogenarian drummer Charles Charlesine presents an opportunity to explore how shifts in the environment are triggering shifts that irrevocably alter a form of cultural heritage that many regard as crucial to Haitian society. This study presents an opportunity to ask, How are Haitians confronting apparent loss of the sacred, with particular regard to the *tanbou* and trees?

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But the earth is a battle day by day without truce, to clear the land, to plant, to weed and water it until the harvest comes. Then one morning you see your ripe fields spread out before you under the dew and you say—whoever you are—“*Me—I’m master of the dew!*” and your heart fills with pride. But the earth’s just like a good woman: if you mistreat her, she revolts. I see that you have cleared the hills of trees. The soil is naked, without protection. It’s the roots that make friends with the soil, and hold it. It’s the mango tree, the oak, the mahogany that give it rainwater when it’s thirsty and shade it from the noonday heat. That’s how it is—otherwise the rain carries away the soil and the sun bakes it, only the rocks remain. That’s the truth. It’s not God who betrays us. We betray the soil and receive his punishment: drought and poverty and desolation.

—Jacques Roumain, *Masters of the Dew* (1944), translation by Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook ([1947] 1971:45)

Depi tanbou frape, ayisyen leve kanpe  
(As soon as the drums beat, Haitians stand up).

—Proverb

Haitian ethnographer Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (known in English as *Masters of the Dew*) is a homecoming story featuring Manuel, the tall, handsome, prodigal son of *peyizan* (peasants) who has spent fifteen years laboring in the cane fields of Cuba. On returning to the Haitian village of Fonds Rouge, a small agricultural community reliant on the earth's fertility and the ancestral spirits' good graces, he finds his family and neighbors ravaged by drought and divided by a vicious land dispute. Facing famine and loss of the future, the elders beseech the Vodou *lwa* (spirits of the Afro-Haitian metaphysical practice) for rain and wait for their inevitable return to dust—the same dust that covers everything in sight—while the youth give up and “*chèche lavi*” (look for life) in Port-au-Prince and the Dominican Republic. Manuel diagnoses deforestation as the cause of the drought, and he is frustrated by the townspeople's defense of cutting down trees for charcoal and for their huts and fences, which seems shortsighted and selfish. When confronted, one friend admitted with a sigh of resignation, “Ignorance and need go together, don't they?” (Roumain [1947] 1971:58).

But the story is not merely about the self-inflicted wound and “ignorance” of those who have destroyed the forests and thus compromised their survival by eliminating the source of water for their crops and destroying the roots that prevent erosion. It is an extended parable about tensions between traditionalism and modernism: from Roumain's perspective, the population's clinging to old mythologies—their *lwa*—as a means to explain their world passively rather than taking action based on scientific knowledge and “enlightened” reasoning. It is also a critique of the unjust and usurious economic practices that drive inequality in society, succinctly encapsulated by one character as “some plant, others reap” (Roumain [1947] 1971:51). The land has literally been stripped of its trees, but figuratively, the *peyizan* have been stripped of the value of their labor, and the community has been stripped of its youth. Even the *lwa* have been stripped of their power (or at least their compassion), as they have not responded to their supplicants' desperate entreaties for assistance for some time. All are sources of devastation that erode the conditions for life.

While Fonds Rouge residents hope the spirits will finally hear their drums and sung prayers and appreciate the *yanvalou* dance of their Dahomey ancestors, Manuel sees another path toward a solution. Equipped with revolutionary (Marxist) ideas of labor learned from his experiences in Cuba and the conviction that destiny is one's own to shape, Manuel takes it on himself to find a new source of water so that the crops can grow again and broken relationships can be restored. He treks across the mountains overlooking the valley where Fonds Rouge is located and eventually finds a spring bubbling under the broad leaves of *malanga* plants (a type of edible tuber). With help from the woman he loves, Anaise, a daughter of the rival family, Manuel seeks to organize a *konbit*—a work party traditionally intended for the planting and harvesting of crops—in

order to build a canal and bring the spring's water to the community. He sees his efforts as necessary for the collective good and survival of everyone, but he is murdered by Annaise's jealous cousin before construction on the canal can begin. Yet the reader is left with a hopeful image of "the end and the beginning" (Roumain [1947] 1971:184): the feuding families reconcile, Annaise leads the konbit, workers can be heard in the distance singing jubilantly as they dig the canal, and the first trickles of water reach the fields.

*Masters of the Dew* can be read as an eco-poetic treatise and as a reflection on an agrarian society's consumption of the land. The novel, which some scholars have classed within the Latin American modern tradition of anthropologically informed fiction (Dash 1998:77), provides a glimpse at how cultural expressions associated with the Haitian countryside are often encoded with traditional ecological knowledge and at how ecological observation in Haiti has often centered on loss and degradation. Roumain's writing, in fact, expresses many of the tensions and challenges that characterize this contemporary study on music and the environment.<sup>1</sup> The plot is built around scenes and confrontations about the land and about worries over cultural loss that would resonate strongly with the protagonists of this article. Real-life frictions within families and between neighbors have contributed to upheavals in spiritual and related musical life as "traditional" values are questioned and as the natural and economic resources required for maintaining the "traditional" ways are diminishing. While such frictions get played out—often musically—in public spaces such as the *lakou* (sacred Vodou yards) or the *legliz* (Protestant and Catholic churches), they are also debated in the impromptu, quotidian interactions that take place as people sit around at home and chat.<sup>2</sup> The latter is my primary concern here. This context may lead us to inquire, as Helen Rees has asked during her examination of China's original ecology folksongs, "When a perception of disquieting culture loss extends to concern over a rapidly deteriorating natural environment, how do people imagine the link between the two, both musically and discursively?" (2016:54).

Hints as to how any such links are imagined are woven throughout the Roumain text, which opens up the complex relationships between humanity, the divine forces, and the environment for examination. In fictionalized Fonds Rouge and in nonfictional communities throughout the countryside, residents and the land and, in particular, the trees live in a state of mutual interdependence, each requiring the others for life. For these peyizan, perceived loss of culture and loss within the natural world are often understood and mediated spiritually. Yet Jeff Todd Titon, whose long-standing interests in sustainable musics, sound, and environmentalism have helped to define the emerging field of ecomusicology, worries that ecomusicologists have generally seen nature through the lens of scientific realism and thus failed to address more complicated interpretations of nature. Titon's instinct is that there instead must be "a holistic relational epistemology of interconnectedness, based in ecology and fundamentally different

from that arising from scientific reductionism and economic rationality” to move toward “a more sustainable concept of nature, music, and the environment” (2013:9). It might well be that, in this Haitian case, reaching toward holism and sustainable concepts requires entering the sacred into the epistemology equation. In Afro-Haitian metaphysics, the lwa reveal truths about nature. And for many Haitians, knowing nature through the Vodou spirits is knowing the universe and humanity’s role therein.

Extending Rees’s line of questioning and following Titon’s call, this article offers a meditation on the interconnectedness between humanity, the divine, and the environment and on how shifting relationships between these three entities have effected changes to material and immaterial culture in Haiti. These entities converge in a symbol that, in differing ways, both embodies and is shaped by each: the *tanbou* (drums), which are central to life in Haiti and to navigating the spiritual forces of the universe. The materials from which these sacred drums are made, however, are seriously threatened: rapid, centuries-long deforestation and the effects of readily perceptible climate change have meant that acajou (mahogany)—once the preferred wood of drummakers and drummers (as well as of carpenters and lumber exporters)—is no longer available, and the replacement woods—trumpetwood, breadfruit, gommier, and the like—are increasingly hard to come by.

In this space, I draw on an ongoing ethnographic study of an octogenarian drummer and his family who live in the rural Artibonite, the largest of Haiti’s ten departments and known for its agricultural production, to explore how shifts in the environment (and in the economic structures shaping the lives of the rural “keepers of the earth”) are triggering shifts that irrevocably alter a form of cultural heritage that many regard as a crucial element of Haitian society. After briefly reflecting on ecomusicologies of the intersections between humanity and nature, I consider the significance of the drums and the natural world to Haitian identity and then reassess the common current narrative of the nation’s deforestation problem as disproportionately attributed to the peyizan and urban poor. I continue with a contextual sketch of the life and work of Charles Charlesine, who has crafted most of the ceremonial drums in use in the Artibonite today. This study presents an opportunity to begin asking, How are Haitians confronting the apparent loss of the sacred, with particular regard to the *tanbou* and trees?

## **Ecomusicologies at the Crossroads of Human and Natural Worlds**

Within the past decade, a growing literature on ecomusicology has invigorated musicological and ethnomusicological conversations on the precarity of

humanity and the earth in the face of environmental degradation and climate change (e.g., Allen 2012b; Allen and Dawe 2016; Dirksen 2018; Guy 2009; Ingram 2010; Pedelty 2012, 2016; Rehding 2011). Closely related discussions use ecological perspectives to focus on the (un)sustainability of musics in an environmentally, technologically, and economically evolving world (e.g., Schippers and Grant 2016; Titon 2009), while others consider the effects of displacement and sense of loss of place that have arisen among pastoral and nomadic populations—whose histories and identities are built around the land—when their landscapes dramatically change (Levin with Süzükei [2006] 2010; Post 2007, 2014). Contemporary ecomusicological discourse holds roots in classic texts that addressed a spectrum of concerns, from soundscapes and acoustic ecology, to the symbiotic relationships formed between human-made musics and nature-made musics, to commemoration of place through musical compositions (e.g., Feld [1982] 1990, 1994; Schafer [1977] 1993; Seeger [1987] 2004; Von Glahn 2003). Rather than providing a critical history of this multivalent and “multi-perspectival” field (which has been accomplished brilliantly if in divergent ways elsewhere: see Allen 2012a; Allen and Dawe 2016:1–15; Ochoa Gautier 2016), my objective here is to draw out a few selections from this rapidly expanding body of work that consider the various crossroads between human experience and something else often glossed as nature, which may manifest as the sacred or divine.<sup>3</sup> This includes metaphysical conceptions of the bonds between humanity and the environment.

