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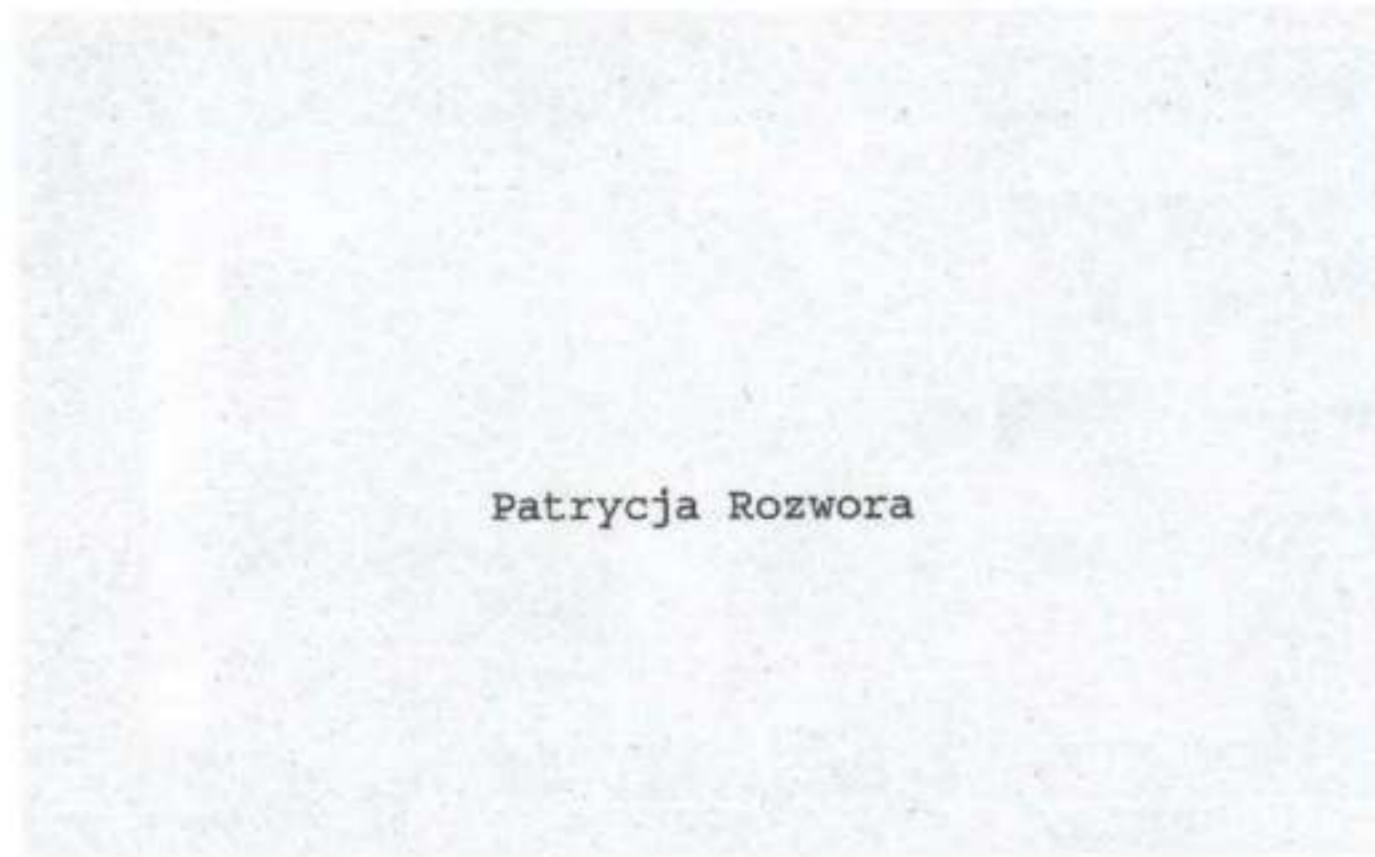
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Cazale, Haiti

A (Trans)National History to Learn From

The Peters World Map[1] is hanging right above my bed. I place my finger on the blue realm representing the Atlantic Ocean. I look at the island to the right of Cuba. On the map, I follow a path from the island's capital city Port-au-Prince towards a market town called Cabaret, then up the mountain, which can be reached by hopping on a truck trailer if you are lucky, otherwise on foot, or on donkeys. With the topography of the region unfolding further in mind, I feel certain that the higher I climb, the clearer the air becomes. Eventually I reach Cazale, where the horizon appears wider, revealing the rocky land completely devoid of trees.

