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Viv Dechoukaj, Long Live Uprooting! Aristide's Politico-theology of Defensive Violence in the Struggle for Democracy in Haiti*

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ABSTRACT



The essay has a twofold objectives. First, it analyzes the complex relationships of popular violence, gansterization, and chimerization associated with Jean-Bertrand Aristide's political leadership and actions during his second presidential administration. Secondly, it examines Aristide's first politico-theological treatise, *100 Vese Dechoukaj Va T'en Satan!* to study whether he has formulated or articulated a theology of violence and aggression that will later shape his political leadership during his second presidential administration. It is evident in this early text, Aristide has perfected a rhetoric of bellicosity, framed within a particular theo-political hermeneutics and discourse, to damn the Duvalierists and Macoutes, and uproot the oppressors and distractors of the Haitian people. In other words, this essay argues that the popular violence and gangsterism associated with Aristide's second-term presidency and his *Fanmi Lavalas* supporters have deep roots in Aristide's revolutionary theology of contextualization and biblical hermeneutical re-appropriation to the Haitian experience of his time.

KEYWORDS

Haiti; Aristide; gangsterization; violence; Duvalierists; Macoutes

Introduction

Jean-Bertrand Aristide is one of the most controversial figures in Haitian history in the twenty-first century. He is a Liberation Theologian, a former President of Haiti, and a former Catholic-Priest who has been expelled from the Catholic Church and Priesthood for his radical views on social and political issues. The political ambiguity that has marked his two presidencies, 1991–1996, and 2001–2004 is quite appalling. Aristide overwhelming won the popular votes in the 1990 presidential election in Haiti. He came to power in 7 February 1991; briefly, after seven months of governance, he was overthrown by a military coup on 26 September 1991. He was restored to power in 1994–1996, by the US government and the International community. His second presidential administration lasted

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*This particular essay is part of the research conducted within the auspices of the University of Pretoria, for a PhD in Dogmatics and Christian Ethics, under the supervision of Prof. Vuyani Vellem. In particular, the author is appreciative of Dr. Jeb Sprague-Silgado's insightful feedback and constructive criticism to this essay. Although we do not share the same perspective on the meaning of Aristide's democratic and justice projects in Haiti and his role as both Priest-Theologian and President-Activist, the author has not undermined Sprague-Silgado's interpretation of the Aristide phenomenon in the context of Haitian, international politics and the struggle for democracy in Haiti.

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from 2001 to 2004. In both presidential elections, Jean-Bertrand Aristide won the popular vote, about 70% in 2001. For the second time, Aristide was ousted in 2004 in a coup d'état, and eventually was forced to exile in South Africa.

Many critics have characterized Aristide's political leadership and actions during his second administration as an era of intense popular violence, gangsterization, and *chimèrization*. Consequently, the goal of this essay is twofold. First, it analyses these complex relationships and sensitive-ethical issues by interacting with the current scholarship on Aristide. Emphasis will be given on three vital issues: Jean-Bertrand Aristide's seeming affiliation with the gangs of *chimères*, the deadly method of necklacing (*Père Lebrun*), which he ostensibly advocated, and the violations of human rights, his second administration, carried out.

Second, the essay examines Aristide's first politico-theological treatise, *100 Vèsè dechoukaj. Va t'en Satan!* to see whether he has formulated or articulated a theology of violence and aggression that will later shape his political leadership and actions during his second presidential administration. It is evident in this early text, Aristide has perfected a rhetoric of bellicosity, framed within a particular theo-political hermeneutics and discourse, to damn the Duvalierists and Macoutes, and uproot the oppressors and distractors of the Haitian people. In other words, this essay argues that the popular violence and gangsterism associated with Aristide's second-term presidency and his Fanmi Lavalas (FL) (his political party), supporters have deep roots in Aristide's theology of retributive justice; yet, such theology was constructed as a response to the Duvalier regime and to redeem the Haitian people from their oppressors and preserve them from future state-sponsored violence and aggression.

There is certainly a tremendous divide between Aristide's theology and his later political administration. Undoubtedly, there exists a wide disunity between his theological ethics and the political activities during his second presidency. For example, if the allegations against Aristide are true, then Aristide's promotion of a theology of love and mutual reciprocity in the public sphere somewhat denies his many political interventions as the former Head of the State of Haiti. On the other hand, we must be careful not to equate propaganda with reality, as both elements pertain to Aristide's religious faith and presidency.

Contemporary Studies on Aristide

Contemporary studies on Aristide not only leave many of his theological ideas unexplored, they have not given serious consideration to his theological ethics and anthropology, with the exception of the works of sociologist Alex Dupuy and philosopher Peter Hallward who examined his theological discourse in passing. Dupuy and Hallward's respective works have many omissions and unconnected threads. Current studies (i.e. Dupuy, Hallward, Sprague, Nesbitt, Achille, Wilentz, Abbott, Girard, Saint Paul, etc.) on Aristide put great accent on Jean-Bertrand Aristide as a politician and President of Haiti.

These important studies have contributed enormously to our understanding of Jean-Bertrand Aristide as a President-Activist on behalf of the Haitian poor and the disfranchised, but there remains an intellectual void to investigate this major figure as a Politico-Theologian Activist. Aristide's political actions and allies have dismayed or demoralized many of his supporters and particularly the Haitian masses who were

faithfully committed to his promise of democratic populism and the leadership vision during both of his administrations.

We concur that it will not be an exaggeration to declare that there are two Aristides: Aristide the theologian, and Aristide the President. Both figures are seemingly scandalous and irreconcilable. The person and works of Jean-Bertrand Aristide as a Theologian-Priest, and President-Activist embody a high level of ambiguity, incoherency, and to some extent, have fostered a life of terrific political disorder and terror in the Haitian society. As one fervent Aristide's supporter has remarked, "Aristide always has a double-face, a double-game, at every juncture ... He looks at the moment to see how to act so he can use it to his advantage and make political capital from it."¹ Our goal in this essay is not to demonize Aristide and reconcile Aristide the Theologian with Aristide the President. We believe the Aristide phenomenon is representative of the indecisive nature of human nature, which Aristide's personality embodies.

We take into consideration that individuals do evolve and progress with time and change, and that the chronology of one's life and circles of influence may impact on their ideas and choices. Of course, in the case of President Aristide, he made some extremely difficult choices and unfortunate decisions as he came to a better understanding of the Haitian reality and the struggle to lead a people, who have been starved, oppressed, and abused by various powerful forces, into a more promising economic future and democratic life.

As compared to previous regimes, the Aristide administration was very progressive and forward-looking. Aristide has supported and invested in many social programmes, and provided substantial resources to alleviate poverty and improve the country's literacy level. He campaigned to ameliorate the living conditions of the Haitian poor and working class and incessantly crusaded for income distribution and job creation in the country. For example, in his first presidency and partially in his second term, Aristide championed the cause of the Haitian poor and the oppressed majority, and his idea of justice not only implied retributive justice and defensive violence. In Aristide's political theology, justice also bears the notion of relationality and solidarity, with the poor.² The accomplishments of the FL Party in Haiti are well documented and attested by various sources.³

Like his political predecessors, as many critics have consistently demonstrated, Aristide's second administration has contributed massively to a disastrous climate in Haitian society, including political terror, human-rights abuse and violation, popular violence, money laundering, government corruption, and political authoritarianism, all of which have radically transformed Haiti's civil and political society. We are also interested in commenting on these crucial matters and reinterpreting the aforementioned studies that depict Aristide as an angry-power obsessed leader, a murderer, human rights violator, and the President-Activist who used his power to exploit the Haitian masses, whom he claimed to dignify, humanize, defend, represent, and love.

As previously mentioned in the introduction, Aristide received massive support from various segments of the Haitian population in his second presidential election in 2001.

¹Abbott, *Haiti: A Shattered Nation*, 375.

²Joseph, "Toward a Politico-Theology of Relationality," 269–300.

³"We Will Not Forget: The Achievements of Lavalas in Haiti" <http://lisarothgrafx.com/portfolio/haiti-history-book/>.

Nonetheless, the ruling class and local elites contested his mandate. Many of these individuals were empowered by American regime's strategy of ramped up destabilization and the outing of any critics of the dominant order.

