



## **Marc Baptiste: RARA!**

### Tour Notes

On View January 15, 2020 - March 8, 2020

#### **SUMMARY**

In part two of a three-part exploration through spirituality of the African diaspora, MoCADA follows acclaimed photographer Marc Baptiste to Haiti, as he documents a community in observance of RARA, the annual celebration of music that unifies African and Taino cultures through Vodun. From procession and protest to performance and pageantry, and grounded by spiritual ceremonies held en masse, enter the unique festival that began in Léogâne long before the revolution.

#### **FEATURED ARTIST**

Marc Baptiste, Haitian-American photographer was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. He moved to Brooklyn, NY at an early age. Baptiste picked up photography in the 9th grade, years later upon receiving his BA in Commercial Art and Advertising; he grew to become an influential fashion and portrait photographer.

Known for his lighting, beauty, cinematic style and great energy he has documented subjects from Top Celebrities including; Prince, Shakira, Janelle Monae, Erykah Badu, George Luka, Cicely Tyson, Yoko Ono, Misty Copeland and Spike Lee, to his most memorable subjects Michelle and Barack Obama, and Carmen de Lavallade.

His photographs have been published internationally in editorial magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle* (US and SA), *Vanity Fair*, *Esquire*, *Marie Claire*, *Esquire*, *Ebony*, *Essence* and *Glamour* (US and GR). Baptiste has photographed the advertising campaigns for revered

brands such as Nike, Remy Martin, Chevy, Reebok, L'Oreal, Mizani, and Crest. His commercial work is distinguished for its appeal in global markets.

Love for his birthplace influences all of his work. Baptiste serves on the advisory board at Cine' Institute, and Noah NY. He uses his lens to donate his time for Charity Organizations worldwide. Baptiste documents Noah NY on their yearly Medical Missions to Haiti, and in 2017 he traveled to Burkina Faso to document the clean water initiative of the Georgie Badiel Foundation.

Philanthropic collaborations with Celebrities include DKNY / Rock the Vote campaign with Eva Mendez, Maroon 5 and Kate Bosworth. The groundbreaking advertising campaign Keep a Child Alive org. with Alicia Keys, Lorraine Bracco, Cynthia Nixon, David Byrne and Lenny Kravitz.

He is passionately building his photo and video repertoire of visuals from his travels. He has many stories to tell.

#### AWARDS

June 2018 Hope awarded by Georgie Badiel Foundation | May 2018 Pride awarded by Noah NY | January 2014 Leadership awarded by CapraCare | January 2012 Marc Baptiste appreciation day awarded by Scott Stringer, Office of Manhattan borough President | January 2012 Honor Award presented by Minister of Haiti.

#### EXHIBITIONS

Haitian Heritage Museum Miami (Haiti a La Mode 2018) apArt Private Gallery NY (Other Color, 2016) | Steven Weiss Gallery NY (The Truth, 2010) | Celebrity Vault Gallery LA (Nudes, 2008) | APART London (Intimate, 2004) | Dactyl Foundation for the Arts NY (Nudes, 2003)

#### BOOKS

Beautiful (2001) | Intimate (2003) | Innocent (2006) Published by Rizzoli's Universe Publishing

## WHAT IS THE MEANING OF RARA?

RARA refers to Haiti's annual celebration of music that unifies African and Taino cultures through Vodun. This celebration involves dance, music, and costume as part of a procession through the streets.

### KEY TERMS

**HAITI:** Haiti is a country in the Caribbean. Baptiste is from Haiti and the works included in this exhibition explore elements of Haitian culture. Haiti was once called Saint Domingue under French.



**RARA:** a music celebration that originated in Haiti during Easter. The music involved in this celebration features trumpet, bells, drums, and instruments made from recycled materials. The music is mostly inspired by African music with hints of Taino elements.

**TAINO:** a group of people native to the Caribbean, predominantly Cuba, Hispaniola, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and the northern Lesser Antilles.

