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Marcin Kornak

Black Polish diaspora, the first Polish anti-racists

On January 12th 2010 the small, insular Caribbean state – Haiti was struck by a disaster of magnificent proportions. As a result of the unusually powerful earthquake, almost 160 thousand Haiti residents lost their lives and over one and a half million lost their homes. Each day following the calamity would deepen the humanitarian crisis. Hunger, shortage of medicine and basic hygiene products, on top of extreme poverty, which has destroyed the one of the poorest states in the world for years, have taken their toll.

Haiti's tragedy shook the entire world. As it usually happens in these situations, a lot of countries rushed to help. United States and France (up until the end of the 18th century Haiti, under the name San Domingo, was their colony) declared substantial and long-term support. Likewise, other European Union members committed similar sums, meanwhile the Polish government's first response was contributing only fifty thousand dollars (for comparison the married Hollywood stars Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt declared their support of a million dollars). Luckily the day after the humiliating decision was made, some sensible member of our government reflected on it, and it was changed. The sum of money to be contributed was raised to 150 thousand dollars and the logistical assistance was extended.

Nevertheless, the furthest reaching assistance was offered by a government of a small, poor country in Africa, Senegal. The televised images of the disaster-stricken coun-

try showing Black, French-speaking Haitians, really moved the inhabitants of West and Central Africa – former French colonies, so much so that the President of one of the states, Senegal, Me Abdoulaye Wade, declared that Haitians, as the descendants of enslaved people, are entitled to repatriation to Africa. 'Africans should give Haitians a chance to come back home. They have the right to do so. There is no need to bargain'. He announced that he will propose to the 53 members of the African Union, established eight years ago in place of the Organisation of African Unity, the establishment of a 'state for Haitians, on the African territory, the land of their ancestors'. The Senegalese Members of Parliament confirmed that their state is willing to offer agricultural land to Haitians. Dakar further committed a million dollars to the earthquake victims.

This was not the first surprising and little-known act of humanitarianism in the

history of Africa. In fact, the biggest one in the history that goes beyond this continent was orchestrated by the Malawian authorities. When the neighbouring and equally poverty-struck Mozambique, which was additionally devastated by years of civil war, was flooded by the Zambezi river, it was Malawi that rushed to help. It offered agricultural land to hundreds of thousands of impacted Mozambicans for a ten years time!

In comparison to these examples, the generosity of the Polish government seems rather bleak. Yet, it is Poland that would have a lot of reasons to go above and beyond when helping Haiti in comparison to helping other states struck by natural disasters.

For a long time, the only memory I associated with Haiti was the one from my childhood when the Polish football team won against Haiti 7:0 during the World Cup in Germany. Despite my childhood fascination with the team led by Kazimierz Deyna I was

in pity of the Black players helplessly running between the Polish footballers. It was then that the name of their country stamped on my memory.

Some time has passed, and the shocking scenes from the adaptation of *Asbes* by Stefan Zeromski,¹ directed by Andrzej Wajda² appeared. The movie showed a group of Polish Legion soldiers using bayonets to murder a battalion of Black soldiers, who were helping them suppress the uprising of enslaved people on San Domingo, as was Haiti formerly known, as well as the charismatic role of Jozef Nalberczak, a wandering soldier harking back to these events. Thus, a legendary epic was born of deceived Jan Henryk Dabrowski's³ soldiers fighting the uprising of debased descendants of the Black Land in the name of Polish Independence.

Zeromski himself depicted the scene in a suggestive manner: 'Dessalin along with the whole division of Black soldiers went to the insurgents' side at night. We were on opposite sides under the command of Krzysztof and Pawel Luwiertur. Eh, what a shame, what a shame... One battalion of these Black soldiers, four hundred men, they did not manage to follow close behind Dessalin. Only at the crack of dawn was his betrayal noticed. Just one Polish Bolesta's battalion was not able to control and force them to fight their fellow countrymen, a couple hundred of strong, armed Black soldiers. What to do with them? Let them go free, then they will strengthen the enemy's army, drag them along and they will betray us in the worst possible moment. General Fressinet, our new commander, a native Frenchman, commanded the Black soldiers to gather at the assembly, like every day. A military custom dictates that soldiers gather at the assembly without their weapons. As they gathered at the square, our battalion on Bolesta's command, surrounded them from each side. General Fressinet appeared. Gave a sign. The Black soldiers were not even expecting it. We

grabbed our weapons and pierced the defenceless, all 400 of them, with bayonets. Not even half an hour later no one was breathing'.