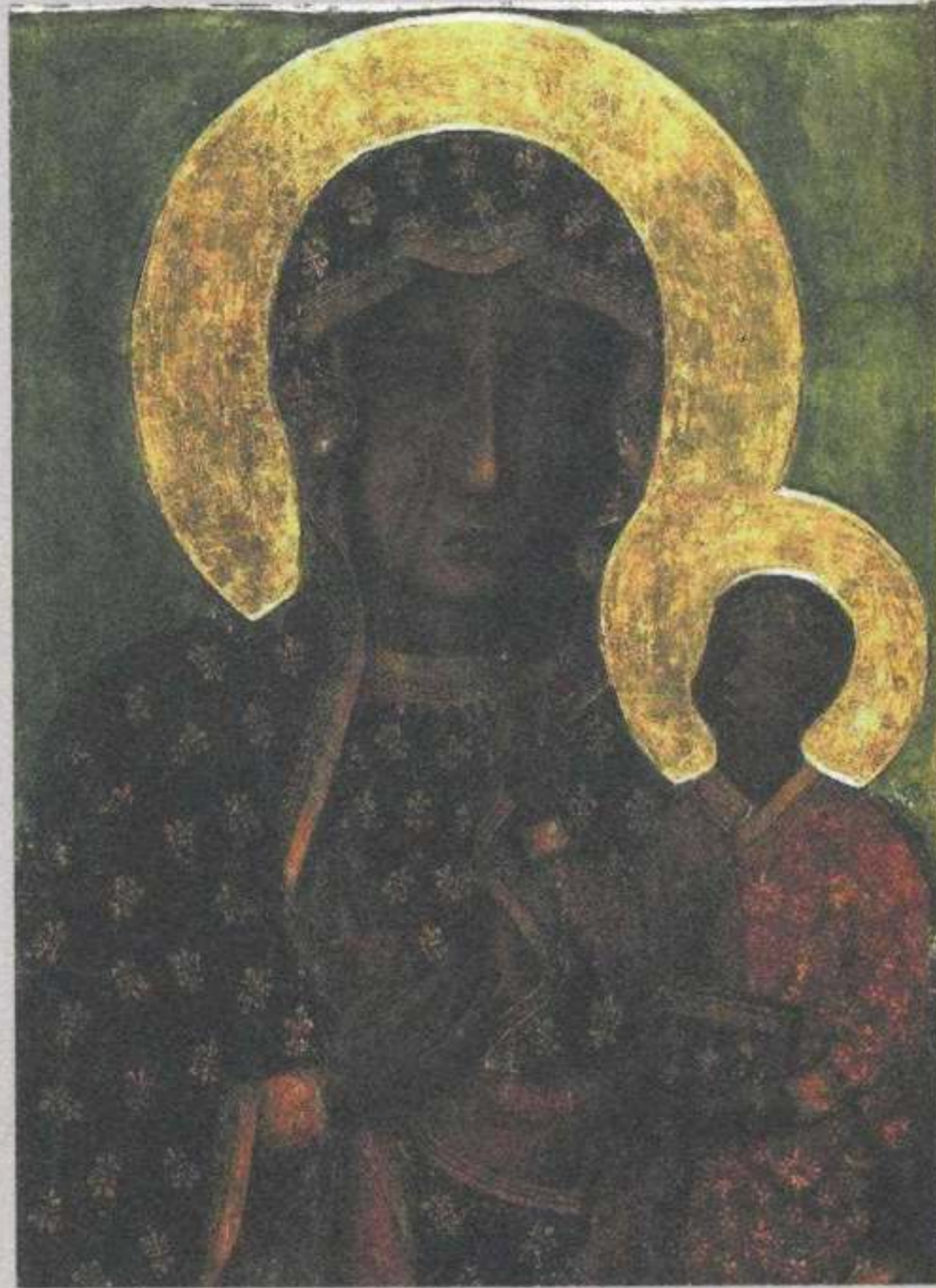
Cazale is a village similar to hundreds of others, situated on top of the bare mountains of Haiti. The dwelling of the locals is a mix of African-looking huts made out of dried mud or plaited straw, covered with banana leaves, and brick constructions with upper stories and little balconies close to a Tyrolean style. The houses are dotted about at random because the village does not have a connecting road. For a long time, before collapsing, the only substantial and central building was a small stone church dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel with a graveyard attached right next to it.[2]

