

Songs of Resistance

*Music plays an integral role in the social and religious activities of Haitian everyday life. Historically Haitian music developed through the synthesis of European and various African musical traditions. Some of the African musical characteristics are the collective quality by which the performers engage the participation of the audience, the featuring of percussion instruments, and the emphasis on improvisation. The most pervasive feature of the music is its use for social commentary. Since a majority of the population is illiterate, information and ideas are shared through music. One contemporary group that communicates its political views through music is called the **Boukman Eksperyans**.*

Boukman Eksperyans

In the aftermath of the September 1991 coup against President Aristide, Boukman Eksperyans continued to play despite censorship and intimidation. Three of their songs were banned by the military authorities in 1992 as "too violent" and radio stations were prohibited from playing them. One of these songs, *Kalfou Danjere* states that those who lie, cheat, kill, and steal will be judged at the crossroads, a place of central importance in Vodou metaphysics.

Soldiers and Macoutes are a fixture at Boukman concerts where they try to prevent the group from playing censored songs. It is thanks to the informal cassette industry in Haiti, to the support of Haitian immigrant communities abroad, and to international exposure that the voices of Boukman Eksperyans evade the efforts of authorities to silence them.

Language

A few terms in the English version of Boukman's songs are in their original Creole because they defy straightforward translation.

Ginen is derived from the name of a region of West Africa (Guinee) and has a complex set of meanings. It can be used to refer to the African homeland, to a spiritual realm where the Vodou deities live, and to a more general state of spiritual development and awareness for Haitians who practice Vodou.

Lakou. Peasant settlements in post-revolutionary Haiti were based on an African style of extended

family residence around a central courtyard. This type of collective living arrangement is still practiced in much of Haiti, even in the urban areas, and is called a *lakou* or courtyard. In the songs, the *lakou* is a symbol of deep family roots and traditions, a tie to land and place, and a sense of commitment and community.

Lwa. Afro-Haitian religion recognizes a supreme deity, Bondye, and a large number of ancestral spirits and deities of natural forces and human archetypes. These deities are known as *lwa*, *miste*, or *zanj*. Some *lwa* are: (**Met**) **Gran Bwa** an Afro-Indian deity of the deep woods; (**Kouzen**) **Azaka/Zaka** an agricultural *lwa* protector of peasants and farmers.

Background

Soul in a Bottle. This is a protest against those who control others and force them to live by foreign cultural standards. The bottle refers to certain practices of *Boko*, or sorcerers, who are reputed to be able to control people by capturing their souls in bottles.

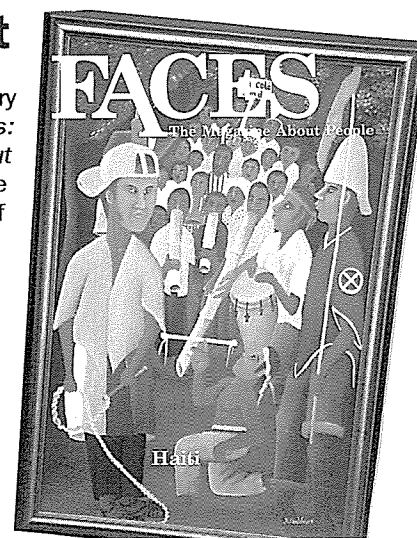
Our Ancestors. Congo, in addition to being an ethnic grouping in Haiti, is also a term used derogatorily for someone who looks like a rural mountain inhabitant. *Our Ancestors* talks of taking pride in being called Congo. They draw parallels between traditional Haitian culture and Jamaican Rastafarianism.

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Haitian Art

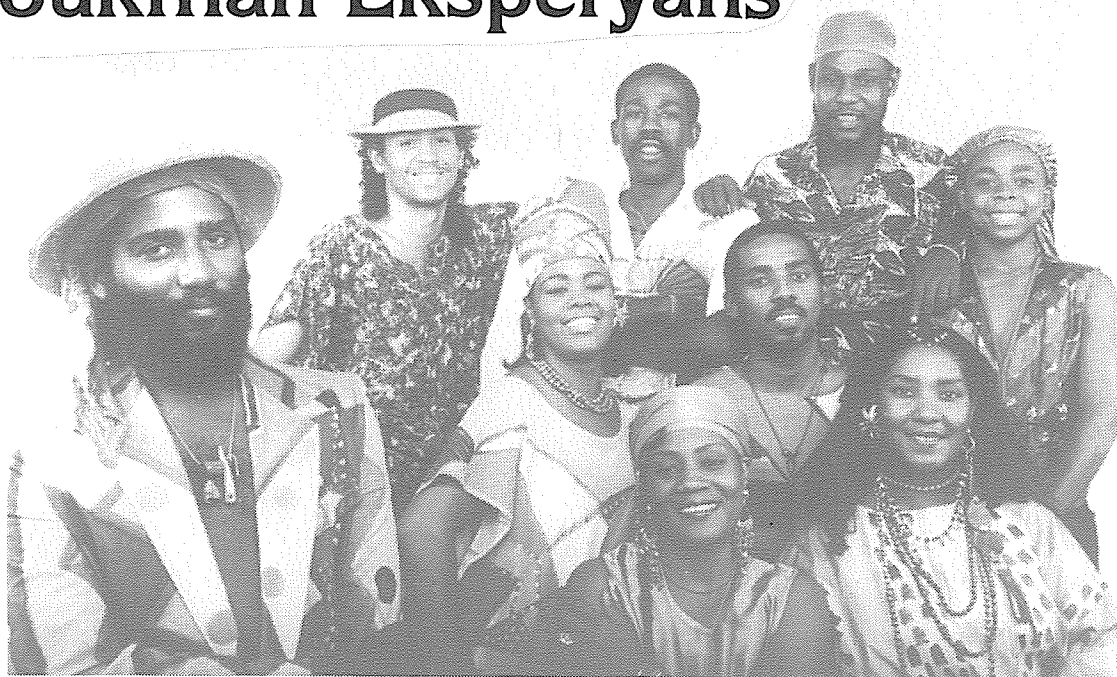
The February 1992 issue of *Faces: A Magazine About People* features the art and culture of Haiti for grades 4-7. Readings and hands-on activities. See *Resource Guide* for ordering information.