Aristide's advocacy of dechoukaj, necklacing, and chimerization should be understood in the context of his participatory democratic and retributive justice projects aiming at protecting the perilous nation of Haiti that was under attack by the people's oppressors. Hence, Aristide's support of popular violence is retributive and just. Many have argued that his famous "Pere Lebrun" speech which he delivered in Creole in 27 September 1991,⁴ in which he advocated necklacing was misunderstood and mistranslated in English, and that his words were twisted by CIA operatives.⁵ Interestingly, in the speech, Aristide's playful Creole metaphors and evocative images were clearly understood by the Haitian people; the intent of his message was not ambivalent nor have the Haitian people misunderstood what he wanted them to carry out. Historically, necklacing was a common method that anti-Duvalierist and Macoutist opponents (supported by the general Haitian masses who have been terrorized by and were victims of the Duvalier regime), used to slaughter Haiti's boogeymen and Duvalierists.

This deadly method became popular in Haitian society at the fall of Jean-Claude Duvalier ("Baby Doc") in 1986, through the popular uprising of the suffering republic. It was an act of vindication and retributive justice from a people who refused to suffer and wished to explore emancipatory future possibilities. From 1986 to the ascension of Aristide to presidential power, necklacing was practiced nationally in every major city and town in Haiti to end the injurious reign of Macoutism and Duvalierism, and to exterminate any potential oppressor or associates of the Duvalier regime in Haiti. We have listened numerous times to the famous "Pere Lebrun" Creole speech and concluded that President Aristide was not alluding to Haiti's Constitution as the catalyst to assess the activities and deeds of the people's oppressors. It is clear that he was unequivocally promoting necklacing as a vengeful mechanism to cleanse the land from the fearful terror of Macoutism and the poisonous regime of Duvalierism. Aristide did not invent the necklacing death-penalty method. It is important to point out that for many decades in Haitian history, under the ferocious leadership of both Duvaliers (Francois and Jean-Claude Duvalier), Haitian Macoutes, and Duvalierists had slayed thousands of innocent people and imprisoned those individuals who were perceived as anti-Duvalier and anti-Macoute.

Moreover, for many thinkers and critics, the popular violence and gangsterism linked with Aristide's second administration should be understood in the context self-defense, precisely when the Haitian people tried to shield their communities from paramilitary terrorists armed by Haiti's elite minority and Dominican military. Therefore, we should not lump all Lavalas militants together as criminal thugs whose goal was retributive violence because of the unjustified mass killing of poor Haitians.⁶ Aristide's unfavourable political actions did not occur in a vacuum. His decision to cooperate with business interests and conservatives may have dismayed his left leaning supporters and the radical FL movement,

⁴See, for example, "Did Aristide Support Violence and Pere Lebrun in Haiti? – Speech – September 27, 1991," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQt8tFzFA8>. The speech was given in Haitian Creole and was translated in English by Raymond Joseph for *Haiti Observateur*.

⁵For further reference, see Ridgeway, *The Haiti Files*.

⁶For a critical analysis on these matters and an alternative reading, see Sprague, *Paramilitarism and the Assault on Democracy in Haiti*.

or his various interventions to make peace between gangs in the Cite Soleil, probably angered Aristide's critics, Haitian elites, and the ruling class in the country.⁷

Nonetheless, during his two presidencies, Aristide has used inflammatory speeches to fuel popular protest and violence against the bourgeoisie class, the political dominant class, and to unify the masses against the wealthy and elite minority in Haiti. This incendiary rhetoric eventually led to national disunity and the animosity between the poor and the rich and mulatto and Black and brown-skinned Haitians.

In addition, Aristide encouraged his supporters to use the deadly method of necklacing to annihilate his political opponents and the *Macoutes*.⁸ In a powerful speech he delivered to the Haitian people, Aristide deployed the rhetoric of violence to motivate the Haitian masses to practice the necklacing (*Père Lebrun*) method and to threaten his political foes. He called upon his FL followers to give the *Macoutes* "what they deserve," and named the deadly device, necklacing, "a nice tool," and "a nice instrument:"

If you catch someone who does not deserve to be where he is, do not fail to give him what he deserves. Do not fail to give him what he deserves! Do not fail to give him what he deserves! Do not fail to give him what he deserves ... *Macoutes* are excluded from the political game. *Macoutes* are excluded from the political game. Do not fail to give them what they deserve. Do not fail to give them what they deserve ...

If we watch one, do not fail to give him what he deserves. What a nice tool! What a nice instrument! What a nice device! It is a pretty one. It is elegant, attractive, splendid, graceful, and dazzling. It smells good. Wherever you go, you feel like smelling it. It is provided for by the Constitution, which bans *Macoutes* from the political scene. Whatever happens to them is their problem.⁹

Aristide and the Practice of Necklacing (*Père Lebrun*) and Gangsterization (*Chimères*)

In another speech (July 1991), Aristide called for popular violence against his foes:

When you are in your literacy class, you are learning to think about '*Père Lebrun*,' it's because you have to know when to use it, and where to use it. And you may never use it again in a state where law prevails.¹⁰

According to Robert Fatton,

When Aristide made his famous '*Père Lebrun*' speech on September 27, the speech in which he rhetorically extolled in front of a huge crowd the virtues of necklacing his *Macoute* enemies, he had already lost the battle. The speech was a desperate attempt to prevent the army and the bourgeoisie from striking down Lavalas.¹¹

Dupuy's harsh criticism of the Aristide administration for its use of popular violence is worth noting below.

⁷Griffin, "Haiti Human Rights Investigation: November 11–21, 2004"

⁸Macoutes are often terms as 'Bogeymen'. Macoutism was a paramilitary/armed forces which Francois Duvalier created with the goal to maintain his political power and totalitarianism.

⁹Girard, *Haiti: The Tumultuous History*, 128; "Did Aristide support violence and pe lebrun in Haiti? – Speech – Sept. 27, 1991," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQt8tFzFA8>; "Aristide's 'pe Lebrun' Speech: President Aristide's Speech of Friday September 27, 1991, translated by *Haiti Observateur*, <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/43a/009.html>.

¹⁰Nesbitt, *Caribbean Critique*, 218.

¹¹Fatton, *Haiti's Predatory Republic*, 84.

As President, it was Aristide's ultimate responsibility to uphold the rule of law and human rights, "to refrain from any statement that could be understood to support *Père Lebrun*, and to speak out firmly and consistently against this barbaric practice." Aristide failed to do so because he became deluded by his own charismatic powers and believed that, with the masses behind him, he was invincible and that he could rule respecting the law and without winning over the bourgeoisie, the parliament, or the army. This was his greatest mistake. The error that Aristide made in all these instances, where popular violence was used or threatened with is explicit or implicit encouragement, was political and not moral. It stemmed from his failure to distinguish between democratic rights and violent and illegal threats to democracy (and his presidency).¹²

Evidently, for many Haitian nationals, Jean-Bertrand Aristide was "the spiritual father of the Haitian state,"¹³ although his pitfalls are numerous. He failed to condemn the threat of and use of necklacing by his supporters. He even recommended it as a tool to annihilate anyone who opposed his power or administration, and as a way to cleanse the Haitian nation and to free the people from the vestiges of Duvalierism, Macoutism, and political totalitarianism. For Dupuy, Duvalier's *Macoutes* have kept the Haitian people in perpetual bondage and terror.

Necklacing is cathartic violence for the President-Theologian almost in the same way Frantz Fanon has endorsed the use of cathartic violence towards decolonization and post-colonial independence. In the same way, Aristide has collaborated with the gangs of the *Chimères* to pacify the country and maintain political power. Jeb Sprague has provided a counter perspective that these events and affiliations must be studied within the context of

years of economic and political destabilization launched as part of the hyper militarized post-9/11 Bush-regime and the country under attack with the police force unable to protect itself – that at this last moment in the last few weeks some supporters were mobilized to halt the paramilitary invasion.¹⁴

Conversely, in his "Foreword" to Dupuy's excellent study on Aristide, *The Prophet and Power*, Frank Laraque reiterates the significance of Aristide's liberation theology to overthrow the Duvalierist regime and to mobilize the Haitian people towards a democratic future. According to Laraque, Aristide has achieved both objectives,

mainly through the politization of religious faith: the Christian faith, with its teaching of miracles, divine intervention, and the infallibility of the word of the messiah or prophet, and the Vodou faith, with its "power of the point," which, when given by a *hougan* (Vodou priest), allows the receiver to disappear and be invulnerable to bullets.¹⁵

Within the backdrop of Liberation theology, it is historically true that Aristide's rhetoric bears a messianic overtone, aimed at the emancipation of the Haitian masses. On the other hand, unless one was an eyewitness, it is very difficult to know how Aristide used the power of the Vodou religion to ascend to political power and popular leadership.