**VODUN:** West African Vodun is a system of spiritual practices and beliefs that are the basis for Haitian Vodou.

**VODOU:** Haitian Vodou is a spiritual practice which involves the belief in one supreme "good god" who believers communicate with through multiple spirits who control various parts of human life.

**HOUNGAN:** a Vodou priest, often leads ceremonies.

**VEVES:** geometric drawings done by Vodou priest, often seen at Rara celebrations.

## QUESTIONS

1. How and why did Rara come become a tradition in Haiti?
2. What types of instruments are involved in Rara music?
3. What materials are used to create handmade Rara instruments?
4. What is the significance of Rara music to Haitian culture?
5. How is Rara related to Haitian Vodou?
6. How did West African Vodun influence Haitian Vodou?
7. How did the Haitian Revolution start?
8. How long did the Haitian revolution last and how did it eventually end?
9. Why is the Haitian Revolution significant to world history at large?
10. What are the important components of Rara?
11. What is a Majojon?
12. What is a potomitan?
13. What kinds of objects can people place on the potomitan? Why do people place objects on the potomitan?
14. Who were the Taino people? Why are they important to Haitian culture and Caribbean culture at large?
15. How are the Taino people honored through the Rara celebration?
16. Who is Anacaona?

# EXHIBITION THEMES

## 1. The Haitian Revolution

### Summary

Haiti is well known as the only modern nation to free itself from slavery, a revolt known as the Haitian Revolution. The Haitian Revolution began on August 22, 1791 when Toussaint L’ouverture led half a million slaves to overthrow French colonizers.<sup>1</sup> At the time, Haiti was called Saint Domingue and was ruled by the French who enslaved its African natives. The revolution was onset when a group of slaves attended a vodou ceremony in which a tropical storm was interpreted as a sign of change. That same night, slaves began killing their slave masters which led to civil war. Later, high priests of vodou Dutty Boukman and Cecile Fatiman gave word to begin the revolt. Over the course of a few months, former slaves killed thousands of French colonizers and destroyed hundreds of plantations. White Europeans did try to fight back, but eventually decided to abolish slavery in 1793 due to the violence. Haiti eventually became an independent nation in 1804 with leadership from Toussaint L’ouverture. However, this freedom came at a cost. Haiti was forced to pay off France nearly \$21 billion dollars in order to remain an independent nation and has had many financial problems since. Despite this, the Haitian people have managed to preserve their culture and traditions through celebrations such as Rara.

## 2. Rara

### Origins of Rara

Rara commemorates the moment in which the slave revolution resulted in Haiti’s independence. The first Rara celebration occurred on Easter in Saint Domingue. Although there is no written documentation regarding the origins of this tradition, it is said that lower class African citizens of Saint Domingue paraded through the streets singing in Creole and playing musical instruments. Eventually, this act of revolt transformed into a colorful, celebratory tradition featuring Rara music. **Haitian Vodou** is also an aspect of this celebration as many **houngans**<sup>2</sup>, or Vodou priests, call upon the spirits to protect Rara bands and festival participants while they travel. Houngans also draw geometric shapes known as veves during the festivities.

### Elements of Rara: From Procession to Pageantry to Potomitan

---

<sup>1</sup> “The World Factbook: Haiti.” *Central Intelligence Agency*, Central Intelligence Agency, 1 Feb. 2018, [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ha.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ha.html).

<sup>2</sup> Corbett, Bob. “Introduction to Voodoo in Haiti .” *Webster University* , Webster University , 1998, [www.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti/voodoo/overview.htm](http://www.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti/voodoo/overview.htm).

Rara begins with a **procession**, similar to a parade, of participants from various cities who all meet in Léogâne to celebrate. The procession involves song, dance, chanting, and spiritual practices. People also create handmade **kites** and **games** to play with during the procession, adding to the colorful nature of the celebration. Handmade straw hats are also a popular element of the celebration, often decorated with bright colorful paints.