Two aforementioned texts have laid a path for such discussions, even as neither explicitly deals with sacred intersections per se. Yet they offer possibilities to explore points of communion within the natural world more fluidly than through Western logic, which insists on a robust distinction between nature and culture, between “the cosmological and anthropological orders”—a disconnect that Ana María Ochoa Gautier convincingly argues is “reaffirmed” in emerging formulations of ecomusicology (2016:109–11). Namely, Steven Feld’s study of the Kaluli in the Papua New Guinea rainforest was premised on the “intuition” that “strong relationships would exist between ecology and sounds of the natural world and those of cultural expression” ([1982] 1990:10). He found that “birds are mediators because they are both natural beings and *ane mama*, the ‘gone reflections’ of Kaluli who have left the visible world upon death and reappeared . . . ‘in the form of birds.’ Sound is the behavior of birds that is both indicative of their natural lives and actions and expressive of their feelings as *ane mama* to those who are living” (218). Within their expressive repertoire, the Kaluli master weeping, poetics, and song conveying sentimentality, sadness, and nostalgia—all modeled after the sonic activities of different bird species with which they share their environment. And since “‘becoming a bird’ is the passage from life to death” (218), birds are not merely mediators but beings who

embody the act of crossing between, from human to bird and back again, as in the myth of “The Boy Who Became a *Muni* Bird.” There appears to be no firmly defined boundary between species, or between human and nature, or between music and sound, as embedded in the Western imagination (see again Ochoa Gautier 2016).

Such boundaries have been blurred in different ways among the Kĩsêdjê (Suyá) of Mato Grosso, Brazil. Anthony Seeger has noted that in the cosmological belief system of this Amazonian people, performers would infuse patients with natural (nonhuman) powers through sung invocations, which were more central to Kĩsêdjê pharmacology than herbal remedies. Invocations were powered by metaphors, which could “insert . . . an attribute of an animal, plant, or other natural object into the body of a human in order to give a particular body part or function the [desired] properties of the animal,” plant, or natural object. A performer would blow or sing the attribute into the individual’s body, much like giving “a hypodermic injection” or “the equivalent of ‘first aid’ and prophylaxis” (Seeger [1987] 2004:34–35). When an attribute (strength, endurance, fertility, etc.) of a nonhuman being is made to become a functioning part of a human being, it again becomes difficult to separate various beings as independent entities.

Stepping to the side of ethnomusicology, anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena has further demonstrated the entanglements of “lifeworlds” in ways potentially helpful here. “Co-laboring” with indigenous healers and land reform activists in the Peruvian Andes, she shows how locals, foreigners, politicians, shamans, dancers, anthropologists, tourists, entrepreneurs, university students, intellectuals, nation-states, and institutions all come into interaction with the mountain Ausangate (Cadena 2015:5–8). In translating the Quechua term *tirakuna* as “earth-beings,” encompassing Ausangate and other mountains, rivers, lagoons, and such, she draws out their presence and agency as nonhumans and material existences, as “other-than-human-beings who participate in the lives of . . . people . . . [and who] actively partake in modern institutions that cannot know, let alone recognize, tirakuna [earth-beings]” (xxiv). The earth-beings she came to know during the course of her research “had a presence that blurred the known distinction between humans and nature, for they shared some features of being with runakuna [people]” (5). Cadena acknowledges that these lifeworlds are “not necessarily commensurable” (xxv), but out of their continual frictions and interactions emerges “a socionatural region that participates [in] more than one mode of being” (5).

Each of these ecologically oriented logics is likely to make intuitive sense to a typical Vodou practitioner. Haitian Vodou is premised on entangled lifeworlds, on blurring boundaries between humanity and nature and the divine, on crossing between states of being, and on shifting energies from one mode



of existence to another. It is a way of life produced by the environments out of which it has grown (Africa, the New World colonial experience, and the ocean separating the two), yet it perpetually re-creates the environments in which it lies. Vodou involves maintaining a balance between and within the visible (human) and invisible (spiritual) worlds; these worlds penetrate each other at points of intersection called crossroads (*kalfou*)—powerful spaces where spiritual energies (*pwen*) get negotiated. Crossroads are frequently found in natural things, such as trees, rivers, mountains, and rocks, and in animate beings as well, such as snakes, chickens, goats, and bulls. Spiritual energy and the mysteries of the universe more generally are often communicated through the lwa, who reside primarily in the invisible world until occasions when they “mount” receptive individuals through trance (see especially Brown [1991] 2001; Deren [1953] 2004). Such profound wisdom may be accessed *nan dòmi* (a state of lucid dreaming) (see Beaubrun 2010).<sup>4</sup> This transition (crossing-between) state of *nan dòmi* is notably relevant to the ethnography of drummaking presented below, but interpreting this ethnographic account calls first for exploring the importance of these “earth beings” and “divine beings” as drums, trees, and people within their environmental context.

### Tanbou and Trees: Earth Beings, Divine Beings

Racine [roots] is the rhythm of our culture, while the tree mapou represents the strongest of all roots, the sacred tree whose imposing roots accommodate the spirits.

—“Azor” (Lénord Fortuné), late master drummer and maestro of the *mizik rasin* (roots music) band Racine Mapou (Desrosiers 2011)<sup>5</sup>

Anthropologist Melville Herskovits explained that during Vodou gatherings “the drums and the iron are the focus of all activity of the dance, especially since those who are possessed dance facing the drums, in whose beat is heard the voice of the gods” ([1937] 1971:184) (figure 1).<sup>6</sup> Filmmaker and Vodou initiate Maya Deren reported that “of all the sacred equipment of a[n] hounfor [Vodou temple], the drums . . . are perhaps the most important. Certainly they are the objects to which the greatest degree of independent divine power is attributed” ([1953] 2004:184). Anthropologist Alfred Métraux added that “the drum is not only a musical instrument, it is also a sacred object and even the tangible form of a divinity” ([1959] 1972:182). Ethnomusicologist Lois Wilcken continued, “The instruments of the Vodou battery have a double nature. They are physical matter shaped according to the principles and patterns of tradition and of the circumstances into which they are born, and they are non-material, spiritual entities that speak through matter” (1992:29).





Figure 1. Vodouizan dance facing the drums at Lakou Badjo, 6 January 2017. Screen capture from field video by Kendy Vêrilus on the author's behalf (with permission; see endnote 6).

The divine connection begins before a *tanbou* exists. As ethnomusicologist Gerdès Fleurant put it, “One does not simply go to the forest, fell a tree, and make a drum” (1996:38). His tutor, the legendary master drummer Coyote (Philoclès Rosenbère), shared that the craftsmen who make sacred drums revere the intrinsic power the instrument holds and are explicitly aware of the relationship between the natural sources of the materials for making the *tanbou* and the *tanbou* itself. Prior to cutting down a tree, drummakers must ritually acknowledge the spiritual ties to the environment and give offerings to the *lwa*:

When you plan to make a drum, you have to perform a special ceremony, to make sure that the right spirits get into it. You go to the wood, with your assistants as if you were having a Vodun ritual under the peristyle. You light a candle and you draw a *vèvè* (the *vèvè* of Legba, the entity that opens the cosmic gates) at the foot of the tree you intend to fell.<sup>7</sup> Then you offer food, liquor and water, and you pray. It is only after you have done all these things that you are allowed to cut down the tree to make the drum. After the drum is made, it must be baptized, the same way you baptize all other ritual objects. (Fleurant 1996:38)

In an ethnographic *étude* of the ceremonies performed for the tall *asotò* drum, Jacques Roumain described baptism as essential to infusing the drum with its soul.<sup>8</sup> He documented the order of the baptismal rite, from the *lwa* that are heralded, to the songs sung, to the sacrificial food offered, to the salutations

made toward the cardinal directions. He also noted the honored communion between the instrument and the environment: “Chez les Ibo, le grand tambour de bois était un des autels de la Terre-Mère” (Among the Ibo, the great wood drum was one of the altars of Mother Earth) (Roumain 1943:8). Besides conveying the adherents’ regard for nature, this citation of one of Haiti’s most prominent heritage groups (the Igbo, of the Bight of Biafra) explicitly highlights the ties to the ancestral land.<sup>9</sup>

It is not merely that the drums have a soul after being baptized, however, or that the voices of the gods are heard through them, or that the instruments themselves dislodge deep memories of the ancestral homeland. It is that the tanbou perpetually toe the line between physical and metaphysical existence, tangibly requiring, as any human does, regular food, libation, and rest while more abstractly inspiring communication, through possession, between the spirits and people (e.g., Herskovits [1937] 1971:183–89, 276–80; Rigaud [1953] 2015:387; Wilcken 1992:46–48). Moreover, the drums may be ceremonially leveraged to send the lwa home to Africa, to a mystical place roughly akin to Eden. Conducting research during the early and mid-twentieth century, Milo Rigaud recounted that the drum spirits must periodically go to Ife (the ancient Yoruba city located in present-day Nigeria) for renewal and rebirth. During such ceremonies, the drums are covered with white sheets and draped with ritual flags—as though they are dead bodies—while funeral dirges are sung. As the faithful mourn this symbolic death, the drums and their attendant ancestral spirits are resanctified in the “purifying atmosphere” of Ife before returning across the (Atlantic) ocean with renewed powers (Rigaud [1953] 2015:385–87).