Aristide's charismatic messianism and prophetic rhetoric, framed within the logic of liberation theology, has been used to "strengthen and unite the various base ecclesiastic

¹²Dupuy, *The Prophet and Power*, 130.

¹³Saint Paul, *Chime et Tontons Macoutes comme Milices*, 64.

¹⁴The author's correspondence with Jebb Sprague, November 7, 2016. For further reflection on this matter, see Sprague, *Paramilitarism and the Assault on Democracy in Haiti*.

¹⁵Dupuy, *The Prophet and Power*, x.

communities,”¹⁶ and Haitian of all social classes and educational background. The force of Aristide’s political theology and his religious approach to political activism and social issues has produced psychological effects on the Haitian masses, impacting on the collective agency and the democratic participation of the people. One can even speak of a particular Haitian liberative psychology associated with the era of Jean-Bertrand Aristide. As both Laraque and Dupuy have realized, Aristide’s

theological views on politics led him to see himself as a prophetic, charismatic leader who had a direct, symbiotic relationship with the ‘prophetic’ people and who could interpret their needs, interests, and aspirations ... The masses who state that Aristide was a prophet or a messiah, as he claimed, firmly believed he was protected by a divine force, a *loa* (a Vodou spirit), against all perils. In demonstration after demonstration, the crowd never failed to shout, ‘Don’t you touch the prophet, or you will be burned!’¹⁷

The blending of Christian power and Vodou power to effectuate democratic progress in Haiti is more simply vain speculation than it is rooted in historical reality.

Unfortunately, only seven months in his first presidential term, the Haitian military, supported by the Haitian bourgeoisie and elite class, the United States, France, and Canada, overthrew the first democratically elected President. Consequently, would Aristide abandon the participatory democracy, democratic communitarianism, and radical egalitarianism he once promoted? During Aristide’s second and final presidential term, Dupuy contended that “To maintain power, Aristide relied on armed gangs, the police, and authoritarian practices to suppress his opponents, all the while cultivating a self-serving image as defender of the poor.”¹⁸

For Dupuy, Aristide’s second administration became shunned and increasingly totalitarian because after his return to Haiti in October 1994, his main objective “was to monopolize political power for himself and his Lavalas Family (FL) party to create what Robert Fatton aptly called ‘a presidential monarchism bent on suppressing any alternative, independent power’”.¹⁹ As Jeb Sprague has interpreted, for Dupuy,

Political violence is depicted as if it was perpetuated equally by sectors of the ex-military (aligned with the bourgeoisie) and urban gangs (aligned with Lavalas) – two heads of the same coin – where extralegal groups carry out violence for politicians hungering for state power.²⁰

Moreover, according to Dupuy’s poignant analysis on Aristide’s governance and bipolar personality:

On the other hand, Aristide preached class conciliation, and the entire social democratic project of his government was based on forming a broad consensus and a class alliance among the bourgeoisie, the working class, and the peasants. On the other hand, he threatened to unleash popular violence against and expropriate the bourgeoisie when the latter refused to go along with his program. He preached respect for the constitution and the rule of law, yet he sanctioned the use of force if necessary to achieve his vision of justice, even when that contravened the law. He declared his adherence to the democratic process and the separation of powers, yet he disdained all established political parties, sought to bypass the National

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., xiii.

¹⁸Ibid., xv.

¹⁹Ibid., 59.

²⁰Sprague, *Paramilitarism and the Assault on Democracy*, 290.

Assembly and the judiciary, and even encouraged his popular supporters to harass and intimidate parliamentarians and the justices who opposed him or sought to exercise their independent functions.²¹

Interestingly, the usually critical Dupuy could conclude his assessment on Aristide with this balanced and sympathetic statement:

For all his political errors and even the abuse of his powers as president, the human rights record under the first Aristide government showed dramatic improvement, compared favorably with the record of any of his predecessors, and certainly paled in comparison with the reign of terror that followed his overthrow.²²

Aristide's second presidency was marked by a zeal for revenge, self-protection, and the annihilation of his opponents. Correspondingly, Aristide was more concerned about the threats of globalization, the Haitian dominant and bourgeois classes and their international allies than unifying the people and bringing together various divided segments and groups in the Haitian society.

[Aristide] He believes he was left with little choice but to rely on his mass base, especially the gangs of *Chimère*, for his support ... In effect, by relying on armed gangs rather than mobilizing his popular base as a counterforce to the opposition, Aristide would marginalize the latter. Henceforth, Lavalas would become equated with the chimes, and the entire popular movement associated with Lavalas that made possible the defeat of the neo-Duvalierists after 1987, the election of Aristide in 1990, the resistance against the military junta between 1991 and 1994, and the return of Aristide in 1994 would become discredited, demobilized, and demoralized.²³

Also, Dupuy explains painstakingly, the rise of gangs of *Chimères*, an internal terrorist group in Haiti which many critics associated with Aristide's second administration. He states:

It is important to note, however, that well before his reelection, Aristide and other Lavalas officials were using the *chimes* as a force de frappe against his opponents. Many acts of violence and a number of killings occurred between 1999 and May 2000 elections, including the assassination in April 2000 of the renowned journalist Jean Dominique, a onetime supporter turned critic of Aristide. In March 1999 gangs of chimes used violence and demanded the dismissal of the electoral council over a dispute with President Preval on the dates for the new elections. Five people were reported killed in fights among criminal gangs. In April 2000 and on the day of Dominique's funeral, some chimes burned down the headquarters of the *Espace de Concertation* and threatened to kill Evans Paul, leader of the *Konfederasyon Inite Demokratik* and former ally of Aristide in 1990 ... The creation of armed groups that would become the chimes, however, goes back to 1995 after Aristide had abolished the Haitian Army and a new Haitian National Police was created with help and training from the United States, France, and Canada. Aristide understood the need to control that force and placed trusted allies in its command. It was then that the link between Aristide and the chimes was formed. The director of the police, along with the minister of interior and the chief of presidential security, served as the liaison with the gangs, who received cash and weapons for their operations.²⁴

²¹Dupuy, *The Prophet and Power*, 133.

²²*Ibid.*, 131.

²³*Ibid.*, 143–4.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 144.

Apparently, Dupuy seems to lump together all supporters who organized to halt the coup, and implies that they are all criminals and violent individuals. He has overlooked the historical trajectories and social contexts that led to the emergence of Haiti's *Chimères* and the close relationship between Aristide's administrations and them. Dupuy proceeds to delineate the atrocious practices and crimes of this terrorist organization in Haitian society:

The *Chimères*, along with the police, would attack and kill members of the opposition, violently disrupt their demonstrations, burn their residences and headquarters, intimidate members of the media critical of the government, and engage in countless other human and civil rights violation and impunity ... Some leaders also became a force in their own right by forming criminal gangs that acted autonomously, turned their neighborhoods into wards under their control, engaged in drug trafficking and other criminal activities, and even requisitioned the government itself.²⁵

Robert Fatton, also a fierce critic of Aristide's government, has made similar remarks as those by Dupuy. He perceives Aristide's administration as a continuity of Haiti's ineffective governance and political despotism: "The rise of its *Chimères*, its absolutist rhetoric, the alarming levels of governmental corruption and incompetence, the emergence of a 'narco-state,' and the political magouilles (fraud) of its leaders bode very poorly for a successful Lavalasian democracy."²⁶ In his critical analysis, Fatton has carefully demonstrated that Aristide's administration has resulted in the decline of Haitian democracy and the destabilization of Haiti's civil and political societies. He states:

While Haiti has all the features of an unconsolidated democracy, it suffers from more acute symptoms of democratic dysfunctionality. In fact, its politics is increasingly based on the criminalized zero-sum game of a predatory democracy. The game is characterized by brutal forms of intimidation in which emerging and antagonistic factions to monopolize the few sites of public power giving access to wealth and privilege. Lavalas is not, however, the only faction appropriating the means of violence; all groups possessing resources have created their own autonomous "security" apparatuses and forces.²⁷

For Fatton, Aristide and the associated *Chimères* have become a serious threat to Haiti's democratic progress, and national peace and unity.