Despite looking quite ordinary at a first glance, this particular village carries a unique and special story. Amongst the dark-skinned Haitians living here, there are many who appear quite different from the majority. High-cheek boned with blue eyes, fair skin and straight, blond hair like that of many other Eastern Europeans—the descendants of Polish soldiers, now frequently called 'the Polish Haitians.'

Their story dates back to 1802 when 2,570 soldiers of the Polish Legions commanded by Napoleon Bonaparte were sent to Haiti with the task of suppressing the uprising of the enslaved people of Saint-Domingue (the name of the island under French rule, from 1659 to 1804). The Polish soldiers worshiped Napoleon. He promised to restore the freedom of Poland (which was under the double protectorate of Prussia and Russia at that time), in return for restoring order in his colony. However, uniforms ill-suited to a tropical climate, no sense of the enemy field, and an epidemic of yellow fever collectively shattered their dream of a quick and easy return home. After multiple defeats and too many deaths, the Polish started

[1] A type of map that accurately depicts countries and continents, relative to their true size. Traditional maps have tended to show countries incorrectly in proportion to one another, to the advantage of the European colonial powers.

[2] Riccardo Orizio (2000) *Lost White Tribes: The End of Privilege and the Last Colonials in Sri Lanka, Jamaica, Brazil, Haiti, Namibia and Guadeloupe*. The Free Press, p.140. The church was built by Polish legionaries shortly after their arrival to Haiti. In 2000, the church suddenly crashed down. The inhabitants of Cazale suspected that witchcraft had something to do with this.



Black Madonna of Czestochowa, Poland. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

to notice similarities between the situation of the enslaved rebels of Haiti and their own situation back home in Poland. The subjugated black Haitians and the Polish nationalists were all fighting for the same ideals of liberty, independence, and freedom from foreign tyranny. Soon thereafter, hundreds of them decided to side with the black Haitians and fight for their revolution. After the French were defeated, Haiti became a free state with an independent constitution which formed in 1805.[3] Many Polish remained on the island and became citizens of the only place in the world brought into being by the revolution of an enslaved people.

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[3] Riccardo Orizio (2000) *Lost White Tribes*, p.146. According to the constitution, no white person was to either enter or own any of the island's territory. However, the constitution made an exception for Polish and German people. All citizens, no matter their skin colour, were to be called black.

[4] Riccardo Orizio (2000) *Lost White Tribes*, p.140.

Aside from their Slavic features, the soldier-ancestors left no books, documents, or tales to be passed down to the Polish Haitians of Cazale. More than two hundred years later, all that remains is a painting depicting the Madonna and Child, reminiscent of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa. The painting is kept under lock and key in a dusty corrugated-iron hut that now serves as a church.[4]



Voodoo scenes, seen in Port au Prince. Author: Fritz Rudolf Loewa. Source Wiki Commons.