Why were there even Polish soldiers on San Domingo? The Polish Legion soldiers fighting in Italy, had become a burden on Napoleon after the peace treaty with Austria was signed in 1808, hence they were sent to the island to pacify the anti-French uprising of the enslaved people.



Jean-Jacques Dessalines depicted in anti-Haitian French propaganda

This topic, perhaps on account of its tragic and exotic nature, left a big impact on the Polish literature. The Caribbean expedition led by the legendary Wladyslaw Jablonowski, referred to as *Black boy*, a Polish bi-racial lieutenant colonel of the Tadeusz Kosciuszko insurrection⁴ and the General of the Polish Legions brigade was mentioned by Adam Mickiewicz in *Pan Tadeusz*.⁵ He mentioned San Domingo in reminiscence of an old Legion soldier, who 'Brought back old bones to his motherland':

'He would sit behind the table
And tell tales stranger than fairy tales. (...).
How Jablonowski fled,

Where sugar is smelted,
And where in eternal spring
Fragrant forests blossom;
with the Legion of Dunaj
There the Commander kills Black people,
But yearns the country'.

This topic was also undertaken by a January Uprising⁶ soldier, writer, historian Walery Przyborowski (aka Zygmunt Lucjan Sulima), in his book *In San Domingo* (1902). The Haitian history was also mentioned by a National Democracy activist, Jan Dobraczynski.⁷ His book *The Twentieth Brigade* (1957) was written to contradict the false narrative of Zeromski, which was in fact criticised by some historians: 'By writing it, I fulfilled my duty of removing the undeserved disgrace that the French propaganda removed from its nationals and placed on the Polish'.⁸

Out of over 5 thousand Polish soldiers, only a couple hundred returned back to Europe. The rest died decimated in battle, in tropical climate and constant yellow fever and malaria outbreaks. The most interesting, however, is the history of a group of 500 Polish soldiers who switched sides and joined the Black insurgents.

Their bravery and merits had to be above average as the leader of the rebellion, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, expressed his appreciation after successfully fighting the French expeditionary army and proclaiming Haiti's independence.⁹ In the year 1805 he wrote the constitution, where he incorporated two meaningful articles: 12. 'No White, regardless of their nationality cannot set foot on this territory either as a land owner, or as a Lord, and never in the future can they buy any gods here', and 13. 'The previous article does not adhere to these White women, which were naturalised by the government's decision, as well as the children they might give birth to. This article also applies to Poles and Germans naturalised by the government's decision'.

The article referred to women living with the rebels, perhaps not all of them willingly,

¹ Stefan Zeromski was a Polish novelist and dramatist, who belonged to the Young Poland movement at the turn of the 20th century (translator's note).

² Andrzej Wajda was an internationally awarded Polish film and theatre director (translator's note).

³ Jan Henryk Dabrowski (1755-1818) was a general, regarded as a Polish national hero for his part in Tadeusz Kosciuszko's rebellion against Russia (1794); he later organized and commanded the Polish Legions in Napoleon's army (translator's note).

⁴ Tadeusz Kosciuszko (1746-1817) – Polish army officer and sta-

tesman who gained fame both for his role in the American Revolution and for his leadership of a national insurrection in his homeland (translator's note).

⁵ *Pan Tadeusz* is a Polish national epic poem. It is compulsory reading in Polish schools and is deemed the last great epic poem in European literature (translator's note).

⁶ An insurrection in Russia's Kingdom of Poland aimed at the restoration of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It began in 1863 and was the longest lasting insurgency in post-partition Poland (translator's note).