Accordingly, the tanbou, embedded with the trauma of the Middle Passage, hold keys for the Haitian population to confront their history and identity and consequently begin the process of spiritual healing and resurrection (see Armand 2011:69–71). Herskovits described this music- and dance-driven healing process as “a release of psychic tension” ([1937] 1971:179), whereas Wilcken has characterized it more in terms of maintaining equilibrium. Guided by the late master drummer Frisner Augustin, she views “the primary purpose” of the instrumental ensemble, led by the drums, as being about “stabiliz[ing] human interaction with ancestors (culture) and with the elements (nature)” (Wilcken 1992:48). For Vodouizan and for the Haitian population more broadly, then, the tanbou (or drums) are routinely imagined at the center of Haitian experience and provide necessary access to the spiritual forces of the universe.

Equally central to the core identity of Haiti are the land and that which grows out of it. From the pre-Columbian era to the present, local populations have relied on an agrarian economy that extends from the sugarcane and tobacco crops that enabled Saint-Domingue to become the most productive and most lucrative colony in the New World to the cultivation today of rice, wheat, corn,

manioc, and tree fruits such as mangos and avocados. Parallel to this agricultural production, there is also a revered practice safeguarded by the *dòktè fèy*, or “leaf doctors”—the rural “pharmacists” who learned to use leaves and roots for healing. Much of this pharmacological knowledge dates back to the indigenous Taíno and to the *bosal* (slaves born in Africa rather than in the colony); this knowledge, more than five hundred years later, has been distilled into everyday contemporary life through the drinking of homeopathic teas and tinctures, besides the use of leaf-based rubs and baths (see McClure 1982; Rouzier 1997).

Yet there are mystical and metaphysical understandings of the land as well. Trees hold unique importance: with their branches stretching up to the heavens and their roots reaching far and wide, the *arbre* or *pyebwa* is a powerful symbol representing the vertical and horizontal axes of human and divine interaction and the intersection or crossroads between physical and metaphysical realities. The symbolism runs deep in many directions. Karen Richman writes of “eternal arbors” in relation to imaginings of the “original” humans created by Bondye (Good God), implying a connection achieved with the ancestors through the roots of heritage (2005:153). Laënnec Hurbon assesses that the tree has its own place within the Vodou pantheon, as Vodouizan hear in the arbres the voices of the spirits, the dead, and the ancestors; practitioners are essentially “lodged” under the shade of the lwa just as they are under the shade of trees (1987:130–31).<sup>10</sup> One species in particular has come to represent Africa, as well as the oldest strains of humanity: the calabash, which offered its gourd fruit as the vessel from which early humans presumably fashioned bowls to eat (Richman 2005:153). Despite its modest height, the calabash tree possesses an extensive root system, a relation of visible and invisible constituent parts that has been compared to an iceberg, as what is below ground dwarfs the trunk and branches above ground. This natural architecture offers unexpected fortitude during times of heightened stress: while a calabash tree may lose all its branches in a hurricane, for example, the trunk has a remarkable capacity to regenerate new ones (Larose 1977:110). Accordingly, the *rasin*, or “roots,” are viewed not only as the stability and source of life for the tree but also as the symbolic anchor of society. Moreover, the rasin represent connection to the ancestors and to Ginen (metaphorically, the spiritual homeland, or the Isle beneath the Sea; literally, the Gold Coast, or Africa, in its broadest sense).

Critically, the spiritual entities, or lwa, are understood to preside over various aspects of nature. The lwa Azaka, for example, deals with all things agricultural and is indeed sometimes referred to as the minister of agriculture. The patron lwa of farmers and a healer who knows how to use plants, Azaka is visually depicted in denim, with a woven straw bag (*makout*) slung over his shoulder and a machete in his hand; he embodies the deification of the Haitian peyizan, the “peasant” or rural laborer, and is syncretized with the Catholic saint

Isidore the Farm Laborer, the patron saint of farmers. Other spirits preside over various aspects of nature—the master of the crossroads, Legba, commands the sun, and the powerful Agwe oversees the oceans, for example—but ties to the trees are especially strong. Gran Bwa (Big Wood), a manifestation of Legba, is master of the forests submerged below the sea, on the island below the waters (Deren [1953] 2004:99–100). Loko, a healer like Azaka who knows the secrets of leaves, is charged with caring for the trees. There are also tree spirits called Azizan, “*petites créatures de la forêt qui donnent la magie aux hommes*” (little forest creatures who give the magic [of healing with leaves] to men) (Roumain 1943:34). Reciprocally, trees are protectors of the spirits, serving as repositories or dwellings: most lwa, regardless of their sphere of specialized powers and domains of expertise, are associated with and frequently reside in a particular species of tree, such as almond, tamarind, calabash, elm, mahogany, lime, palm, oak, cherry, and fig.

Moreover, certain trees, such as the mapou, hold magic and tutelary powers (figure 2). The mapou, with its characteristic large trunk and gnarly exposed roots, is host to certain lwa and also contains “doors” to the spiritual world that are accessible and activated only in the presence of the very highly initiated (Guignard 2006:20). Vodouizan have customarily avoided crossing before the



**Figure 2.** Vodouizan congregate around the exposed buttressing roots of a mapou tree at Lakou Souvenans, 2 April 2018. Photo by Kendy Vêrilus on the author's behalf.



mapou at noon or midnight, as those hours are reserved for the gallivanting of certain spirits associated with death (Hurbon 1987:132), and anecdotes abound of mysterious misfortunes befalling anyone who dares cut down a tree of this species. During the colonial era, the mapou's metaphysical magic manifested in the physical world (which undoubtedly fed the myth making): Maroons fleeing the plantations where they were enslaved navigated up the island's numerous tree-covered mountains toward safety, frequently tailed closely by their captors. Time and again, the pursuing colonizers were stumped and frightened when the men and women they saw escaping in front of them apparently disappeared into thin air. In fact, the Maroons had learned to hide inside the hollows and cavities within the mapou's knotty trunk and roots, and thus the tree literally saved countless lives (Anthony Pascal "Konpè Filo," interview by the author, 16 April 2017, Souvans, Haiti).

With the centrality in Haitian culture of both the tanbou and trees, we find a knitting together of various planes of physical existence dealing with human bodies and bodies in nature and with earth beings and divine beings. Drummer, Vodouizan, and metaphysical thinker Jean-Michel Yamba explained (figure 3):

Tanbou a, espesyalman, sòn enstriman sakre paske tanbou a se union de èt botanik la avèk èt animal la ki sanse de èt k ap viv sou tè a ke senbolikman tanbou a reprezante de èt sa yo ki pou konekte w kòm objè de kominikasyon a linivè.<sup>11</sup> Se pwèn sakre



**Figure 3.** Drummer, Vodouizan, and metaphysical thinker Jean-Michel Yamba, 10 August 2015. Screen capture from field video by Kendy Vêrilus on the author's behalf.

sa ke yon tanbou, senbolikman, vle di. Se union èt botanik la e èt animal la ki f'on tanbou. E son tanbou a—majik ki gen ladann—fòs magnetik ki gen ladann—rive trè lwen. Menm o nivo sa yo rele mizik medisinal oubyen mizik terapatik. Donk se nòmal lè mizik al nan sans sa, e avèk de son pur, yon enstriman pur e sakre, se nòmal pou ki l ka vibre, e gen dez efè pozitif sou moun. . . . So si yon enstriman sou nivo sa, sou dimansyon sa, depi l sou konsepsyon, ou wè l son enstriman ki gen tout fòs linivè gen ladann. Mitan tanbou a se linivè.

The tanbou, especially, is a sacred instrument because the tanbou is the union of the botanical being with the animal being, which are the two beings that are living together on Earth, such that symbolically, the tanbou represents these two beings that serve to connect you, as an object of communication, to the universe. It's this sacred point that a tanbou, symbolically, is. It's the union of botanical and animal beings that makes a drum. And the sound of the drum—the magic that's inside—the magnetic force that's in it, reaches very far. Even on the level of what's called medicinal music, or therapeutic music. It's normal when music [like this], with pure sounds—an instrument that's pure and sacred—it's normal that it will vibrate and have positive effects on people. . . . So if an instrument on that level, on that dimension, from its very conception, you see that it's an instrument that has all the force of the universe contained inside. Inside the tanbou is the universe. (interview with the author, 10 August 2015, Port-au-Prince, Haiti)<sup>12</sup>

Among those who serve the spirits (*sèvi lwa*), there is broad concern that Haiti—and indeed the entire world—is in an extended period of tremendous imbalance. This concern is encapsulated in the turmoil we are currently witnessing pertaining to tanbou as an item of cultural heritage and the transmission of the parallel practices of making and playing drums. That is, the high value accorded to tanbou and the material from which they are made—trees—comes into direct contradiction with present environmental realities and practices. *Tanbourinè* (drummer) Yamba elaborated:

Nou menm ayisyen nou rejte sa k pou nou. Nou pase tout sa k pou nou anba pye, n al pran lòt bagay. Se nòmal pou n peye l. Se sa n ap peye la. Nou pa ka yon bagay epi nou pè l, ou wè sa m di w? Fò nou—sa li ye. Eh, se pa tanbou ki fè pa gen pyebwa. S'on biznis chabon, dife, bagay sa yo, moun yo pa gen anyen. Yo pral nan politik pou yo gen kòb ki k ap rantre yon bagay, yon sèl jan yo wè l, s'on pyebwa yo wè pou yo fè kòb, yo fè kòb. Bon. Sa se sa yo rele ratres la: tout moun ap fini avèk la nature just tan yon vin fè l cho. Ou konprann? Tout nasyon viktim, e fè kraze la nature la.