Old Duvalierists are not the only menace to democratic governance, however. The *Chimères*, which are closely linked to Fanmi Lavalas, have also contributed to a climate of insecurity by threatening and indeed using violence against political opponents ... While their slogan "Aristide or death" and veiled appeals for more "*Père Lebruns*" have worsened social polarization, they should not mask the reality that well-known supporters of the murderous military regime have gone unpunished pursuing their political activities. In fact, the moral dilemma of seeking national reconciliation while at the same time establishing the rule of justice has remained a Gordian knot.²⁸

In the same manner, Jean Eddy Saint Paul has established striking parallels, connections, and links between Duvalier's "*Tonton Macoutes*" and Aristide's *Chimères*.²⁹ Saint Paul echoes many assertions made by Dupuy and Fatton. The latter explores the puzzling

²⁵Ibid., 145.

²⁶Fatton, *Haiti's Predatory Republic*, 121.

²⁷Fatton, *Haiti's Predatory Republic*, 12.

²⁸Ibid., 152–3.

²⁹Saint Paul, *Chime et Tontons Macoutes*, 87–102.

interesting interactions between Aristide and the *Chimères*, and speculates about the justification for their historical alliance and bond.

The role of the *Chimères* in the current conjuncture is, however, ambiguous. Are they merely Aristide's pliable instrument of intimidation, or are they becoming an increasingly autonomous and volatile force with its own independent strategy and leaders? While it would be naïve to assume that Aristide has no authority over them, it would be equally simplistic to think that he fully controls them. The relationship between *Chimères* and Aristide seems to be based on an opportunistic convergence of interests. On the one hand, Aristide appears to have broad power over their activities, but the exercise of that power is curbed and shaped by his concern for the *Chimères'* adverse impact on his own capacity to rule effectively. On the other hand, once unleashed, the *Chimères* acquire a dynamic of their own and can begin to actively voice and negotiate their own corporate demands on the president himself. They can become a power unto themselves.³⁰

He gets more specific when he writes with greater precision and clarity:

The interaction between Aristide and the *Chimères* is typical of the phenomenon of clientelism ... Clientelism is an "alternative means for integration where coercive power is not sufficiently coercive to command widespread compliance and where conceptions of legitimacy are as yet too weak or circumscribed to produce consensus." It is clear, however, that in spite of his temptation to depend on the *Chimères* for enforcing his political agenda, Aristide would prefer to establish a consensus through compromise rather than violence. This is not to say that he does not find them a useful vehicle for intimidating the opposition; on the contrary, he has an interest in keeping them going as a reminder of Lavalas's ever present menace to friends and foes alike. Always lurking in Haiti's shadowy politics and always on the verge of activation, the *Chimères* constitute Aristide's weapon of deterrence.³¹

Fatton's concluding remark is quite informative:

While it would be wrong to equate ... Aristide's rule with Duvalierism or the "de facto" regime of the military dictatorship, there is an increasing sense of *déjà vu*, of a descent into hell and a new authoritarianism. It is not merely that key figures of the democratic movement have abandoned Lavalas and criticized pointedly Aristide for his *derive totalitaire*, but there is also the reality of collusions between Lavalas and old antidemocratic foes ... In these conditions, Haiti's ills cannot be blamed exclusively on Aristide and/or his Fanmi Lavalas; they are also the product of the collective failure of the political class and its external allies.³²

How have the Haitian people responded to the political violence and the climate of terrorism and fear in the Haitian society, which many believed Aristide's administration promoted? Succinctly, Elizabeth Abbott describes the collective reaction of the Haitian people in 2003, when she writes:

With their President's *chimèrrization* and his opposition's gangsterism also on the rise, Haitians wanted security in the streets. They wanted justice, that most elusive of conditions. They wanted Aristide to resign, or they wanted him to stay and honor the dimmed promises that once shone so brightly, instead, they got relentless insecurity, terror and bloodshed.³³

³⁰Fatton, *Haiti's Predatory Republic*, 180.

³¹*Ibid.*, 181.

³²*Ibid.*, 121–2.

³³Abbott, *Haiti: A Shattered Nation*, 414.

Amy Wilentz, who has cultivated a strong friendship with President Aristide and translated many of his books into the English language, has an important statement to make about Aristide's second presidency: "Although several changes of human-rights abuses have been levelled against the turbulent second Aristide administration, which lasted from 2000 until he was overthrown in 2004, none has been proved."³⁴ This same Abbott clarifies that "Aristide fought back, urging those of his still-loyal *chimères* to retaliate, attack, shed blood, save his presidency ... They beat, raped and killed, including by decapitation ... Aristide armed these people and he can no longer control them."³⁵ On the other hand, she also prizes the achievements of Aristide's second administration:

To placate Haiti's millions of vodoun practitioners, he issued a decree recognizing vodoun and permitting its *houngans* to officiate at weddings, baptisms, and funerals. He also increased the minimum wage to 70 *gourdes* daily, although the plunging exchange rate between *gourde* and U.S. dollar made this gesture ineffectual. He initiated a two-week Christmas of Solidarity Program which, at a cost of \$ 1.6 million, offered hundreds of poor Haitians bowls of soup, gifts and free concerts, and gave out 20,000 fifty-day jobs. Aristide also sent the French government a bill for \$ 21, 685, 135, 571.48, the equivalent (he calculated) of the 90 million gold francs France had exacted in reparations from Haiti after the 1804 Revolution. Radio and television spots declared, "Hand over my dollars so I can celebrate my independence!" France declined to hand over a single cent.³⁶

As observed in our previous analysis, the Aristide phenomenon and the pursuit of justice and democracy in Haiti are complex issues to understand fully. In 2007, philosopher Peter Hallward published the controversial and significant text, *Damming the Flood: Haiti and the Politics of Containment*, to chronicle Aristide's journey to the presidency and to demonstrate how the international community opposed his administration and suppressed Haiti's steps towards democratic progress, under Aristide's leadership. Hallward also wrote his text to counter many seemingly "unjustifiable claims" made by Alex Dupuy; he articulated an alternative view favourable to Aristide's presidential leadership and democratic and justice projects in Haiti. Similarly, Jeb Sprague's groundbreaking book, *Paramilitarism and The Assault on Democracy in Haiti* contains an appendix in which he critically assesses the claims made both by Dupuy and Hallward.

Undoubtedly, Sprague is on the side of Hallward, and does not see any shortcomings in his work. Finally, Nick Nesbitt's seminal text, *Caribbean Critique* provides a succinct but critical evaluation of Dupuy's work while condemning his major claims against Aristide's administration. He, like Sprague, vindicates Hallward's preferential treatment or evaluation of Aristide. What I hope to do in the following pages is to provide an overview of this complex conversation between Dupuy, Hallward, Nesbitt, and Sprague. It is clear in their critical assessment of Dupuy's work, Hallward, Nesbitt, and Sprague articulate a more positive attitude about Aristide's leadership while challenging and even rejecting Dupuy's assertions about the administration of the Theologian-President.

First of all, Sprague postulates that while Dupuy has faulted Aristide and the FL movement for the disintegration of democracy in Haiti, Hallward claims that Aristide's supporters and the Lavalas movement themselves have been subject to political violence throughout Aristide's presidential terms.³⁷ As Sprague suggests, "Though not

³⁴Wilentz, *Farewell, Fred Voodoo*, 213.