⁷ Jan Dobraczynski was a Polish writer, novelist, politician and a Catholic publicist, between the two world wars he supported the National Party (translator's note).

⁸ Maciej Motas: *Legiony, Haiti i Dobraczynski*. 'Mysl Polska', 31.01-7.02.2010.

⁹ Dessalines reinstated the original, pre-Colombian name of the island in the language of Indians Taino/Arawak Hayiti/Hayti means a 'mountainous country'.

and besides the Poles, to a group of Germans, who also supported the formerly enslaved people. The rest of the White people on the island, Dessalines ordered to be mercilessly killed. These atrocities were not the first or the last poisoned fruit of colonialism and enslavement.

The special treatment of Poles was written about by a 19th century Haitian historian Thomas Madiou in his book *The History of Haiti*: ‘Dessalines gave orders not to kill any Poles who served under the French command. Conversely, he ordered his officials to offer them Haitian nationality. Boisrond-Tonnerre, the bloodthirsty secretary and Dessaline’s ideologue, added that they are brave people, whose despotism armed them against freedom, but they fought tyranny in their own state’.

The Poles created two battalions to serve the young republic, and since then, they became an integral part of its history and the present. Polish traces can be found on the island to this day – all it takes is pointing out that Guerda Benoit Preval, the former wife of the present President of Haiti Rene Preval,¹⁰ is Haitian of Polish descent.

The Poles settled in a couple of parts of the island, mainly in the Fond des Blancs and Cazales regions, where to this day all inhabitants, whether they have blue eyes and light-coloured hair or black skin, think of themselves as *polone* – Poles. Unfortunately, after 200 years of living in isolation and separation from Poland, *polone* have forgotten their mother tongue and most of the customs of their ancestors.

Nevertheless, their traditional Polish spirit of independence persisted, and it began to inconvenience Francois Duvalier known as Papa Doc and his son Jean-Claude – Bebe Doc, Haiti’s bloody dictators. Their regime started oppressing *polone* in mid 20th century. Duvalier’s secret political paramilitary police, the infamous Tonton Macoute,¹¹ orchestrated two bloody massacres of Cazales

residents – in 1965 and 1969. They are responsible for the destruction of most of the Polish heritage: documents, old houses resembling traditional Polish manor houses and a graveyard with Polish tombstones. On top of that, almost all mementos of the past were robbed. The couple of decades of repressions led the Poles to deepening poverty. In order to blend into the island’s society, most Cazales residents opted against Polish-sounding surnames.



Cazales inhabitants

During the many changes to the constitution made by the ruler of Haiti (Duvalier the father – author’s addition), the provision allowing Poles to acquire a Haitian nationality was dropped. It was supposed to be revenge for the spectacular defeat that the Haitian football team suffered in a match with Poland.¹²

However, Duvalier’s scheme did not go according to plan. When in 1983 the airplane with John Paul II landed on the Port-au-Prince airport, a group of fifty dark-skinned compatriots from Cazale came to greet him. According to their memories, the pope was moved by the encounter.

‘John Paul’s II visit was very important for the entire state. The pope influenced the history twice: by visiting Poland in 1979 and with his visit to Haiti. Although he

did visit the tyrant Bebe Doc, he did make a speech that led to the regime’s demise shortly after. He helped Haitians liberate themselves. He told them: «Houraj! Kinbe fem!» (Be brave, be strong).¹³

Leszek Kolankiewicz, a culture expert and a theatre academic, studies anthropological aspects of the Haitian syncretic religion voodoo.¹⁴ It connects the animism from Togo and Benin, from where the enslaved people were brought to San Domingo, as well as Indian and Christian beliefs. Kolankiewicz points out that one of the main deities in Haiti is Ezili Danto – meaning Holy Mary of Czestochowa – Black Madonna, which was a relic left after our Legion soldiers. ‘One can find the Black Madonna lookalike with the characteristic scars, in almost every temple in Haiti. The only difference is that she has three not two of them. (...) The scars are explained in two ways: she was either scratched by her rival Ezili Freda, or – as told by the highest priest Max Beauvoir – she was attacked by a panther. Her image has changed over the years. The crown, which she wears as the Queen of Poland was changed to a war bonnet made out of a pineapple, and the baby Jesus transformed into her daughter Anais’.