We Haitians, we've rejected that which is for us. We trample everything that's ours beneath our feet and go take something else instead. It's normal that we pay for that. That's what we're paying for now. We can't be something and be afraid of it. You understand? We must—that's what it is. And it's not the drums that cause that there are no trees. It's a business of charcoal, fire, things like that; that people don't have anything. They enter politics to try to bring in a few coins, and the only possibility they see to make money is with trees for them to make money. So. That's what they call [global warming; literally, "recession," "shortening," "diminishing"]. Everyone

is “using up” nature until they cause [the climate] to become hot. You see, every nation is a victim and is destroying nature. (interview, 10 August 2015)

Effectively, this conversation is about the overuse and misuse of the land and, specifically, the rapid deforestation of Hispaniola, which, just five hundred years ago, Columbus repeatedly extolled in his ship logs as having tremendously fertile soil and “grove[s] of trees of a thousand kinds, all loaded with fruit,” and “some of the most beautiful plains in the world, almost like the lands of Castile, only better,” and trees “so luxuriant that the leaves are not green but very dark in color . . . and the lands suitable . . . for orchards and anything on earth a man might wish” (Fuson 1987:129, 131, 137). And about which M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Méry, French Creole colonist, slaveholder, and lawyer, declared in his two-tome topographical description and political history of Saint-Domingue: “Almost everything that one entrusts to the soil of Dondon [a commune in the North] in grains, vegetables, fruits, and flowers, could not succeed there more happily,” and “the forests abundantly provide everyone with their needs for construction and furnishings” (1797:262, from the French).<sup>13</sup> But Moreau, writing three hundred years after Columbus, was at least partially cognizant of the impacts of overcultivating the earth and the eventual limits on its agricultural productivity. He marveled that even as mountains and rocky areas cut the terrain in every direction, human industriousness had created great wealth out of generally unusable parcels of land. He expressed concern, however, over erosion and the degradation of the soil caused by the frequent rains. In his estimation, as long as the forests existed, cutting down trees would procure new land suitable for planting, but “one will only be able to judge the destruction of the ax in sixty years, of what one hopes will remain” (262). Moreau further complained that terrain near the hospital in Cap-Français (known post-Independence as Cap-Haïtien) was “exposed to the devastation of the Negros, who came to cut wood there,” despite attempts to prevent such activity with ordinances and hefty fines (591).<sup>14</sup> This account suggests that colonial-era Saint-Domingue was beginning its wrestle with ecological balance, even if it was not yet considered in those terms. Foretelling Jean-Michel Yamba’s 2015 assertion by more than two hundred years, Moreau conveyed his sense that nature could be “used up.”

## Denuded Land, Denatured Livelihood

Tout le mal vient des arbres coupés. . . ils ont coupé jusqu’aux calebassiers,  
jusqu’aux arbres d’Ogoun  
(All misfortune comes from the cut trees. . . they’ve cut them down, even  
the calabash trees, even the trees of Ogou).  
—Marie Chauvet, *Fonds des nègres* (1960:3–4)



Satellite images circulating in recent years show the stark line in the tree cover between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, suggesting profound differences in the ways in which the respective national governments have managed their material resources. Alongside reports of each hurricane that strikes the western part of the island, such as Hurricane Matthew in October 2016, come accounts of the number of citizens who are killed in correlated landslides and the quantity of crops destroyed as erosion carries away the topsoil and plunges entire regions into extended famine. Haiti's heavily deforested state has been used to explain the disproportionate destruction and loss of life that befall the nation each time a hurricane makes landfall.

The standard contemporary narrative pins deforestation in Haiti on today's impoverished citizens who cut down precious trees to sell charcoal and to cook food. The general (misguided) message is that the rural poor are the country's biggest environmental menace; they are too uneducated and in too much misery, merely surviving day to day, to have the capacity to foresee the importance of trees for the future. Unsurprisingly, a vastly more complex story underlies Haiti's deforestation, and we do great disservice to the marginalized classes by persistently failing to acknowledge the accumulation of activities over centuries at all levels of society that have contributed to the loss of trees. While a detailed history of land use on the island of Hispaniola is beyond the scope of this article (see instead Bellande 2015), a broad contextual overview is a helpful introduction to understanding how Haiti's inhabitants have approached their consumption of trees as among the most important natural resources around them.

Human-instigated degradation of the natural landscape, if it can be called such, began prior to European interference on the island. Columbus suggested in his ship logs that he found the indigenous Taíno population to be skilled cultivators of the earth, noting that they had made expanses of land suitable for growing fields of manioc and starchy tubers (Fuson 1987:137). The Taíno further cleared land for planting sweet potatoes, peanuts, corn, arrowroot, malanga, and tobacco; archaeologists have even found traces of an irrigation system (Aubourg 1951:58–59). Moreover, the Amerindian Arawak were a seafaring people, fashioning their ocean-bound canoes from acajou, fig, and mombin wood (Bellande 2015:14).<sup>15</sup> Archaeological artifacts demonstrate that besides being artisans of decorated ceramics, carved bone, polished stone, and pearls, the Taíno elevated wood sculpting into a highly developed craft (Deagan 2015:95). One hundred years of Spanish rule saw the indigenous population quickly decimated and sites of vegetation reverted to uncultivated terrain; agriculture was weak and consisted of a few small sugar plantations near the capital of Santo Domingo.

Following the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697, which ceded the western third of the island to the French, however, forests were razed for plantations cultivating sugar, tobacco, molasses, coffee, cotton, and indigo, relying on the labor of

vastly increasing numbers of slaves imported from West Africa. After Haiti's Independence in 1804, business in lumber exports boomed through the mid-1900s, especially trade in the hardwoods oak, walnut, and acajou (mahogany), sent to Europe and the United States for furniture and construction. A "golden age" for acajou exports from 1830 to 1870, which saw at its peak eighty thousand tons of the wood shipped to England alone in 1875, came crashing to a close as the once-pervasive species that had blanketed the Artibonite Valley and the Central Plateau was "pratiquement épuisées" (practically exhausted) through its international commercial exploitation (Bellande 2015:61–62).

Even as private multinational companies, such as the Brooklyn-based American Dyewood Company, cut down trees on a vast scale, and although the Haitian state during the nineteenth century encouraged exporting wood as a profitable activity in support of the national economy, the *peyizan* (peasant) farmers were pegged with the crime and deemed "ignorant" actors who had precipitated deforestation. Concern over the degradation of natural resources grew during and after the US Occupation of Haiti (1915–34). In response, in 1939 the Haitian Service National de la Production Agricole et de l'Enseignement Rural put out a telling bulletin: "Cette destruction inqualifiable de la couverture du sol ne peut être imputable qu'à l'Haïtien. Armé de machette, parfois de hache, il va dans la forêt . . . et fait des 'bois neuf'" (This unspeakable destruction of the ground cover cannot be attributed to anyone but the Haitian. Armed with a machete, sometimes with an ax, he goes to the forest . . . and makes "new wood") (Bellande 2015:108).

The Haitian who is armed with a machete and who cuts down trees to make charcoal is responding out of profound economic need to a demand for the cooking fuel that has risen steeply with the swelling of urban populations since the mid-1900s. Consumption of charcoal is "almost exclusively" a city thing, where it is less expensive than the propane gas or kerosene alternatives (Bellande 2015:239). Seemingly unrelated economic drivers have moved people to cut trees as well. When a swine fever epidemic appeared in the Dominican Republic in the late 1970s, the United States eradicated 1.3 million pigs in neighboring Haiti to protect the US pig industry, even as detectable signs of the virus were few to manifest. The effort was perceived as a direct attack on the livelihood of the *peyizan*: the small but hardy indigenous *kochon kreyòl* (Creole pig) had served the rural poor as a banking system where none existed, securing their capital in a concrete—and easily sellable—form. A US Agency for International Development (USAID) program sought to restock the destroyed livestock, but the huge Iowa hogs brought in as replacements proved costly and ill-suited to the tropical climate, requiring better living conditions to survive than those attained by most rural residents (Farmer [1992] 2006:37–41). To make up for the loss of their primary cash crop, many peasants turned to harvesting whatever remained

of the forests for charcoal. Beyond the devastating environmental effects, this situation posed an existential problem as well. One Vodou priest explained, “The Creole pig incident was a mystical coup d’état by the *blan* (foreigners/whites)” (Smith 2010:11). The *kochon kreyòl* is nothing less than a powerful symbol of Haiti’s founding: a black Creole pig was sacrificed at the Vodou ceremony at Bwa Kayman that launched the Haitian Revolution against French colonial rule.