³⁵Abbott, *Haiti: A Shattered Nation*, 416–7.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 414.

mythologizing Aristide, Hallward seeks to combat the demonization of this widely misunderstood figure and the political projects he helped found.”³⁸ Nesbitt, who draws considerable parallelisms and differences between the texts by Hallward and Dupuy, insightfully highlights that both writers

are highly critical of the role of American foreign policy and its systematic attempts to undermine the process of democratization in Haiti. Each is fundamentally supportive of the promise Aristide represented to open the political terrain to the excluded Haitian multitude, and both describe the degree to which North Atlantic neo-liberal policies in the era of globalization have undermined economic and political autonomy in Haiti. They agree as well on the close relation of these policies with the extension of US imperial hegemony, the intensive coalition of the US and the Haitian elite in the attempt to undermine Aristide’s progressive social and political reforms.³⁹

Furthermore, Sprague blames Dupuy for ignoring the perspective of the Haitian masses and the poor, and Aristide’s support-base: FL, and he posits that Dupuy’s study is heavily dependent on “the dominant narratives of well-heeled NGOs, corporate media, the organizations such as the Organization of the American States (OAS).”⁴⁰ He disagrees with Dupuy’s conclusion that Aristide’s chief goal was to cement his own personal power, and equally rejects Dupuy’s thesis that “Aristide went down the same path as his dictatorial predecessors.”⁴¹ Sprague also discounts the allegations that FL partisans have carried out mass killings during the period of Aristide’s second term, which Aristide himself never condoned. In contrast, he maintains that Hallward’s careful investigation about the human rights issue in Haiti during Aristide’s second administration leads to contrary conclusions. As he has declared:

In fact, the vast majority of political violence during the second Aristide administration, just as throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, was carried out by armed groups backed by elites, not “mobs” backed by corrupt FL bureaucrats. The argument is made plausible only by ignoring the victims of rightist political violence and taking at face value the narrative presented by the corporate media ... The fact that participants in this popular demonstration set fire to a few homes and office buildings owned by opposition elites is further justification of Dupuy’s thesis: FL was overcome with a violent mob mentality, intent on cracking the skulls of the opposition. But, as it turns out, the claims made by Lavalas had been correct on two accounts: (1) the December 2001 assault was an attempted coup d’état; and (2) elites in the opposition were in fact bankrolling the paramilitaries. Defensive violence, as Peter Hallward calls it, was at times the only proven method the poor had to defend themselves and their communities against the return of the military and paramilitaries and preserve their few gains after years of struggle against the country’s deeply entrenched social order.⁴²

In regard to Dupuy’s claim that Aristide has deployed gangs of *Chimères* to arouse fear and pacify the Haitian masses, and correspondingly, to silence the political opposition, Sprague acknowledges that several weeks before the second overthrow of Aristide from power, popular organizations, gangs members, and militants associated with Aristide’s FL “mobilized against the paramilitary ‘uprising.’”⁴³

³⁷Sprague, *Paramilitarism and the Assault on Democracy*, 290.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Nesbitt, *Caribbean Critique*, 216.

⁴⁰Sprague, *Paramilitarism*, 290.

⁴¹Ibid., 290.

⁴²Ibid., 291–2.

For Sprague, the violence and crime committed by Aristide's supporters could "hardly support the sweeping claims made by Dupuy and others that Aristide had an informal army of gangs under his direction."⁴⁴ In the same line of reasoning, in his appraisal of Dupuy's work, Nesbitt arrived at a similar conclusion. He approves of Aristide's use or support of "defensive violence" to eliminate his opponents. (Some critics have argued that Aristide has always tried to unify the people, seeking reconciliation and peace between various segments of the Haitian population, until the last moment he was ousted from power.) He compares Aristide's promotion of popular violence to the vicious nature of the Haitian Revolution, in which (1) enslaved Africans overthrew the atrocious colonial system, (2) abolished chattel slavery in the island, and (3) founded the first postcolonial Black Republic in the Western world so that they could live free from their masters' oppression and humiliation. As Nesbitt avers:

The inherent, foundational relation between violence and democracy lies at the center of this debate. In defending this limited use of popular violence, I would argue that Aristide in fact remains faithful to one of the primary lessons of the Haitian Revolution ... The popular violence of the Haitian Revolution was rightful insofar as the situation of plantation slavery was, in the political language of the period, precisely a state of nature prior to any imaginable social contract between a slave and master. Thus, in the case of slavery, the necessarily violent imposition of a novel political order escaped any ban on revolutionary violence.⁴⁵

On a different note, Nesbitt acknowledges the difficulty and multifaceted dynamics between popular violence and the collective effort to actualize democratic ideals in society; in other words, democracy is not always equated with sustaining peace and tranquility. Democracy like freedom is always a process, and an on-going event, and that is contingent to both internal and external forces that could alter or reorient its course in society. In some cases, defensive violence and distributive justice will be necessary for the triumph of the democratic life. The work of the democratic life is the antithesis of human oppression, totalitarianism, and the politics of alienation.

There exist no absolute, categorical criteria to determine when a democratic order is threatened in its very existence and popular violence thus justified. For any fragile democracy, from those of the French revolution in the early 1790s, to that of Haiti in the years after 1804, and the Weimar Republic in 1933, such a decision will always remain an intensely political process of reflection, discussion, and negotiation in reference to universal democratic norms of equality and freedom.⁴⁶

Consequently, by engaging Hallward in the intricate conversation, Nesbitt clarifies his position, further, on this precarious topic:

In the very few cases in which Aristide did invoke the possibility of popular violence, its use appears remained explicitly banned in any consensual state of constitutional law. Aristide remained faithful to this injunction in his September, 1991 call to give the Macoutes "what they deserve." Hallward mounts convincing evidence that Aristide's democratic government was by that time mortally threatened by Cedras's military insurrection ... Aristide's invocation was nonetheless a coherent, reasonable, and political defense of democracy at the

⁴³Ibid., 293.

⁴⁴Ibid., 293.

⁴⁵Nesbitt, *Caribbean Critique*, 218.

⁴⁶Ibid., 218.

very limit of its continued existence. Democracy, in such a view, is to be understood not as the categorical (and suicidal, in such contexts) banishment of violence and its replacement by rational discussion on the part of competing interest group.⁴⁷

For Hallward, in justifying his “defensive violence” theory, he found the use of popular violence by Aristide’s administration substantiated by his vicious FL militants to be necessary in order to orchestrate a new political process and democratic order in Haiti. To put it simply, Hallward supports the use of cathartic violence to safeguard the democratic process and to prevent a country from falling into disorder, as was the case in Aristide’s second administration.

What is more important is the fact that this era, in spite of the astonishing levels of repression it aroused, has indeed opened the door to a new political future. There is little to be gained from judging this opening by the standards of either armed national liberation movements on the one hand or entrenched parliamentary democracies on the other over the last twenty years, Lavalas has developed as an experiment at the limits of contemporary political possibility. Its history sheds light on some of the ways that political mobilization can proceed under the pressure of exceptionally powerful constraints.⁴⁸

We should not, however, characterize all Aristide’s supporters as brutal militants and those who believed that redemptive violence was the best solution to achieve national peace and unity. Moreover, in an interview Peter Hallward conducted with Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 20 July 2006, he has asked the former Haitian President about the place of violence in his governance, his association with the *chimères*, and how he has maintained political order and national unity during his second presidency. For convenience, we reproduce Hallward’s question and Aristide’s informative reply:

PH: Perhaps the most serious and frequent that was made by the demonstrators, and repeated by your critics abroad, is that you resorted to violence in order to hang on to power. The claim is that, as the pressure on your government grew, you started to rely on armed gangs from the slums, so-called “chimères,” and that you used them to intimidate and in some cases to murder your opponents.⁴⁹

JBA: Here again the people who make these of claims are lying. As soon as you start to look rationally at what was really going on, these accusations don’t even begin to stand up. Several things have to be kept in mind. First of all, the police had been working under an embargo for several years. We weren’t even able to buy bullet-proof vests or tear-gas canisters. The police were severely under-equipped, and were often simply unable to control a demonstration or confrontation. Some of our opponents, some of the demonstrators who sought to provoke violent confrontations, knew this perfectly well. The people also understood this. It was common knowledge that while the police were running out of ammunition and supplies in Haiti, heavy weapons were being smuggled to our opponents in and through the Dominican Republic. The people knew this, and didn’t like it. They started getting nervous, with good reason. The provocations didn’t let up, and there were some isolated acts of violence. Was this violence justified? No. I condemned it. I condemned it consistently. But with the limited means at our disposal, how could we prevent every outbreak of violence? There was a lot of provocation, a lot of anger, and there was no way that we could ensure that each and every citizen would refuse violence. The president of a country like Haiti cannot be held responsible for the actions of its every citizen. But there was never any deliberate

⁴⁷Hallward, *Damming the Flood*, 218–9.