The voodoo rituals were discovered in the European culture by Jerzy Grotowski¹⁵ among others, and he referred to them in his vision of theatre. ‘Grotowski was vocal about breaking the cultural boundaries. I can only imagine that the specific Polish situation had an impact on forming such ideals. He was brought up in a country, which both geographically and historically was on crossroads of different cultures and influences. When experiencing foreign European cultures – Grotowski could have thought – people realise the differences between themselves through language, which is interconnected with culture. Experiencing things, the way we view affairs and our world view turns out to be shared and identical’.¹⁶

¹⁰ He left office May 14th 2011 (translator’s note).

¹¹ It was set up in 1959 inspired by the Italian fascist Blackshirts.

¹² J. Mielnik: *Haiti, niezwykła polska wyspa na krancu świata*. ‘Polska’, 16.01.2010.

¹³ *Czarna Polonia* (interview with prof. Leszek Kolankiewicz). ‘Gazeta Wyborcza’, 23.01.2010.

¹⁴ This religion was often confused with the voodoo cult that uses dark magic, but has little in common with it. Some scholars, including Leszek Kolankiewicz, are advocating for differentiating the spelling – wodu (religion) and wudu (magic).

¹⁵ Jerzy Grotowski was an innovative Polish theatre director and theorists, whose approach has significantly influenced theatre today (translator’s note).

¹⁶ Zbigniew Osinski: *Grotowski i jego Laboratorium*. Warszawa 1980.

In his travels around Haiti, Grotowski also visited Cazale. In his attempts to break cultural boundaries, he was determined enough to, as Kolankiewicz recalls: 'he turned the Polish legion soldier, the officer who demonstrated courage during the suppression of the Black enslaved peoples uprising on San Domingo, Feliks Grotowski, into his ancestor; and was able to go as far as to convince historians that this officer switched sides and joined the uprising. However, this story-telling fits in to his interpretation of the Haitian culture'.¹⁷



Ezili Danto - Holy Mary of Czestochowa

In the summer of 1980 a group of voodoo priests came to Warsaw invited by Grotowski, among them was one *laptop*, Amon Fremon – a representative of one of the oldest Polish diasporas in the world that set foot by the Vistula river. Professor Kolankiewicz, who took care of these amazing guests in Poland, recalls the visit as follows: '(Fremon felt here – translator's note) like he was in a magical land of ancestors. He believed we belong to the same tribe. It has to be understood that we and they have a different narrative. Ours is mostly based on history, theirs is more mythical. For instance, for them Grotowski was an anticipated messiah of sorts, who visited Cazale to bring back Fremon to his promised land – Poland. I had trouble with showing them around Warsaw, as I didn't know what to show them. Monuments? But what will they tell them!? It was only when we were on Krakowskie

Przedmiescie street next to a statue of Mickiewicz that I had an idea. I said: this is the great Polish voodoo priest, who kept in touch with ghosts and wrote a great rite to make these ghosts appear. It was then that they looked at Mickiewicz with admiration and I think it stuck with their memory'.



A green-eyed girl from Cazales

At the beginning of the 80's the Polish punk-rock revolt discovered Jamaican reggae music. This music caused a stir in our country that is felt to this day. Reggae culture cannot be separated from Rastafarianism – a syncretic, liberal belief that grew in the 30's among groups fighting for racial equality using interpretations of bible prophecies, aspirations of Black people and Markus Garvey's sermons – the pioneer of Black peoples' emancipation. Rastafarianism prophecies the fall of satanic Babylon, the system of evil, equated to racist colonialism and the return to Africa. Polish youth has discovered, through Rastafarianism's mysticism, the universal language to channel its revolt and the fight for freedom, which had its artistic impact on some of the greatest music albums in the history of Polish rock music, the group Izrael and Brygada Kryzys among others.