Consequently, the loss of one sacred symbol, the Creole pig, contributed to attacks on another sacred symbol, the tree. One question that emerges is how such sacred and ecological losses—driven largely by socioeconomic and political shifts, many of which cannot be fully addressed in this space—have been reconciled against orientations toward the natural world. While it would be difficult to pinpoint a complete response, a longitudinal study on income-generating reforestation projects involving *peyizan* ascertained that when the poor are pressed to the limits of possibility, economic survival may necessitate overriding spiritual priorities: “Wood trees . . . were viewed as natural goods supplied by nature—or rather by *Bon-Dye*, the Creole version of the French word for God—for human extraction. Though some individual wood trees were considered sacred and left standing, protective folk religious traditions were ecologically impotent in the face of a growing rural population that needed to clear land for farming and growing urban population that needed charcoal as cooking fuel” (Murray and Bannister 2004:384). In light of this context, where “folk religious traditions” are rendered “ecologically impotent,” what impacts might deforestation have on the *tanbou*, this *poto mitan* (central pillar) of Haitian culture? An examination of the life’s work of one of the most prolific contemporary drummakers in Haiti provides substantial insight into this matter.

### Thousands of Drums in a Lifetime: Drummer Charles Charlesine’s Story

Octogenarian Charles Charlesine (figure 4) has led an unassuming life, but his contributions to sacred practice in Haiti have been unparalleled and profound, though seldom publicly recognized or sufficiently remunerated. For more than half a century, his drums have graced the most important *lakou* (sacred yards) in the nation, from *Souvnans* to *Soukri* to *Badjo*, animating the annual pilgrimages (*pelerinaj*) that call the faithful home from around the world.<sup>16</sup> Beyond the most committed of *Vodouizan*—the *oungan* (priests) and *manbo* (priestesses), other high-level initiates, and the drummers—few know his name or seem aware of his impact. Yet thanks to his craftsmanship of the *tanbou*, those who serve the spirits are, if we understand Jean-Michel Yamba, connected to the universe. Until health issues limited his outings in recent years, Charlesine



Figure 4. Drummer Charles Charlesine, 12 August 2015. Photo by Kendy VÉRILUS.

has been a consistent presence at the *pelerinaj*, tending, in my observation, to be a quiet participant blending in at the back of the crowd.

Charlesine resides in the rocky foothills of the Artibonite Valley at the outskirts of a *ti bouk* (little town) called Ti Rivyè Bayonè, about forty-five minutes off the road from Gonaïves, the coastal city of the revolution where the nation's independence was declared. Despite being only about 180 kilometers from Port-au-Prince, traffic congestion and road conditions make it a nearly five-hour journey one-way; about forty-five minutes of that distance involve off-roading across severely eroded topsoil and through dry riverbeds prone to flash flooding with any hint of rain in the mountains above. After turning off the main road near a marketplace just outside Gonaïves, where vendors crowd the street with their produce and sundries and seem loath to let vehicles larger than motorcycles through their ranks, we pass a Methodist missionary kindergarten and a Presbyterian missionary primary-school academy; half a dozen wood-and-tin shacks with names such as Patience Bank and La Solution where hopefuls try their luck with picking the daily lotto (*bòlèt*) numbers; and several communal wells for pumping water from the underground Source Bayonais (Bayonè)—the structures claimed with the acronyms BID (Inter-American Development Bank) and USAID (US Agency for International Development). The farther we drive,

the less often houses are constructed with cement and the more often with rocks and packed mud or sand topped with thatching.

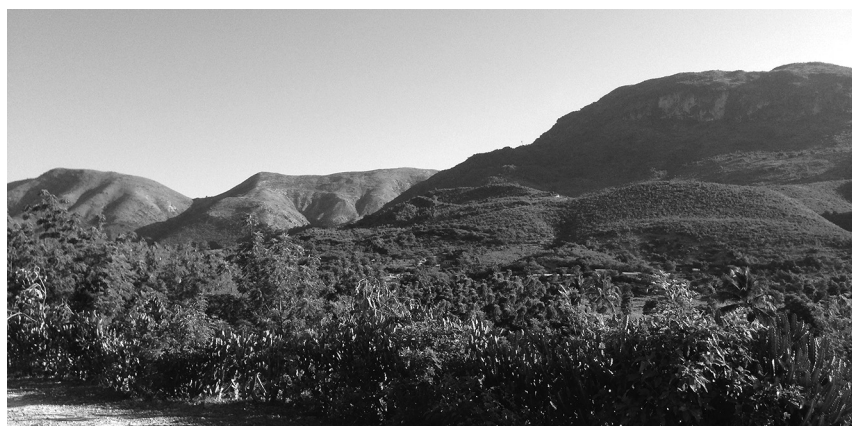
The result of an ecologically destructive process called desertification, the foliage in this microregion of the Artibonite—thought to have been rainforest just five hundred years ago—is that of a semiarid tropical desert. Short, dense candelabra (*kandelab*) cactuses are strategically lined up as fences between neighbors' yards, interwoven with shrubbery and ambling vines of various kinds. As in Jacques Roumain's description of the rural plight in *Masters of the Dew*, dust covers everything, except after a rain, when mud takes its place. This panorama poses a stark contrast from the rice paddies and fields of plantain trees just a few miles away. On coming to a high point on the road overlooking a wide valley, a traveler sees further contrast in the coconut, palm, almond, and mango trees scattered among the shrubbery below. The surrounding mountains have largely been stripped bare (figures 5 and 6).

Whenever we arrive and park, word travels faster than we can unload our equipment and gifts of food and necessities and walk four minutes up the footpath. The jutting rocks paving the way indicate that long ago this had been a site of shifting plate tectonics. Although I feel every jab of the rock edges through my thick-soled sandals and move cautiously, no matter how many times I have walked this path, residents breeze by with bare feet, often balancing heavy loads on their head. Past several small plots and near the top of a hill,



**Figure 5.** A view demonstrating desertification and deforestation a few miles from Charlesine's community, 24 November 2015. Image taken during the dry season. Screen capture from field video by author.





**Figure 6.** Deforestation of the mountains, with some ground cover in the valley below, a few miles from Charlesine's community, 24 September 2016. Image taken during the rainy season. Photo by author.

we enter the lakou, or family compound, of Charles Charlesine. The setting is almost consistent with what life would have been like centuries ago. There is no running water and no septic system or other means of treating sewage. There is no electricity, except for the solar-powered device that is simultaneously a lamp, radio, and cell phone charger that we gave to the family during one of our early visits. The four-room house, an exemplar of historic rural architecture, is made of packed mud and rocks with a wood-plank *galata* (attic) and a tin roof (figure 7); a mud-and-rock outhouse stands on the opposite side of the lot. The other structure in the lakou, an external thatched-roof kitchen, was made of sticks woven through vertical poles before it collapsed in March 2016 during strong winds. A new kitchen was built similar to the last, though it lacks a covering. The sun is scorchingly hot, even in comparison to the rest of the country.

This space is home to Charlesine and his daughter Veronique, more frequently called San Peche ("without a catch," purportedly alluding to her lack of a husband), at least six grandchildren under the age of twenty-one, three great-grandchildren, several informally adopted kids, and a number of neighbors, who spend many of their waking hours in the yard. Charlesine is the primary source of income, although San Peche cultivates shallots and sells them at the local market when climate conditions allow. She explains that the dry years of late have meant that the land does not yield, and so it is too expensive to buy seeds and spend time planting anything other than what the family can consume. The resignation is palpable. Each time we visit, there are noticeable signs that something else is missing from the lakou: smaller trees, shrubs, posts

for a new structure the family hoped to build, and sticks pulled from the sides of the kitchen have all evidently been used for charcoal to cook food. On our most recent visit in July 2017 (as of this writing), boughs from the two largest remaining trees had been cut off and used.

This is the backdrop for some of the most sought after tanbou in the country.

In our many visits prior to October 2016, we typically found Charlesine hovering over a log balanced on end, long-handled homemade chisel or machete in hand, surrounded by drums in various states of construction (figure 8). Even in his later decades, Charlesine has spent a remarkable eight or ten hours a day hollowing out instruments, sculpting their bodies into smooth, tapered columns, carving concentric rings at the base, and stretching goat- or cowhide skins across their tops. His workstation consisted, until very recently (writing as of July 2017), of a straight, narrow bough lashed between two neem trees, which offered limited but welcome shade in the otherwise almost barren yard. Drying hides, an assortment of ropes and rubber pieces, stripped bicycle wheels, salvaged metal drum hoops, and smaller unfinished drums hung from their boughs (figure 9). During the middle of 2016, Charlesine's health precipitously declined, although he has since regained some strength. Most of the time now, we find him sitting outside on a peach-colored plastic stacking chair. His pace of work has slowed considerably, but in late July 2017 we discovered the nearly



**Figure 7.** A view of Lakou Charlesine with daughter, granddaughters, and great-granddaughter, 23 July 2017. Photo by Kendy Vêrilus.





**Figure 8.** Charlesine surrounded by drums in various states of construction and accompanied by a great-grandson, 24 October 2015. Screen capture from field video by Kendy Vêrilus on the author's behalf.