In Poland, the Black Madonna is believed to be the mother and protector of every true Catholic. Already back in the 19th century, in fear of the pagan communities they had to face, soldiers took the Madonna icon to Saint-Domingue as a shield from the 'uncivilised' Other. Over time, the Madonna started to gain new meaning and paradoxically got incorporated into practices that the Catholics feared the most. Haitian Voodoo practitioners gradually identified with the powerful, dark-skinned icon. Their beliefs are a mix of animism from Togo and Benin (places from where people were shipped to the plantations of Saint-Domingue) and elements from Buddhism as well as Christianity.[5]

The Haitian Ezili Danto and Child sits and gazes the same way as the Polish Black Madonna. Ezili however is dressed in rather modest raiment with a lot of colour. The golden halo evolved into a crown made out of pineapple leaves and the baby Jesus got swapped with Anais, Ezili's daughter. Ezili is believed to be the pantheon of Lwa, who represents the divine forces of love, sexuality, prosperity, pleasure, maternity, creativity, and fertility.[6]

* * *

In 1983, two Catholic priests drove up the mountain to the village of Cazale. The community leaders, the Haitians with the fairest skin, and indeed anybody who cared to go along, were commanded to wear their best clothes and go welcome John Paul II. Full of excitement and hope, the villagers watched the Polish Pope emerge from his white plane and kiss the Haitian ground.[7] A few of them managed to shake his hand. To others, he promised assistance in the form of food, medicine, and educational materials, emphasising that Poles should help one another. Since then, however, no aid has arrived.

In 2010, a disastrous earthquake fell upon Haiti. 160,000 people were found dead and another 1,500,000 lost their homes. The enormous tragedy shook up the world, encouraging many nations to send financial and sanitary support. Despite having a great historical connection to Haiti, Poland didn't show any special concern for the Haitians' misery. The financial

[5] Marcin Kornak (2010) *Czarna Polonia, czyli o pierwszych polskich antyrasistach*. [Black Polish diaspora, the first Polish anti-racists], *Nigdy Więcej* nr. 18, 2.

[6] Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley (2018) *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders*, Duke University Press, p.4.

[7] According to some Christian Haitians, the gesture of kissing the ground by John Paul II was a coded signal identifying his involvement in Voodoo and meant bringing war to the country, which in fact happened a few years after. They believe that men, especially men in power, are guided by spirits.

support they sent was rather deplorable. In fact, the impoverished West-African country of Senegal (also a former French colony), feeling responsible to help the descendants of their enslaved ancestors, came up with the most generous offer. In addition to significant financial support, the President of Senegal filed a proposal to the African Union for dedicating a piece of African land to the Haitians for agricultural use.[8]

* * *

I am looking back at the map hanging above my bed. Twenty-one and a half centimetres away, north-east from Haiti, lies the country I tend to call home. According to *Minority Rights Group International*, Poland today is the most ethnically, racially, and religiously homogeneous country of Europe, with approximately 97% of the population declaring themselves 'fully Polish' and nearly 87% Catholic.[9] The recurring atrocities of right-wing slogans like 'Pure Poland, White Poland' or 'Poland for the Polish' have consistently led to the exclusion and isolation of any belief system that is progressive or inclusive.

Considering the above, the history of the Polish Haitians of Cazale strikes me right in the heart. As told by travelers who visited and talked to the soldiers' descendants, they never had to suffer racial prejudice at the hands of the other Haitians. The Polish never had a position of power in Haiti, and therefore weren't hated by anyone and could freely and gradually assimilate their new home. The soldiers, despite being told to suppress the 'savage' and 'wild' communities, used their own consciousness instead and saw their enemy as equal, admiring their struggle for freedom. This forgotten story should be shared extensively as a national history to learn from.

Today, the symbol of the Black Madonna—the ostensible patroness of all Catholics—is being hijacked by Christian Democrats and the Polish Church, who collectively profess that Madonna protects only the obedient and those living according to Church teachings, excluding thus important parts of Poland's contemporary society. Here again, the appropriated Polish Madonna—the Haitian Ezili Danto—may actually teach us so much more about the universality of love, especially for those who in the course of history, as well as uneven socio-economic development, were systematically put at the margins of society.

[8] Marcin Kornak (2010) *Czarna Polonia*, 1.

[9] *Minority Rights* (2018) *Minorities and Indigenous Peoples in Poland*. Online at: <https://minorityrights.org/country/poland/>