We are dealing with a double paradox here. Firstly, the youth from Central Europe fit in perfectly with the Afro-American narrative (nowadays it might not come as such surprise as in the time of multicultural societies different surprising associations occur). The second paradox is that not so far from

Jamaica, on Haiti, our own 'Polish rasta', *polone* live, who keep at their somewhat mystical, yet very much real Polish identity and await the great return to the land of their fathers! Their ancestors fought among the formerly enslaved Africans and by doing so, they wrote a beautiful chapter in Polish history that initiated the country's anti-racism tradition. However, this story was never heard by young artists and many others...

This abiding and waiting in hope was described in a brilliant book on the relicts of the colonial era *Lost White Tribes: The End of Privilege and the Last Colonials in Sri Lanka, Jamaica, Brazil, Haiti, Namibia, and Guadeloupe* by an Italian writer and journalist Riccardo Orizio. It was recently published by a Polish publishing house Czarne. Orizio dedicated one chapter to the Haitian *polone*. He wrote about his stay in Cazales in 1996 in a slightly poetic way.



Riccardo Orizio *Lost White Tribes*

The first question that he and his wife have been given on arrival was: 'Are you from Poland?'. Despite their disappointing answer, the residents treated them very cordially. They told them about their history and showed them the last memorabilia pointing to their Polish heritage that were kept with the utmost reverence and treated almost like sacred relics.

'Here, in Cazale, we never had racial prejudice – said Michelle Belno. (...)

¹⁷ *Mistrz i łgarz* (interview with prof. Leszek Kolankiewicz). 'Polityka', 27.06.2009.

Sitting on a chair on the porch, he tells us that Belno is one of the most popular names in this society and it derived from Belnowski.

We modified it to better integrate with Black Haitians, others changed their surnames completely. However, there were never any issues: my grandfather was Polish with very fair skin, my mother was Black and my father was Mestizo. You see, we Polish people were lucky that we never ruled, conversely to the now ruling Mulattos, who have an inferiority complex. Because of this, there was never anyone who hated us. We used to have it good. For example, this house was built by my grandparents. In those times finding the money and the building material was not hard. Now, as you can probably see, the society has sunk into poverty. A couple of people studied at university and was able to move to the city. In Port-au-Prince, there is one judge and a couple of doctors with Polish surnames. To be honest they have darker skin. You see, that's the reality: time erases race and only surnames survive. (...) We have never seen Poland, but we know that people living there would like to cooperate with Cazale – that's what they say. (...) The villagers from Cazale, cut off from everything and forgotten by everyone,

are full of Slavic melancholy of their ancestors. However, the hope that it's only a bad dream and one day they will wake up on this magic land they call «Lapologne» – this hope is still alive'.



Young Polish diaspora from Cazale

In the end, a couple of questions arise: isn't it worth it, given the past and the tragic situation in Haiti, to offer a helping hand in solidarity? We would like to appeal to our country's government to allow some of them, including our Black compatriots, the right to

settle in Poland. Isn't it the best moment to pay the debt of gratitude to Haiti, that provided asylum to all Poles who needed it, during the hardest 150 years in the Polish history, and was the only state in the world to guarantee such an unusual privilege in their constitution? For the majority of these 150 years, Poland was deprived of its sovereignty and was fighting for independence. It was in need. And now so is Haiti...

The Polish influence in the Haitian language (the local Creole variant – French with a strong African influence: Wolof language and other languages from the Gbe family)		
Mouin chaje kou Lapologn	Translation read	I'm always laden like Poland I'm always ready
Chaje kou lapoloy	Translation read	Charging through like a Pole Attack with force
Chaje kou Lapologn	Translation read	Charging through like Poland Be well prepared (e.g. for an exam)
M-ap Fe Krakow	Translation read	I'm making it like in Cracow To do something very properly

Translated by Zuzanna Palejko.