Cover of February issue by popular Haitian artist Julien Valéry.



Boukman Eksperyans

Photo: Steve Winter



Nanm Nan Boutèy

Anye, sa rèd o!
Anye, sa rèd o!
Nanm nou lan boutèy
Sa rèd o!

Sa rèd o!
Anye, sa rèd!

Sa rèd o wo!
Sa rèd o!

Nou bezwen pale kou moun sa yo
Nou bezwen wè kou moun sa yo
Nou bezwen tande kou moun sa yo
Nou bezwen gade kou moun sa yo

Nanm nou lan boutèy anye
Wa ayo o!

Anye sa rèd o wo wo!
Sa rèd o!

Ki lè nape rive o!
Ki lè nap pran Konsyans
Me Zanmi sa rèd o!

(Repeat) Ouyèe nan revolisyon na pwale

Lyrics by: T. Beaubrun Jr. and Mimerose Beaubrun.

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Soul In a Bottle

(English Translation)

Hey, this is rough!
Hey, this is tough
Our soul in a bottle
This is tough!

This is tough!
Hey, this is tough!

This is tough!
This is really tough!

We have to speak like these people
We have to see like these people
We have to listen like these people
We have to look like these people

Our soul in a bottle
Wa ayo o!

Hey, this is tough!
This is tough!

When will we arrive
When will we take a stand
My friends this is tough!

We're going to join the revolution!

See *Teaching Ideas* for discussion questions.

Listen To Me

Chorus: Listen to me
Understand me
Listen to me
The truth is talking

The truth speaks
Children come to listen
Listen to me
A revolution is truly starting

Yes, the truth speaks
Children gather together
Listen to me
Love will truly govern
(Chorus)

Yes, the truth talks
Ginen come to listen
Listen to me
All of the Indian spirits return

Yes, the truth speaks
Three words speak
Listen to me
Oh, *ginen* will govern

Listen to me the truth speaks
A little chat speaks
The truth is talking the truth is talking
Human beings, if you're there, come to listen
(Chorus)...

For Discussion

1. Currently many political decisions are made based on what will be most financially "profitable" for business. How would the world be different if the Boukman's concept of "love" governed?
2. Boukman band says "the truth is talking." Some people would say that there is not one truth about history, but instead that there are different, equally valid perspectives. Using Haiti as an example, is there one historical truth to be known or are there two equally valid interpretations of reality?
3. Using the same chorus as in *Listen to Me*, write a song or poem about the truth of your own community or city. What do you want children to know that they might not be hearing in the traditional media?
4. The song talks about how *Ginen* will govern and Indian spirits will return. What would this mean? Would this be better? Why or why not?

Our Ancestors

...Our ancestors
Nago people
Vodou Congo
Natty zing, natty dread
Nago Yoruba
Wo wo wo wo wo

Our ancestors
Congo people
Our true family
Natty dread, natty zing
From the Mandingo and the Fon peoples...

Congo oh! oh! (Repeat after every line below)
Congo doesn't bother me
You'll call me Congo
to dismiss me as backwards
Congo doesn't bother me
Swearing doesn't bother me

Refrain: The Congo queen rises
Rises, rises, rises, rises

Congo oh! oh! (Repeat after every line below)
Congo doesn't bother me
You call me Congo
to dismiss me as backwards
Congo doesn't bother me
Wherever you go, you try to panic me
Congo doesn't bother me
Swearing doesn't annoy me
Congo doesn't bother me...
(Repeat refrain)

For Discussion

Two students can prepare to read the song aloud. They can ask the rest of the class to repeat "Congo oh! oh!" at the appropriate times. Then discuss:

1. What groups in your community are looked down on as poor people are in Haiti? How is this seen, e.g. insults, job discrimination. What are the categories? (e.g., race, rural vs. urban, class, gender, etc.)
2. Boukman speaks of the links between the people of Haiti and the Rastafarians in Jamaica. What links can you see between people in your own communities? Or across borders, e.g. between you and people in Haiti?
3. Share a geographic map of Africa. Why are the names of the peoples in the song who were brought as slaves not easily found on the map? Compare the colonization of Africa with the colonization of the Caribbean.

Lyrics: Mimerose Beaubrun & T. Beaubrun Jr. © 1992 Songs of PolygramInternational, Inc. and Balajo Music