⁴⁸Hallward, *Damming the Flood*, 314.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 363.

encouragement of violence, there was no deliberate recourse to violence. Those who make and repeat these claims are lying, and they know it.

Now what about these *chimères*, and the people they call *chimères*? This is clearly another expression of our apartheid mentality, the very word says it all. Chimères are people who are impoverished, who live in a state of profound insecurity and chronic unemployment. They are the victims of structural injustice, of systematic social violence. And they are among the people who voted for this government, who appreciated what the government was doing and had done, in spite of the embargo. It's not surprising that they should confront those who have always benefited not surprising that they should confront those who have always benefited from this same social violence, once they started actively seeking to undermine their government.

Again, this doesn't justify occasional acts of violence, but where does the real responsibility lie? Who are the real victims of violence here? How many members of the elite, how many members of the opposition's many political parties, were killed by "chimères"? How many? Who are they? Meanwhile everyone knows that powerful economic interests were quite happy to fund certain criminal gangs, that they put weapons in the hands of vagabonds, in Cite Soleil and elsewhere, in order to create disorder and blame it on Fanmi Lavalas. These same people also paid journalists to present the situation in a certain way, and among other things they promised them visas – recently some of them who are now living in France admitted to what they were told to say, in order to get their visa. So you have people who were financing misinformation on the other hand and destabilization on the other, and who encouraged little groups of hoodlums to sow panic on the streets, to create the impression of a government that is losing control.

As if all this wasn't enough, rather than allow police munitions to get through to Haiti, rather than send arms and equipment to strengthen the Haitian government, the Americans sent them to their proxies in the Dominican Republic instead. You only have to look at who these people were – people like Jodel Chamblain, who is a convicted criminal, who escaped justice in Haiti to be welcomed by the US, and who then armed and financed these future "freedom fighters" who were waiting over the border in the Dominican Republic. That's what really happened. We didn't arm the "chimères," it was they who armed Chamblain and Philippe! The hypocrisy is extraordinary. And then when it comes to 2004–2006, suddenly all this indignant talk of violence falls quiet. As if nothing had happened. People were being herded into containers and dropped into the sea. That counts for nothing. The endless attacks on Cite Soleil, they count for nothing. I could go on and on. Thousands have died. But they don't count, because they are just "chimères," after all. They don't count as equals, they aren't *really* people in their own right.⁵⁰

Clearly, in his response above, Aristide dismissed any affiliation with the *chimères* nor has he encouraged popular violence or relied on armed gangs to stir collective fear among his enemies in order to maintain his political power. Aristide interpreted these allegations as false, unhistorical, and detrimental to his character and second presidential administration. He accused Haiti's elite class and the United States, France, and Canada for creating these pseudo narratives that have no historical basis, and that these powerful countries supported fabricated media coverages.

In as many press conferences as his South African hosts permitted, and in interviews and the occasional article, he expressed no remorse about his corrupt, chaotic and violent regime. In his version of events he had been sinned against but had ever sinned; he had been a blameless

⁵⁰Ibid., 363–5.

president with many important accomplishments, albeit one who confessed to not being a good politician. His opponents and critics, he declared, must be in the thrall of white men.⁵¹

The historical reality of these transpired experiences is that the Aristide administration attempted to stop continuous paramilitary violent attacks, and it was successful – even if it were through popular violence and vindictive retaliation.

Viv Dechoukaj, Long Live Uprooting! A Theology of Violence and Aggression

Beyond what is discussed previously, Aristide's hermeneutic of violence is rooted in a constructive (re-) reading of the Biblical text; it is particularly evident in his inflammatory prose articulated in his Creole text, *100 Vèsè dechoukaj. Va t'en Satan*. The paradox is that Aristide was unwaveringly committed to a rhetoric of peace and unity, and relationality and mutual reciprocity,⁵² which is also sourced in the Biblical narrative. Aristide wrote this text to empower the Haitian masses, the poor, the peasants, and Haiti's grass-roots movements to radically uproot the Duvalierists, the Macoutes, as well as the powers and institutions that oppressed and exploited the Haitian people. Historically, the text came to us in a tragic moment in Haitian history in which the Duvalier regime was terrorizing the Haitian people, slaughtering them by the thousands, and torturing in prison innocent prisoners and anti-Duvalier suspects.

It is a text of radical protest in the search for human justice and shalom. In this book, Aristide employs a politico-theological pedagogy to provoke the Haitian people to protest against their oppressors and even exercise popular violence towards them. A possible rendering of the Creole text can be translated as *100 Verses of Uprooting: Go Away Satan!* The word “dechoukaj” (uprooting) in the title signals violent symbolism. Aristide published this text within the historical context and trajectories of Jean Claude Duvalier's (“Baby Doc”) (1971–1986) ruthless dictatorship and political aggressive authoritarianism; the text also appeared in the era of Macoutism and paramilitarism associated with the Duvalier regime. The pedagogical strategy used in this book includes three basic elements: shocking images, biblical references, and short commentaries that creatively reinterpret both the scriptural references and the illustrated images, connecting the latter to the former. This revolutionary text is written in Haitian Creole and is supplemented by evocative photos based on the biblical data. The text clearly implies that Aristide was writing a political theology of resistance in which he envisioned the collective Haitian masses as his audience. In this forceful politico-theological text, Aristide wrote with boldness, force, clarity, and precision to stimulate sustaining faith and equally to call the suffering Haitian masses to decisive action against their political exploiters and oppressors.

The linguistic preference is the Creole language, the mother tongue of the Haitian people, which is spoken by all Haitian – both educated and uneducated. Nonetheless, the working class Haitians are more proficient in Creole than French – given the fact that only 10% of the Haitian population can express itself effectively in French. The other group Aristide writes for is the illiterate population who may not be able to

⁵¹Abbott, *Haiti: A Shattered Nation*, 416–7.

⁵²For a careful analysis on this subject, see Joseph, “Toward a Politico-Theology of Relationality,” 269–300.

understand the written word in the Creole language, but inevitably, they will comprehend the meaning of the messages communicated through both simple and complex (symbolic) images. This pedagogic practice and strategic method was used immensely by Latin American Marxist and socialist thinkers, theologians, and educators such as Paulo Freire, in the second-half of the twentieth century.

The word “dechoukaj” is used more than 25 times by Aristide in the 100-page book. According to the Webster dictionary, the word “uproot” (“dechoukaj”) has three primary meanings: (1) “to pull (a plant and its root) completely out of the ground,” (2) “to remove (something) completely,” and (3) “to make (someone) leave home and move to a different place.” As a transitive verb, to uproot something carries the idea of removing completely as if by pulling it; it also implies to pull it up by its roots. Put simply, to remove someone is a form of radical displacement from a country or traditional habitat. Like a plant that can be eradicated from the roots that sustain it, a person can be uprooted from his/her job, country, and position of influence or power. A tree can be uprooted by an earthquake or storm. Taking a job in a non-familiar place could also mean to uproot one’s family from a familiar location. Uprooting could also mean a non-voluntary displacement, to be forced away (exile) from a country or a traditional home to a host or strange country. The question we should now be asking *who* should be uprooted? *What* should be uprooted? What are the circumstances to uproot someone from his/place traditional location? Also, what are the specific circumstances to uproot something from its habitual place?

In Aristide’s perspective, “dechoukaj” not only carries a symbolic image, the concept has an empirical value in that it becomes clear it is a religious-political practice that is framed within an ethical framework and moral demand.⁵³ For Aristide, “dechoukaj” can be construed as a categorical imperative in terms of Kantian logic, as its goal aims at retributive justice and defensive violence, even if it entails the murdering and complete annihilation of the enemy, the opponent, or foe, in this case, the oppressors of the Haitian people.