There are also important figures within the Rara celebration including “**captains**” and the **Majo Jon**. Captains are the leaders of the procession and often do tricks with rope and whips. They wear traditional captain costumes to signify their title. The Majo Jon are dancers within the celebration. They are considered the best dancers in their community and often dance with a baton and scarves around their waist. The scarves are different colors to represent different spirits. For example, the Majo Jon pictured in this exhibition wears scarves honoring goddess Erzulie who represents love, health, beauty, passion, and prosperity.

Women of the Rara celebration often participate in **pageantry**. Specific women are chosen by the spirits to lead each band. They wear sashes to signify which band they represent. Many women also wear headdresses as an ode to Taino leader, **Anacaona**. Anacaona is the warrior who sacrificed her own life for her people after she was captured by the Spanish in 1504. The **Taino** people were the indengous group of peoples inhabiting the Caribbean, including Haiti. Unfortunately, they were found by European colonists and were eventually wiped out entirely. Still to this day, the Taino people are honored throughout the Caribbean islands. The use of Anacaona’s iconic headdress and statues of her placed throughout Haiti are just some of the ways her legacy is memorialized today.

The exhibition also features a handbuilt, custom **Potomitan** created just for this exhibition. The Potomitan is an important structure in Haitian Vodou. The Potomitan is similar to an altar in the sense that people place sacred objects such as candles, candy, alcohol, jewelry, and more on top of the structure in order to invite specific spirits. The structure, or temple, is often made of wood and built in a circular fashion. In Haiti, the base of the Potomitan is often made with the trunk of a palm tree. Many people paint their Potomitan with different colors and decorations representing different spirits. The Potomitan represents deity Papa Legba, who communicates between the loa (the spirits) and the people.



Photograph of Rara celebrators surrounding a potomitan, captured by Marc Baptiste.

## Rara Music



An example of a painted banner and straw hats seen during Rara, captured by Marc Baptiste.

Instruments involved in the making of Rara music include bamboo trumpets, recycled metal trumpets, drums, shakers, bells, wind instruments, and scraped instruments. One of the most integral instruments in Rara is called the “**vaccine**”<sup>3</sup> which is a wind and percussion instrument made of bamboo. The lyrics often center around political messages. Many people in Haiti also create costumes, paint their faces, and engage in dancing as part of the procession. Festivities usually begin on Ash Wednesday and continue into the weekend of Easter.

The celebration involves several **bands**, each of which include various instruments such as horns, whistles, drums, and shakers. Each band is led by a large banner which indicates the name of the band and sometimes the years in which the band has been active. Each band is also led by a woman who wears a sash with the name of the band.

### 3. West African Vodun

#### Overview of Beliefs

West African **Vodun** is the basis for a variety of spiritual systems such as **Haitian Vodou**, Dominican Vudú, Cuban Vodú, Brazilian Vodum, Puerto Rican Vudú, and Louisiana Voodoo. West African Vodun is a belief system based on Vodun spirits and divine beings who control the planet. Those who follow Vodun also believe that the deceased live side-by-side with the living, therefore ancestor worship is very important within this religion. Each family has a line of priesthood, based on matriarchs and daughters. **Mawu**, also referred to as Mahu, is an elder female being who is the divine creator. She created seven children: Sakpata who is Vodun of the Earth, Xêvioso, or Xêbioso who is Vodun of Thunder and Divine Justice, Agbe who is Vodun of the Sea, Gû who is Vodun of Iron and War, Agê who is Vodun of Agriculture and Forests, Jo who is Vodun of Air, and Lêgba who is Vodun of the Unpredictable. In many Vodun religious rituals, herbal medicines and healing objects are used, often made into shrines to call specific Voduns.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> “Vaccination Instruments.” *Vaccination Instruments | History of Vaccines*, [www.historyofvaccines.org/index.php/content/vaccination-instruments](http://www.historyofvaccines.org/index.php/content/vaccination-instruments).

<sup>4</sup> Anthony B. Pinn (2017-10-15). *Varieties of African American Religious Experience: Toward a Comparative Black Theology*. Fortress Press. p. 7.