**Figure 9.** Charlesine working on a drum as drying hides and other materials hang from the neem trees' branches above, 2 November 2015. Neighbor and godson Moïse looks on. Photo by Kendy Vêrilus.

completed body of an exquisitely sculpted asotò on the ground—a request we had made half a year prior.

In the course of our time together, Charlesine's reflections on his occupational and spiritual journey as a drummer—a career that has spanned more than fifty-five years—have repeatedly come up. One of the most intriguing parts of his biography is how he got started. Reminiscent of Mimerose Beaubrun's aforementioned account of acquiring knowledge and spiritual lucidity, while Charlesine was in his midtwenties, the *mistè* (effectively, the mysteries, the spirits, the lwa) came to him in a dream—nan dòmi—and gave him instruction:

Sa sòn nerasyon Ginen an, derasyon Dye, paske m leve, kòmsi—Papa m te konn fè l, men m te timoun, papa m mouri bonè.<sup>17</sup> M pa konn nan menm lè m leve m tou soufri m wè m ladan m ap travay. Sa vle di, sa sanble, se mistik la k ap endike m fè l. Ou konprann, m pa fè pasyon. Lè m antre nan fè tanbou se kouche m kouche epi nan dòmi yo vin pran mwen, m al nan yon gran travay nan nwit, epi m al nan travay la, yo vin pran mwen kòmsi se nòn bitasyon yo fè m. M wè m nan travay, m wè kijan m ap travay nan nwit la epi lè m vin, apre lè jè m vin klè m wè se nan kabann mwen m ye. Alò, sa m t al wè nan istwa l, m al eseye fè l. Sa w tande a e kònsa m wè m tou soufri nan travay la.

It's something that's [born out of] Ginen, [from] God, because I arose, as though—my father knew how [to make drums], but I was a child, and my father died early. That's to say, it seems like it's the *mistik* [the spirits, the supernatural] who directed me to [make drums]. You see, I don't have a passion [for it]. When I began to make drums, I laid down to sleep, and while dreaming, they [the mistik] came to take me to go do serious work in the night, and I went [to do] the work, they came to take me as though they made me go to ancestral lands [also implied: colonial plantation]. I see that I am working, I see how I am working in the night, and when I become, when my eyes become clear I saw that I was in my bed. So what I went to see in the story [dream], I went and tried it. What you hear, that's how I found myself enduring the work. (interview with the author, 12 August 2015, Ti Rivye Bayonè, Haiti)

As a result of this spiritual intervention, Charlesine explains that people immediately recognized the quality of his work. Local *rara* bands began requesting his *tanbou akòd* (a drum with cords strung the length of the instrument used to tighten the head) and *matinik* (a drum with heads on both ends), and soon thereafter he was supplying the Dawome and Kongo drums used in the important Vodou lakou in the region (figure 10).<sup>18</sup> As the 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of the *mouvman rasin* (an anti-Duvalierist political and cultural movement focused on revaluing African roots), several well-known rasin music groups commissioned Charlesine to make instruments for their ensembles.

While drummaking has never been an economically lucrative vocation, today the picture looks less rosy as end-of-life issues loom. How will this family support itself after the patriarch dies? Who will receive the guidance of the lwa



**Figure 10.** Charlesine with several sets of dawome drums and one tanbou akòd in the foreground, 7 November 2015. The kitchen, which fell in a windstorm, stands in the background. Photo by Kendy Vèrilus.

to make the vessels that connect thousands of Haitians to the universe? Who will attend to the environmental issues that have threatened the resources required to make tanbou—and that severely compromise daily living?

Such questions have been debated, but they largely lack resolution and continually stir up frictions. Moreover, the extent of these challenges was not initially foreseen, as it was presumed there would be some generational continuity to support the family: besides his daughter, Charlesine had several sons. One son drowned in the ocean. Another son, who Charlesine had hoped would become his successor and who had served as his apprentice, abruptly fell ill and passed away; the family believes that he was poisoned by someone who saw the mistik as *djab* (devils) and who consequently opposed the making of tanbou. A third son renounced his family heritage of the lwa, converted to Evangelical Christianity, and became a Protestant pastor in charge of a large congregation in the northern city of Limbé. When that son got sick, Charlesine brought him home and attended to his medical care, but to no avail: he also died prematurely as a result of his illness.

Today, a number of children and youth hang around in the yard as Charlesine makes tanbou, although they seldom engage with the craft. His oldest grandchildren, ages fourteen and nineteen at the time of this writing, are girls who insist that drummaking is a gendered activity, for men only, and that they are not

strong enough to hollow out a log. (These same young women carry fifty-pound loads on their heads for great distances.) Perhaps more damaging, however, is their avowal that they are not “in” the *mistik* because they are in the church. This response makes sense given the context: the only consistent efforts toward economic development in this region come via the few evangelical parishes that run the only schools in the area, which the oldest two grandchildren have sporadically attended.<sup>19</sup> Across Haiti, the evangelical missionary message is generally unified and clearly articulated: Haitians suffer because of their supposedly “backward” ways of Vodou and so-called devil worship. Charlesine’s granddaughters have taken this judgment to heart; consequently, even as they are at ease sharing their living space with *tanbou*, they do not intend to continue their grandfather’s legacy.

Beyond matters of religious conditioning, deforestation poses another challenge to this legacy. Charlesine intuitively perceives environmental changes that impact the way he acquires materials for making drums:

Men kounyela, bwa vin ra. Kounyela pou achete bwa, fò m sòti isit—e m ap fè l lontan. Zòn isit pa genyen, m pati lwen m al achte bwa lòt kote. . . . S ak fè bwa vin difisil, gen move tan k ap pase, move siklòn pase. Tout bwa o lòn rivay [au long du rivage], tout bwa o lòn ravin—se la pou ou ta jwenn yon pi bon pyebwa—dlo rache yo pote yo ale gaspiye bwa yon sèl kou. Nan de lane la, nan dèzan, nou pase konbyen siklòn pase? Lè siklòn pase, uhm, peyi a vaz [vid]. . . .

M fè *tanbou* avèk bwa figi, men figi a fini, preske. M fè ak *twonpèt*, men e pa bwa ou jwenn fasil; ou ka jwenn li byen lwen. M fè avèk *lam*. *Lam* nan pa fasil pou achete yon pye *lam*. Ou konn sòn manje li ye preske, moun nan preske pa vle vann ou, ou konprann? Sòn pakèt lajan y ap mande w pou li.

But now wood has become scarce. Now, to buy wood, I have to leave this area—and I’ve been doing this a long time. This zone doesn’t have any wood, so I have to go far to buy wood in other places. . . . What has made [finding] wood difficult is that there have been bad storms, there have been bad hurricanes. All the wood along the riverbanks, all the wood along the ravines—where you should find the best trees—the water tears them out and carries them away and wastes them all in one blow. In the last several years, how many hurricanes have we experienced? When hurricanes happen, uhhh, the country is [emptied]. . . .

I make drums with fig wood, but fig is gone almost. I make [drums] with trumpetwood, but it’s not a wood you can find easily; you can find it very far away. I make [drums] with breadfruit. Breadfruit isn’t easy [to come by], to buy a breadfruit tree. You know it’s a food, so people seldom want to sell it to you, you understand? So they’ll ask you for a lot of money for it. (interview, 12 August 2015)

Yet Charlesine has a limited sense of what his role in replenishing the natural resources he has used for his livelihood might be. Together, we calculated that over his fifty-five-plus-year career he has made, conservatively, more than eighteen hundred sets of *tanbou*. Each set (called *je*) typically comprises three drums and sometimes four, yielding a conservative total of more than six thousand

drums in his lifetime. He readily admits that he is responsible for cutting down thousands of hardwood trees for his drum business.

Repeatedly, my Haitian colleague Kendy Vèrilus and I have pressed Charlesine on the possibility of planting trees to improve the well-being of the community and relieve some of the intense *chalè* (heat) residents suffer by having no respite from the burning sun. One such occasion, involving Charlesine and his neighbor, godson, and frequent companion, Moïse, led to an intriguing exchange:

Author: Tè sa, li ka fè tout pyebwa sa yo?

Vèrilus: Tout bagay.

Charlesine: Li ka fè tout bagay men pa gòn dlo pou nou util.

Moïse: —Pa gen frechè.

C: —Fò ta gen dlo pou nou util. Si ta gen dlo menm bannann menm li ka fè.

M: —Men, wi.

C: Men pa gen dlo.

Author: Eske te gen dlo nan zòn nan lontan? Eske ou sonje te gen anpil lapli lontan pase?

M: Wi, lontan lapli te kon tonbe dri.

C: Lapli te kon tonbe dri.

M: A monchè, lè ou monte ou wè nan mòn nan ou wè tout kote nan mòn nan se dlo, se dlo.

Author: OK. Epi mòn sa yo ou wè dèyè nou? Eske ou sonje yon lè pandan te gen plis pyebwa nan mòn sa yo?

M: Wi.

C: Wi, te gen plis pyebwa.

M: —plis pyebwa. Te gen valè bwa.

C: Te gen plis bwa ladan yo. Tout mòn sa yo te gen bwa anpil, men kounyela, bwa yo diminye. Lè move—

M: —sitiyasyon an mete atè—

C: —sitiyasyon mete atè, nèg yo koupe bwa yo fè chabon.