In the context of Haitian society, when a political authority (i.e. macoute, duvalierist) or an individual associated with the political hegemony that oppresses and exploits the people is uprooted, protesters would break into that person’s home, vandalize the property, and steal their belongings. It is a complete disaster, a chaotic moment to witness. Dechoukaj almost always accompanies the violent death-execution called necklacing (*Pere lebrun* in the Haitian term). This torturous method or practice is when the protester takes a rubber tyre, places around the victim’s neck, fills it with petroleum, and sets fire to the victim. As previously mentioned, the Dechoukaj (and sometimes accompanied by necklacing depending on the status of the victim) was a public spectacle practiced in all major cities and towns of Haiti.

100 Vèsè dechoukaj. Va t’en Satan is intended to be read as a theo-political catechism with its valiant assertion: “Viv Dechoukaj!” (“Long Live Uprooting!”).⁵⁴ Moreover, in the text, Aristide literally draws vivid and descriptive images in order to emphasis his theo-political rhetoric.⁵⁵ All of these illustrations and images are linked to very specific biblical references to justify their intent.⁵⁶

⁵³Achille, *Le Dire et Le Faire*, 9.

⁵⁴Aristide, *100 Vèsè dechoukaj*, 32.

Through this theo-political catechism, Aristide envisions the complete reconstitution of the Haitian psyche and nation, and the radical renewal of the Haitian civil and political societies; as he himself declares that he has no tolerance for the oppressors of the people: Let us uproot them! (“Long Live Dechoukaj! *Aba Sitires!*”)⁵⁷ because without justice, there is no peace (“*San jistis, pa p’ gen lape*”).⁵⁸

The various, aforementioned, images and symbols outlined have a didactic objective whose basic function is fivefold: (1) to diagnose the human predicament in Haiti’s political and civil societies, (2) to raise collective consciousness about the political crisis, (3) to offer the prognosis to Haiti’s ills and woes, (4) to orient the people towards the path of national healing through the strategic use of cathartic violence, and (5) to serve as a systemic manual (*100 Vèsè dechoukaj. Va t’en Satan*) towards the rebuilding of the Haitian civil and political societies. Written from the perspective of Haiti’s lower classes and the country’s disfranchised groups, *100 Vèsè dechoukaj* presents to us, what we may call a discourse on instantaneous death of the oppressor; in the sphere of theological and biblical studies, we may phrase it a “theological hermeneutics of aggression and violence”. In these pages, Aristide utters some of the most shocking and destructive imperatives, and makes some of the most fearless claims and outrageous declarations:

1. *Lanmo pou mechan*: Death to the wicked.
2. *Adye Defen Kochon*: Farewell to the deceased Pigs!
3. *Si n’ te dechouke yo, Yo pa t’ap gen tan dechouke ou!* If we had uprooted them, they will not have the time to uproot you!
4. *Lavi pou pwofet*: life for the Prophet.
5. *Yo deja mo red!* They are already down dead.
6. *Ale di Makak la n’ap dechouke res ke a*: Go tell the Monkey, we will strip the rest of the tail.
7. *Laperez se pwason. Si ou pa touye l’, lap touye out!*: Fear is poison. If you do not kill him, he will kill you.
8. *Gen lanmon ak lanmo!* : Many are the forms of death!
9. *Wi, gen twop makout degize nan mita nou*: Yes, there are too many macoutes (boogeymen) disguised among us.
10. *Si n’ pa kontinye teke, Y’ap remonte kouran an*: If we don’t continue striking, they will overcome us.

The text is written in a homiletic style and diction of an eloquent and authoritative preacher-activist. Theodore Achille interprets the book as an important work of

⁵⁵Ibid., 1–3, 15, 3, 33, 37, 44, 48, 56, 57, 61, 64, 68, 72, 73, 76, 78, 84, 86, 87, 91, 94, 97, 98.

⁵⁶The range of images deployed by Aristide include ferocious dogs, horses, and pigs, shotguns, sharp machetes and knives, Haitian peasants attacking political authorities (tonton macoutes), people burning at stake, people in shackles, people disguised as animals, closed and open Bibles, scales of justice, protest groups, Haitian politicians fleeing the scene with bags of money with the U.S. dollar signs, protesters stepping on animals’ heads, protesters launching gunshots at political authorities, individuals holding the ‘Liberty’ signs, individuals holding the “Long Live Uprooting” sign, individuals holding upward the sign of the Christian cross; individuals kneeling down praying, protesters holding the “Life or Death” (“*Libete ou lanmo*”) sign, broken hearts signs, happy hearts signs, protesters confronting Tonton macoutes, protesters holding hammers to crush the oppressors’ heads, heavily armed Tonton Macoutes, protesters holding rocks to stone the oppressor, and political authorities disguised as monkeys and vicious beasts.

⁵⁷Aristide, *100 Vèsè dechoukaj*, 77.

⁵⁸Ibid., 49.

Aristide's subversion strategy.⁵⁹ In all of its content, the text interrupts the political consensus of the country, in which Aristide the preacher speaks in discursive rhetoric to disqualify, uproot, and to stun the dominant political class in the country. In the interpretative reconstruction of the speech the author realizes a disclosure, that is to say, a diversion of morality in the service of politics,⁶⁰ and in the best interest of the most wretched (*les plus misérables*), and those living in the margins in the Haitian society. Achille's excellent study on the book provides a comprehensive appraisal of the linguistic categories and rhetorical strategies used, according to their original intent, followed with insightful exegetical commentaries.⁶¹

As previously noted, the book is composed of short, pity sayings, and sometimes abridged biblical references followed by Aristide's succinct and revolutionary theo-political interpretation of the given scriptural reference. In many instances, Aristide rewrites the original text of the Bible to achieve the desired goal: the complete uprooting of the Duvalier regime and its allies. There is a clear indication of a hermeneutics of violence in his translation of the Biblical data and the meaning imposing upon it.

The underlying themes of *100 Vèsè dechoukaj* include a series of dialectics (good vs. evil, God vs. Satan, the people vs. their oppressor, the Haitian masses vs. the ruling class) and key words or concepts, related to the dialectical struggle for truth and justice in the Haitian context.⁶²

The Symbiotic Function of the Bible in the Sphere of Politics and Theology

The function of the Bible in *100 Vèsè dechoukaj* is both modest and multifarious. In its simplicity, the Bible is used as a weapon of mass destruction launched at the oppressors and opponents of the Haitian people, which may include the Duvalier regime and its macoutes, the international community (i.e. the United States, France, Canada), the oppressive capitalist system, Haiti's bourgeoisie class and the political elite minority. The Bible is also used here as a corrective device to both reveal and denounce the sins of the oppressors, and as a liberative vehicle, it is referenced to mobilize the Haitian masses and foster collective political consciousness about their plight and condition. The Bible is also deployed to challenge Haiti's social class division and hierarchy and to dismantle the great divide between the poor and the rich, and the mulatto and Black skinned Haitians. Furthermore, the Bible is interpreted as a mechanism of hope for the Haitian poor, the homeless, underrepresented families, and the marginalized in the Haitian society, in the pursuit of human dignity, human rights, justice, retributive justice, holistic healing, and shalom. The Bible is called upon to challenge the luxurious lifestyle and destructive actions of the dominant political class and ecclesiastical authorities (the people's oppressors and enemies), in Haitian society.

Aristide articulates a biblically and theologically sensitive hermeneutics whose goal is the total uprooting and annihilation of the people's oppressors. In the rhetoric of the

⁵⁹Achille, *Le Dire et Le Faire*, 17.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid., 48–81.

⁶²The key concepts are words used by Aristide include uprooting, divine retribution, human corruption, social sins, political identity, cultural identity, destruction, suffering, adversary, the poor, the wicked, justice, money, guns, people, weapons, macoute (boogeyman), etc.

Prophetic tradition, Aristide insightfully brings the Biblical narrative to light to deepen the faith of the Haitian people in God, who will alleviate their shared suffering and poverty, and ultimately to orient them towards unrelenting trust and dependence on God, as their liberator and the source of righteousness.

In addition, Aristide writes in the “Preface” of his book that

The Bible is a weapon. A big gun. One of the biggest weapons to uproot Satan. When you use it effectively, you have two chances: if you use hold it correctly, you are good; if you hold it wrong, you will break.

Below, we reproduce the original words in the Creole language:

La bib la se yon zam

Yon gwo zam

Youn nan pi gwo zam pou dechouke satan

Le ou ap seve ave l’

Ou gen 2 chans :

Si ou kenbe l’ byen, ou bon.

