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*The Armorial of Haiti: Symbols of Nobility in the Reign of
Henry Christophe* (review)

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Clive Cheesman proposes to his readers that, once upon a time, the King had clothes, and that his clothes were resplendent. These were the heady days soon after Independence which now, in retrospect, seemed to have been a Golden Age for Haiti, since, for peoples of color at least, hope seemed justified.

The quest for survival, the search for “respect” internationally, had led Haiti into two empires and one kingdom, and a plethora of republics—nine of which established a lifetime presidency praised notably by Simón Bolívar. Opening here a parenthesis, only two other Latin American nations besides Haiti, toyed with empires, Mexico followed by Brazil. Domestic stability was also the leitmotiv of successive early Haitian governments. Under severe ostracism and immense fear that colonization and slavery would be re-established, the new country managed—*tan bien que mal*—to create shaky national institutions based upon the “inheritance” provided by colonialism. In reality, the only lesson the slaveowner can give his slave, is how to be a better slave! Indeed, these state institutions were to be a re-creation of European forms transplanted to the tropics, not a re-adaptation of indigenous and traditional west and central African formulae of statecraft as was the case with neo-African maroon societies as exhibited in the *palenques* and *quilombos*.

The models were unabashedly European, as if to say that only modern-derived—read European—institutions would suffice to keep European armies at bay in the reconquest of “Hayti.” This became the main thrust of Haitian socio-political and philosophical thought throughout the Haitian nineteenth century, and well into the 20th century with the advent of *Négritude*.

The reality of these governmental forms, however, was immensely more complex and complicated. And though Haiti acquired its independence very early in the 19th century, it already had produced a full-fledged creole culture in every sense of that word. Hence what King Henry I unwittingly did, was both apish mimicry of European royalty—partly for international acceptance and consumption—and patterns of leadership reminiscent of olden west African political systems, minus the accountability normally extant in the latter.

The book raises, most indirectly, at least to my mind, substantial

issues concerning leadership and tyranny, fact and folklore, and historical circumstance within its most obdurate context.

For some reasons unknown to me, Clive Cheesman, Rouge Dragon Pursuivant of the Royal College of Arms in London, has produced with this book, a labor of love. The Haitian-born Governor General of Canada, Michaëlle Jean, herself the Head of the Canadian Heraldic Authority, provides a brief preface to the text. Haiti preceded Canada into independent life as a nation.

We are told that the King's models were Frederick the Great of Prussia, and George III of Great Britain and Ireland. And that in 1776, Christophe had volunteered to join the Chasseurs Volontaires, under the command of Count d'Estaing, to fight in the American war of independence, notably at the battle of Savannah, Georgia, in 1779. His meteoric rise in politics and military affairs in colonial Saint-Domingue, made of him one of the signal heroes in the Haitian Revolution of 1791 and in the subsequent protracted and successful war of independence that ended in 1804. The historian Marie-Lucie Vendryes provides a somewhat detailed descriptive chronology of Henry Christophe's ascent to power. Her chapter is a helpful compendium of Christophe's actions over the course of his life, for both foreigners and Haitians. It was good to be reminded of his domestic efforts, and the international relations he maintained with European powers and with foreigners that were or could be of assistance to the fledgling state. Vendryes's contribution, in my mind, calls out for a monograph, as well as intimates the need for further full-fledged historical works on all early Haitian leaders, those in the first tier as well as those in the second tier. Though social histories are absolutely crucial—see for instance the work of Carolyn Fick and perhaps the earlier work of C.L.R. James—those need to be augmented by biographies whose primary sources are to be found in European libraries and archives.

What befell the Christophe family is reminiscent of the earlier travails of King Louis XVI: The Haitian "dauphin," Prince Jacques-Victor-Henry, is jailed at sixteen, then unceremoniously murdered. The Christophian tragedy is summarized well by Vendryes. What remains, she says, are "Some silver and gold coins bearing the King's effigy; the ramparts of the Citadelle..., and the ruins of [Palace] Sans-Souci.... [and] lingering popular memories."