M: —fè chabon. . . .

V: Ou konnen mwen menm m ap di bagay la jan mwen panse l.

Author: This land, it can grow all these trees?

Vèrilus: Everything.

Charlesine: It can grow everything, but there's no water for us to use.

Moïse: —There's no fresh air.

C: —There would have to be water for us to use. If there were water, [the land] could even make plantains.

M: —Yes, of course.

C: But there's no water.

Author: Long ago was there water in this zone? Do you remember whether there used to be rain?

M: Yes, long ago rain would often fall.

C: Rain would often fall.

M: Ah, my friend, when you [would] climb up to see across the mountains, you [would] see water everywhere in the mountains.

Author: OK. And this mountain you see behind you—do you remember a time when there were more trees on that mountain?

M: Yes.

C: Yes, there were more trees.

M: —more trees. There were numerous trees.

C: There were more trees in [the mountains]. All these mountains had many trees, but now the trees have diminished. When bad—

M: —situations arise—

C: —situations arise people cut trees to make charcoal.

M: —make charcoal. . . .

V: You know me, I'll tell it the way I see it.



M: Se sa!  
V: M pa nan kache lonbrit.  
M: Wi!  
V: Ou ka plante pyebwa nan laj ou la  
toujou.  
C: M ka plante toujou?  
V: E s ak f' w pa plante? Paske ou  
konnen ou p ap gen tan pran fwi  
pyebwa?  
Author: —Wi, si ou ka fouye yon tanbou  
konsa!  
V: —Monchè!  
Author: —Ou ka plante yon pyebwa! Sa  
pi fasil!  
C: Se timoun sa yo pou plante bwa.  
V: Wi, men si ou te pran men yo al plante  
avè yo yo t ap plante. Gade tè ou gen  
la! Ou tè ka f'on rak la, wi!

M: Wi!  
V: Non, monchè.  
M: Mwen pa ka fè l ankò.  
V: Paske ou vann tout tè w yo?  
M: Mwen?  
V: Eh.  
M: Non, se pa vann yo m fè. M pa wè, m  
pa wè, m pa ka travay.  
Author: Men ou ka dirije moun pou fè l.

V: —Ou ka dirije moun pou fè l.  
M: Lè ou dirije moun fò yo ka tande w.

Author: Bon.  
M: Si ou dirije moun, moun pa tande w  
sa w fè? Lè timoun, al di timoun yo al  
fè sa yo pa okipe w.

C: Yo ret kanpe an plas.  
M: Oh. Ou di timoun nan fè sa, ou di  
timoun nan fè sa kònsa li pa fè li, li pa  
okipe w. O kontrè ou chita kote l l ap  
di w w ap pale anpil. Sa w fè? Kite li! L  
al deside si li bon pou li l al wè l.

M: That's it!  
V: I'm not into hiding anything  
[idiomatic expression].  
M: Yes!  
V: You can still plant trees at your age.  
C: I can still plant?  
V: What makes it so you can't plant?  
Because you won't be around to eat the  
fruit from the trees?  
Author: —Yeah, if you can hollow out a  
drum like that!  
V: —My friend!  
Author: —You can plant a tree! That's so  
much easier!  
C: It's these kids who should plant trees.  
V: Yes, but if you would take their hands  
and go plant with them, they would  
plant. Look at all this land you have!  
You could make a whole forest here!

M: Yes!  
V: No, my friend.  
M: I can't do that anymore.  
V: Because you sold all your land?  
M: Me?  
V: Uh-huh.  
M: No, it's not that I've sold my land. I  
can't see; I can't see, I can't work.  
Author: But you can direct people to do  
it.  
V: —You can direct people to do it.  
M: When you direct people, they have to  
hear you.  
Author: Hmm.  
M: If you direct people, and they don't  
hear you, what do you do? When the  
kids—you go tell kids to do something,  
they don't pay you any attention.  
C: They remain standing in place.  
M: Oh. You tell the kid to do this, you  
tell a kid to do it like this, they don't  
pay any attention.<sup>20</sup> On the contrary,  
[if] you sit there next to them, they'll  
tell you that you talk too much. What  
do you do? Leave them! They'll decide  
whether it's good for them, they'll see.  
(interview with the author, 24 Septem-  
ber 2016, Ti Rivye Bayonè, Haiti)

The entire conversation reflected a profound sense of resignation—“peyi a vin pa bon ankò” (the country isn’t any good anymore)—and dependency—“m ka plante bagay nan lakou a dèske n ap fè m gen yon tiyo” (I can plant things in the yard as soon as you ensure that I have a water pipe).<sup>21</sup> I have frequently encountered such sentiments among the rural and urban poor; while elaboration on this point will wait until another publication, I understand these expressions to be by-products of decades of missionary practices, failed aid and humanitarian efforts, global development agendas, and foreign interventionism. Yet it is disquieting each time I hear them.

### “Depi tanbou frape” (as Soon as the Drums Beat) . . . No More?

There is no tidy conclusion to Charlesine’s story, to the plight of Haiti’s peyizan, or to questions of deforestation and the impacts of environmental change on the sacred drums of Vodou.<sup>22</sup> Yet there are possible avenues that could lead to better futures, and there are protections built into the Afro-Haitian spiritual system that allow for survival. Specifically, for example, I queried journalist and Vodou adept Konpè Filo, who has known Charlesine for decades, about what will happen when Charlesine passes away. Konpè Filo has faith that the lwa will choose someone else to make tanbou or that Charlesine will yet find a way to transmit his knowledge: “Metye a ap pase kanmenm. . . . Ou pa wè li, men aprantisaj la ap fèt. W ap jwenn ke gen detwa timoun ki komanse fè tanbou a, li konn a kisa, li konn a ki pyebwa pou l fè tanbou a. . . . Nou k ap pa genyen Charlesine menm jan, men nou ka jwenn moun ki fè tanbou a” (The vocation will continue all the same. . . . You don’t see it, but apprenticeship is taking place. You’ll find two or three children who start to make the tanbou, they know with what, they know with what wood to make the drum. . . . We may not have Charlesine in the same way, but we can find someone who makes the tanbou) (Anthony Pascal [Konpè Filo], interview with the author, 25 July 2017, Delmas, Haiti).

When I pointed out Charlesine’s understanding that he learned to make drums nan dòmi (in a dream state) under direction from the mistik (the spirits, the supernatural), Konpè Filo alluded to the belief that Charlesine will take his place among the ancestors, alongside the lwa (Vodou spirits), and may visit his descendants through dreams to guide their path:

Jisteman, sa ka rive, se nan dòmi. Men, li menm, li kapab tou lè l prale oubyen pandan li fin ale, li konn kiyès ki te bò kote l, kiyès ki t ap swiv, epi li montre l, li di l, men kijan pou yo fè tanbou a. . . . Charlesine ka gen dwa bay moun nan leson nan dòmi. . . . Li gen dwa mouri. . . epi [li] di ah, se ou m wè k enterese. M ap ba w fè tanbou a. Men kijan pou fè l. . . . Gen anpil moun ki resevwa don sa nan dòmi.

Indeed, that can happen, it’s nan dòmi. But for him, it’s also possible that when [Charlesine] is going, or after he passes away, he knows who was close to him, who



was paying attention, and he [will] show him, he'll tell him, look, here's how to make a tanbou. . . . Charlesine might very well give the person a lesson nan dòmi. . . . He may die . . . and [he] says ah, I see that you're interested. I'll pass it to you to make the tanbou. Here's how to do it. . . . There are many people who receive this gift nan dòmi. (interview, 25 July 2017)

Accordingly, while Charlesine and many within the Vodou community express anxiety over who will make drums once he is gone, and even as there does not appear to be a successor preparing for this imminent shift, Vodou metaphysics allows for change as an inevitable and continual process but safeguards against complete loss. As another Vodouizan explained to me, even if an element of expressive or material culture within the lakou were to be lost or destroyed and the creators of that cultural item along with it, the seeds of creation—even a single seed—will always remain, ready to sprout again under more favorable conditions (Elizabeth Saint-Hilaire, interview with the author, 31 October 2016, Pétionville, Haiti). Charlesine's experience as a child demonstrates the resonance of this conviction: his drummer father passed away young, taking all knowledge with him before Charlesine had time to study the craft directly with a master. Yet the mistik came to guide Charlesine's acquisition of knowledge, leading him to become the most skilled and respected drummer in the region. His drums, after all, have been the ones played during the past fifty years at Lakou Souvenans,



**Figure 11.** Charlesine and family with labapen tree saplings that we hope will one day become a source of food and shade, 29 July 2017. Photo by Kendy Vêrilus.

Soukri, and Badjo. The significance of these three lakou cannot be overstated: they are among the country's highest regarded sacred yards and officially designated as national patrimony—a historically linked trio of sites where major spiritual pilgrimages draw thousands of local and international participants each year.

I have also pushed to address the lack of tree cover in Charlesine's lakou, well aware that countless reforestation projects over the past half century have failed due to unsuitability to the local environmental and cultural climate or unsustainability of resources and labor over the long run (see Murray and Bannister 2004). Such programs often also depend on how local populations see their best interests and what degree of effort they deem as necessary to invest. Following extensive dialogue about the necessity of trees over a period of two years, in July 2017 my colleague Kendy Vérilus and I gave Charlesine and his family five labapen tree saplings, a species in the breadfruit family that produces a nutty fruit resembling a chestnut that, roasted, is nutrient rich and high in complex carbohydrates (figure 11). The hope is that one day, the family will be able to harvest the labapen for food and enjoy the shade that these large trees with broad leaves provide.