## 4. Haitian Vodou

### *Origins of Vodou in Haiti*

Vodou's origins have been traced to Benin. Vodou was a direct response to the enforcement of Christianity amongst African slaves in the French colonies. Africans used Vodou to preserve their culture and use the power of spirits to better their lives. Many vodouists actually disguised their spirit worship as the worship of Roman Catholic saints in order to trick their masters. The worship of the Supreme Creator was disguised as the worship of God and the worship of Vodou spirits was disguised as the worship of Catholic saints.

### *Overview of Beliefs*

Haitian Vodou is based on the belief in **Bondye**, the supreme god who does not engage with humans. Bondye translates to "the good god." Followers worship spirits related to Bondye, called **loa**. In order to communicate with the loa, Vodouists present offerings to the loa through altars, objects, song, and dance.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES & INSPIRATIONS

### BOOKS

- ***Vodun in Coastal Benin: Unfinished, Open-Ended, Global* by Dana Rush**

This book takes readers on a journey from Togo to Ghana exploring the connections between belief systems in these areas. The book starts in Ouidah, Benin which was once a slave port. The author then explores multiple areas that were significant to the formation of Haiti. This book lays the groundwork for the early history of Haiti, which is helpful in understanding the traditions of the Rara participants featured in this exhibition.

- ***Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora* by Elizabeth McAlister**

A guide to the ways in which followers of the Rara festival harness the power of spirits through this celebration. The author explores the connection between spirituality, Vodou, and Rara traditions. She also goes into depth regarding the musical bands that perform during Rara and how these acts are coded with historicity, gender, and international dimensions. This book gives context to Baptiste's vibrant photographs of the festival itself.

- ***A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution* by Jeremy D. Popkin**



This book provides an overview of the Haitian Revolution from its origins to its end, starting with the slave uprising in the French Colony of Saint-Domingue in 1791 and to Haitian Independence in 1804. The author draws from many other scholars who have studied the subject. In relation to the exhibition theme of Rara, the Rara celebration actually began when Haitians were still enslaved as a protest against their condition.

- ***The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou by Donald J. Consentino***

An anthology which features 16 essays from various experts on the art of Haitian Vodou. This text gives a well-rounded look at Haitian Vodou from multiple perspectives. The book also features artworks and objects that are significant to spiritual practice, such as the potomitan, which is featured in our Rara exhibition.

- ***Vodou in Haitian Life & Cultures by Claudine Michel and Patrick Bellegarde-Smith***

A collection of essays which clarify the common misconceptions about Vodou and gives readers the background of this spiritual practice. Many people assume that Vodou and other Voodoo related practices are negative or dark, however, in reality these practices are very significant to Caribbean culture and are viewed as positive within these cultures. Baptiste's exhibition is a celebration of these traditions and shows the beauty within them.

### **Questions? Comments? Concerns?**

Contact us at: <http://mocada.org/contact-us/>

## **MoCADA**

[80 Hanson Place Brooklyn, NY 11217](#)

phone: 612 834 5245

<http://.MoCADA.org>

### **Follow Us ||**

IG: [@MoCADA\\_Museum](#)

TW: [@MoCADA](#)

FB: [MoCADA Museum](#)

## Works Cited

Anthony B. Pinn (2017-10-15). *Varieties of African American Religious Experience: Toward a Comparative Black Theology*. Fortress Press. p. 7.

Corbett, Bob. "Introduction to Voodoo in Haiti ." Webster University , Webster University , 1998, [www.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti/voodoo/overview.htm](http://www.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti/voodoo/overview.htm).

"The World Factbook: Haiti." *Central Intelligence Agency*, Central Intelligence Agency, 1 Feb. 2018, [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ha.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ha.html).

"Vaccination Instruments." *Vaccination Instruments | History of Vaccines*, [www.historyofvaccines.org/index.php/content/vaccination-instruments](http://www.historyofvaccines.org/index.php/content/vaccination-instruments).