Contrary to expectations, since Christophe was an anglophile fluent in the English language, the heraldic patterns adopted by his Royal Court, were "*calquées*" from French heraldic models rather than from English models. In a parenthesis, I shall like to raise the possibility that the Royal College of Arms in London, attempts to resurrect the heraldry of Emperor Faustin I (Soulouque), 1849-1859 for comparison, and for

partly selfish personal reasons having to do with my own family. I raised the issue while in the United Kingdom recently. Cheesman rightly points out that what Christophe did does seem to be a “historical dead end,” short-lived of course, particularly “as it seems so different in character and rhetoric from the revolutionary movement it sprang from...” (p. 6). He then compares the Haitian Kingdom to the equally short-lived French First Empire. Cheesman makes a powerful argument for the study of all Haitian monarchies as entities *sui generis*, rather than merely as “tyrannies.”

What is particularly precious in Clive Cheesman’s analysis, are the useful comparisons made between Haiti and European monarchies in historical “context,” and other monarchical forms, for instance that found in the independent Kingdom of the Kongo, the point of origin for so many Haitians, and other African-derived formulations of royalty. Cheesman’s analysis does an excellent job, based on the author’s wide knowledge of the field, suggesting that Christophe may be inspired by a number of models from a number of sources, describing in a pedestrian way, the harbinger of early creolization, where new forms erupt from old! Mexico in 1822 and Brazil in 1825, it is stated, offer “two independent monarchies modeled on European originals, but achieving new and unique local forms” (p. 7). As I have argued elsewhere in my work, Haiti was already well-ensconced in the orthodoxy of “European” global thought and socio-economic relations, but particularly, Haiti was well-ensconced in evolving traditions of Latin America (Bellegarde-Smith 1985). Class relations inside Haiti, were similar to those established between rulers and the governed throughout the Americas.

It is interesting and hardly surprising that many of the names of the ennobled are part of the armature of a present-day “old” Haitian elite; names recur from old lists of the *Maison du Roi*, into upper-class Haiti today.

Then follows, in living color, as the King meant it, the whole panoply of sophisticated coats-of-arms—that of the King himself, of Queen Marie-Louise, of the Kingdom itself, and that of the capital, Cap Henry—and more creolized, but heart-rendering coats-of-arms of noble families, beyond the Princes and the Dukes. European mythological creatures mingle unselfconsciously with *pintades*, guinea fowls and other creatures of the Caribbean. My favorite, however, remains the awkward arms of the baron of Sevelinge that shows, instead of an open book, a small “purpure bookcase,” with two shelves, “replenish with books or,” twenty-four books, to be exact, pell mell (p. 162). We are told that Jean-Baptiste-Noël Sévelinge was the *bibliothécaire* du Roi, the King’s librarian. That brought me almost to tears: I remembered, suddenly, that my country was largely non-literate then, as it is today. But then we

were full of hope.

The book presented to us and edited by Clive Cheesman, is a powerful document, one that facilitates certain kinds of discourses in Haitian history and historiography, and also in those of Africa and its diaspora, and in the history of Latin America in general. Monsieur Cheesman is to be lauded for having pursued this task singlemindedly, despite the odds that conspired to keep a part of Haitian history buried in the bowels of the Royal College of Arms in London. This is a magnificently produced volume!

Reference

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This work explores the Jamaican-Atlantic field of family relations that has emerged in connection with Jamaican emigration to Britain, the United States and Canada since the 1950s. The book is the result of collaboration between Elaine Bauer, an emigrant Jamaican anthropologist, and Paul Thompson, a British sociologist/social historian. Bauer recently received her Ph.D. on mixed race couples and their families and her life exemplifies the significance of the trans-Atlantic social field explored in the book. She was born and raised in Jamaica, spent her youth and early adulthood in Canada and is now living in England. Thompson is a sociologist/social historian who has worked for many years with oral history in a European context. He was instrumental in showing that oral testimony provides essential data when doing research on social and cultural processes of the past as experienced by ordinary people. Together these two scholars therefore combine a keen awareness that migration, and with it trans-Atlantic families, is a condition of life affecting most Caribbean people, with a fine grasp of oral history