As concerns over the continuity of spiritual practices and transmission of cultural heritage between generations intensify, the environment seems to be sustaining ever-greater demands on its natural resources. Such frictions are leading many Haitians to wrestle with their understandings of the interconnectedness between humanity, the divine, and the environment—a connection made concrete in the symbol of the tanbou and the trees from which the instrument is made. Some see a time of precarity and imbalance, observing that loss has been a recurrent narrative throughout Haitian history. Others hold on to hope: like the seed of creation that remains when everything else is lost or destroyed, pathways toward regrowth and renewal exist, should Haiti (and the world) choose those futures.

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offered a fellowship for leave, space, and a warm community for writing and reflecting. Colleagues at the 2016 ICTM Study Group on Applied Ethnomusicology symposium at Cape Breton University, at the 2017 DERT symposium Performing Diverse Environmentalisms at Indiana University, and at the Graduate School of Design, Risk and Resilience at Harvard University provided feedback on early drafts of part of this material, and graduate and undergraduate students in my Spring 2018 Caribbean Music, Spiritual Ecologies, and the Environment course were inquisitive readers of the final draft. Many others have accompanied me on this journey, and I hope more still will yet join in.

## Notes

All transcriptions and translations from French and Haitian Kreyòl to English throughout this text are mine unless otherwise indicated. Any errors are my responsibility alone.

1. Roumain, a member of the educated urban elite class far removed from the rural peyizan experience he often wrote about, bore witness to the compound social, economic, political, and environmental processes that were emerging at the time of his anthropological inquiries during the 1930s and 1940s. These processes—pertaining to the declining viability of the soil for agriculture, to large-scale internal migration toward city centers as younger generations have sought economic advantage, and to generational changes with regard to attitudes toward cultural practices, for example—have continued to shift rapidly today.

2. Lakou are sacred yards that support spiritual gatherings including annual pilgrimages, but the term also refers to the familial compound around which many residences and small cultivation plots are clustered. In the last century alone, Vodou has been the subject of repeated persecutions by the church with the complicity of the state, from the vociferous Catholic antisuperstition campaigns of the 1920s through 1940s; to the murderous assaults on Vodou priests and practitioners following Jean-Claude Duvalier's fall in 1986, conducted under the pretext of eliminating the Tonton Makout militia; to contemporary Protestant-driven attacks on Vodou culture as Satanic—certain Protestant sects blamed the 2010 earthquake on Haiti's supposed "pact with the devil," engaged in destruction of Vodou temples (*peristil*), and were reportedly behind the murder of dozens of *oungan* (priests) and *manbo* (priestesses) and Vodouizan across the country in the aftermath of the earthquake.

3. "Multi-perspectival" is the adjective used by Allen and Dawe (2016:10) to characterize the field of ecomusicology.

4. Many sources cited in this article offer detailed considerations of Vodou as a belief system, a practice, and a way of life. Besides the sources highlighted in this paragraph, see especially Hurbon (1987); Métraux ([1959] 1972); and Rigaud ([1953] 2015). Many other relevant publications are not cited here for lack of space.

5. Mizik rasin (roots music) incorporates Vodou and "traditional" melodies, rhythms, drumming practices, and instruments into popular commercial musics, including jazz, reggae, rock, and so on, while emphasizing Afrocentric aspects of Haiti's identity. The music ensemble Racine Mapou is known for its close fidelity to the music heard in lakou (sacred yards).

6. Most of the figures in this text are drawn from photos or video by Kendy Vérilus, a Haitian filmmaker with whom I frequently collaborate. All images shared here were taken in my presence and on my behalf during the course of my fieldwork. As a matter of practice, I seldom operate cameras in public spaces in Haiti, although I openly record sound where socially and politically appropriate. While the Haitian population is largely welcoming of foreigners, collaborating closely with my Haitian colleagues on things like visual documentation reduces tensions that can arise from the white gaze as an outgrowth of Haiti's colonial history. This methodological orientation has been crucial for me as a white woman working in spaces that are not intended for me to minimize the distance between my body and my social environment. I use cameras away from crowds; in private spaces; and among people who already know me, have been briefed on my research, and feel comfortable with my presence. In public spaces, I do not hide my objectives or connection to anyone operating a camera, but my Haitian colleagues and I have generally found that perceptions

of exploitation, intrusion, and scrutinization are greatly diminished when the person behind the camera blends more seamlessly into the group.

7. A *vèvè* is a cosmogram drawn on the ground with cornmeal, flour, coffee grounds, or some similar organic substance. These designs, specific to each *lwa*, are essentially viewed as keyholes to the spiritual world.

8. “Les tambours ont une âme, dit le fidèle du vaudou, après que ceux-ci ont été baptisés” (The drums have a soul, say the faithful of Vodou, once they have been baptized) (Roumain 1943:8).

9. Today, connections to the ancestral Igbo are experienced through a class of Ibo dances and rhythms said to have descended from the West African tribe.

10. For the purposes of this writing, I have simplified the representation of Haitian cosmology to refer principally to the *lwa*, although it should be noted that there are distinctions between *lespri* (the spirits), *lemò* (the dead), and *lezansèt* (the ancestors), as explored in Hurbon (1987) and Brown ([1991] 2001:94–101). The *mistik* (also known as *mistè*) are often thought to encompass all of these mystical beings.

11. Not strictly a word in Kreyòl, *Yamba* derives *èt* from the French *être*. It is common especially for formally educated Kreyòl speakers to mix French (or English or Spanish) into the conversation, as observed throughout *Yamba*’s statements but in contrast to Charlesine’s statements.

12. I juxtapose original verbal or written texts alongside their translations from audio or video recordings and documents or publications, a practice I view as essential in order to allow people to speak for themselves and to lessen the mediation that takes place in my curation of materials for presentation.

13. In Moreau’s original French: “Presque tout ce qu’on confie au sol du Dondon en grains, en légumes, en fruits & en fleurs, y réussit on ne peut pas plus heureusement. . . [L]es forêts fournissent avec abondance à tous les besoins pour les constructions & l’ameublement” (1797:262).

14. Moreau was explicitly concerned with erosion: “Quand on contemple le Dondon, les montagnes qui le coupent dans tous les sens; quand on voit les rochers, les parties incultivables qui s’y trouvent, on est étonné que l’industrie ait pu y créer autant de richesses, mais l’on ne peut s’empêcher de songer que chaque jour le sol s’appauvrit par les dégradations causées par les pluies. Tant qu’il existera des bois, leur coupe procurera de nouveaux défrichés, mais qu’on juge par les dégâts [sic] de la hache en soixante ans, de ce qui reste à espérer!” (When one contemplates Dondon, the mountains that cut in all directions; when one sees the rocks, the uncultivable parts that are found there, one is amazed that industry could have created so much wealth, but one cannot help wondering whether each day the soil is depleted by degradation caused by the rain. As long as there are forests, cutting them will provide new clearings, but one will only be able to judge the destruction of the ax in sixty years, of what one hopes will remain) (1797:261–62). Of the fines for those who would cut down the trees, Moreau’s original French reads: “La proximité où le terrain de l’hôpital se trouve de la ville, l’exposait aux dévastations des nègres, qui venaient y couper du bois; ce désordre, auquel une ordonnance de M. de Chastenoye voulait remédier dès le 4 Février 1726, se renouvelle encore quelquefois, malgré l’amende de 50 livres qu’il fait encourir à leurs maîtres” (591).

15. Among the indigenous Amerindian Arawak peoples were the Taíno, the primary inhabitants of Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, and Trinidad at the time of first European contact in the late fifteenth century.

16. Souvnans, Soukri, and Badjo form a historic triad in both geographic and metaphysical terms that extends back to the colonial era.

17. *Nerasyon* and *derasyon* do not appear to be within contemporary Kreyòl vocabulary. As Kreyòl is a phonetic language, it is possible to transcribe what was said without having direct reference to the words in a dictionary. Contextual clues make the meaning of these words sufficiently evident.

18. In its simplest conception, *rara* are musical foot bands associated with a Lenten carnavalesque festival of the Haitian countryside. The term also refers to the festival itself and to the accompanying music and dance of these foot bands.

19. We have covered the fees for two years of schooling for both girls, although the eldest dropped out when she became pregnant.

20. The singular *li* (he/she/it) has been translated to the plural in English (they) to convey the intended meaning while avoiding gender specificity (he/she). It is common for Kreyòl speakers to move between plural and singular pronouns for the same subject when that subject is conceived of as generic.

21. As remains the norm in rural and even many urban zones, community residents carry buckets of water from a source (a river, spring, well, or neighborhood pump) at great distance for use at home.

22. This subtitle recalls the proverb cited at the onset of this essay, “Depi tanbou frape, ayisyen leve kanpe” (As soon as the drums beat, Haitians stand up). The phrase “leve kanpe” (rise and stand up) is often used to signify action, as in to get up and get going; engagement, as in commitment to a cause; or mobilization, as in standing strong in solidarity. Some Haitians and other observers question whether the necessary level of engagement is being practiced with regard to tanbou and trees today.

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