Si ou kenbe l’ mal, ou chire.

Aristide proceeds to declare that the thesis of the book succinctly: “*Va T’en Satan* is a weapon. A weapon of impeachment or uprooting. Uprooting Satan.”

Va T’En Satan se yon zam

Yon zam dechoukaj.

Dechoukaj Satan.

In various instances in Aristide’s book, the ensuing death of those of the dominant class and the people’s tyrants is both in the present and in the time to come; hence, the imminent destruction of the wicked has both present and future eschatology, a common notion in New Testament and Biblical theology (ies). On the one hand, present eschatology is dependent upon the people’s urgency to “uproot them” (“*Dechouke yo*”); on the other hand, future eschatology in this context is not that pressing an issue because it is contingent upon divine eschatological intervention to judge and destroy the oppressors and emancipate the Haitian poor.

Citing 1 Peter 2:12, Aristide assures the Haitian people that undoubtedly they will be delivered from their foes: “Like animals, they will be destroyed,”⁶³ and that the Duvalier regime will also lose strength and eventually decline: “His own Kingdom will not survive” (Matthew 12:26).⁶⁴ According to Aristide, the Haitian predicament is that the Haitian people are not just fighting corrupt individuals; rather, their fight is also against a dysfunctional institution, a destructive system, class exploitation, and a totalitarian

⁶³Aristide, *100 Vèsè dechoukaj*, 86.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 85.

regime. Aristide proceeds to list a number of infractions; the crimes and violence of the oppressors:

- (1) “building castles on our backs!”⁶⁵
- (2) “uprooted you.”⁶⁶
- (3) “They persecuted the righteousness.”⁶⁷
- (4) “They took money from the weak.”⁶⁸
- (5) “they prevent the poor to get justice in the courts.”⁶⁹
- (6) “They cheat the poor.”⁷⁰
- (7) “They refuse to provide justice to orphans.”⁷¹
- (8) “They deny the rights of the poor.”⁷²

These noted charges are appropriated within Aristide’s creative theological rereading, contextualization, reappropriation, and reinterpretation of four biblical passages: Jeremiah 5:12, Jeremiah 5:18, 1 Corinthians 6:8, and 2 Peter 2:3. Finally, Aristide, working in the pattern of the Prophetic tradition, comforts the people to always hope in God because it is God who will give them justice, freedom, and eventually annihilate “the wicked” and the “evil people” in their midst.⁷³

Not only are the Haitian people actively engaged in the *dechoukaj* activities, God, working on their side and walking in solidarity with them, is actively participating in this collective mission. Yet, they must be both vigilant and confrontational. As God has sent Moses to Pharaoh to free the Israelite slaves from the Pharaonic regime and Egyptian slavery, God has called the Haitian poor and underclass, and Aristide the Haitian Moses, to emancipate God’s people from the Duvalier regime and the Macoutist yoke. The ultimate ruin of the oppressor and the wicked will inevitably take place in order that God may usher in the new age in Haitian history:

- (1) “Go tell the Monkey, we will strip the rest of the tail:” “Ale di Makak la n’ap dechouke res ke a”) ⁷⁴
- (2) “How could we not uproot them, Let all liars be doomed!” “*Pou n’ pa dechouke, Fok manti kaba.*”⁷⁵
- (3) “Long Live Uprooting!” (VIV DECHOUKAJ!)⁷⁶

At this juncture in this conversation, the question we should now ask, is whether Aristide’s conscious method of endorsing popular retributive vengeance and violence justified with the claims made in Scripture? As previously observed, Hallward, Nesbitt, and Sprague

⁶⁵Ibid., 79.

⁶⁶Ibid., 78.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid., 10.

⁷¹Ibid., 12.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid., 79.

⁷⁴Ibid., 1.

⁷⁵Ibid., 10.

⁷⁶Ibid., 12.

maintain that violence was a necessary means for Aristide to sustain political order and advance democracy in Haiti during his second presidential term. In contrast, both Fatton and Dupuy condemn Aristide's seeming promotion of popular retaliation and alliance with the gangs of Chimeres. Interestingly, when one looks intently at Aristide's first politico-theological book (*100 Vèsè dechoukaj*), it becomes evident that the crimes his administration and FL supporters carried out during his second presidency were premised on a theological hermeneutics of aggression and violence.

We should have no interest in justifying any form of violence or human oppression because this disposition categorically defies our non-violent attitude towards (the sacredness of) life and a generic pacifist philosophy. From this standpoint, we reject the consensus on defensive violence that unifies Hallward, Nesbitt, and Sprague with their representative interlocutor: Jean-Bertrand Aristide. We also question the historical credibility of Dupuy's "selected reports" on Aristide's cooperation with the gangs of Chimeres and FL supporters to proliferate fear and widespread violence in the Haitian society, given the fact they are not based, according to Sprague and Hallward's analysis, on primary sources. As Sprague has remarked on the preference of the American-European Media Coverage on Haiti:

Most common in the global media's coverage of Haiti has been the overreliance on official and elite sources. The introduction of quotes in the media's articles covering Haiti illustrates the reliance on these sources: "diplomats say," "an anonymous diplomat says," "a source involved in the palace brainstorming," "a U.S. diplomat in Port-au-Prince said," "U.N. official say," "Haitian police say," "USAID workers explain," "a member of Haiti's electoral council said," "the new commander of the UN peacekeeping force assured," "council members said," "interim officials say," "State Department officials say," and so forth. Rarely, if ever, do we read what the wounded, imprisoned and exiled say, just as rarely do we read what elites say between one another behind closed doors--the testimonies that contradict officialdom.⁷⁷

Concluding Thoughts

We would be remiss if we overlooked Aristide's political situations and Haiti's puzzling relationships with the United States and the International community during Aristide's two-term presidencies. Aristide was a radical and activist president who has become less admired by the United States, Canada, France, and other powerful forces and institutions in the Western world. His second administration suffered greatly from external economic embargo, political instability, and violent attacks against his government. As a consequence, the Haitian people were increasingly starved and the unemployment level was high during this time. As we have seen, given the various historical and social contexts of his second presidency, defensive violence was necessary for Aristide to sustain political leadership in Haiti.

On the other hand, in the post-Duvalierist era, Aristide's subsequent "written cultural criticisms" and politico-theological texts would be more refined and almost include no promotion of popular violence or justification for widespread aggression. His popular texts, such as *Eyes of the Heart: Seeking a Path for the Poor in the Age of Globalization*, *In the Parish of the Poor: Writing from Haiti*, *Dignity*, *Aristide: An Autobiography*,

⁷⁷Sprague, *Paramilitarism*, 304.

Théologie et politique (even the technical text, *Névrose vétéro-testamentaire*), would emphasize cross-cultural friendship, human solidarity and relationality, international solidarity, participatory democracy, communitarian ethics, cosmopolitanism, and a politics of mutual reciprocity and interconnectedness. While his sermons delivered in the 1980s at the Saint Jean Bosco Parish in Port-au-Prince are seditious in content and stimulated popular protest and violence, Aristide's post-Duvalier literary productions are more mature and irenically engaging. Aristide's subversive language was intended to expose the wrongdoings of the Macoutes and denounce the Duvalier regime.

We should reiterate that theology is always contextual and written as a response to specific religious, cultural, economic, and political phenomena, at a specific time, in human history. Aristide's theo-political text, *100 Vèsè dechoukaj*, should be interpreted within this standpoint; such perspective is not meant to rehabilitate Aristide in Haiti's civil and political spheres. Our approach to this sensitive matter in this essay is not intended to offer an apology for Jean-Bertrand Aristide nor provide a legitimate defense for the probable "gangster affiliation," and his crime and human rights violations, assuming he has committed any?

Conversely, when one looks meticulously into Aristide's political actions and presidential, during his second term and the multiple accusations thereof, in the light of the theology of relationality, interconnectedness, and interdependence, which he promotes in his post-Duvalierist writings, one could possibly infer that he has not fully integrated the spirit of Ubuntu and the moral vision and sound theological teachings into his political leadership and presidency. Aristide may have fallen from grace given his reputation as an acclaimed religious leader and the beloved Pastor-Priest of the Saint Jean Bosco Parish in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

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