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Francois Regourd

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Mesmerism in Saint Domingue

*Occult Knowledge and Vodou on the Eve of the
Haitian Revolution*

FRANÇOIS REGOURD

In August 1784, while the controversy surrounding the flamboyant physician Franz Anton Mesmer was at its height in Paris, Madame Millet, a respectable French woman settled in Saint Domingue, recorded the effects of “animal magnetism” on the inhabitants of the island in the following terms:

A magnetizer has been in the colony for a while now, and, following Mesmer’s enlightened ideas, he causes in us effects that one feels without understanding them. We faint, we suffocate, we enter into truly dangerous frenzies that cause onlookers to worry. At the second trial of the tub, a young lady, after having torn off nearly all her clothes, amorously attacked a young man on the scene. The two were so deeply intertwined that we despaired of detaching them, and she could be torn from his arms only after another dose of magnetism. You’ll admit that such are ominous effects to which women should sooner not expose themselves. It produces a conflagration that consumes us, an excess of life that leads us to delirium. We will soon see a maltreated lover using it to his advantage.¹

Mesmer's enemies could have claimed that these few words said all about mesmerism: it was nothing more than a woman's frantic disorder, leading to loose sexual conduct. However, we can say more, as historians, to unravel the tangle of facts and expose them. Mesmerism is, of course, a much more complicated phenomenon, as is the story of its rise and development in the most important French Caribbean colony of the eighteenth century.

As in Paris, mesmerism met with great popular success in Saint Domingue, confirmed by spectacular recoveries; as in Paris, it provoked contradictory and passionate reactions ranging from devotion to hatred; as in Paris, "animal magnetism" excited people's minds enough to reach the papers. Nevertheless, this chapter may be able to offer more than a mere local variant on a European phenomenon. First, the geographical distance from Paris and the colonial status of the island affected its social and intellectual status and its relation to the scientific societies in France; second, the presence at that time of more than 350,000 blacks and mulattos (including about 15,000 free colored people) beside fewer than 25,000 white colonists is a point not to be neglected, as both cultural and political tensions were involved. Saint Domingue, the wealthiest colony of the French empire, was, on the eve of the Haitian Revolution, a time bomb.²

The aim of this chapter is to study a fascinating episode in the history of Atlantic knowledge: how was mesmerist doctrine, and its attendant controversies, exported and appropriated in the colony? How did colonial scientists participate in both local and metropolitan debates under the watchful eye of the Royal Society of Medicine in Paris, and how did this result in a new social organization of scientific life in Saint Domingue? Beyond that point, what exactly happened with the black population of the island, when a few clues suggest that some of them may have assimilated such "magnetic" knowledge, and may have tried to use it as a weapon against their white masters? Alongside these tantalizing traces of a cross-fertilization between European and African occult knowledge and practices, this story is fundamentally about the place and the role of science, knowledge, and belief, in a context of tremendous political and social tension.

Chastenet de Puységur and the Introduction of Mesmerism in Saint Domingue

On June 8, 1784, Antoine-Hyacinthe-Anne de Chastenet de Puységur arrived in Saint Domingue, commanding his corvette *Le Vautour* (*The Vulture*). He was a bright thirty-two-year-old naval officer particularly well versed in nautical sciences: distinguished by the dignity of *chevalier de*

Saint-Louis, he had already participated in important scientific campaigns in the Atlantic, testing naval clocks under the command of Verdun de La Crenne in 1772 and learning the delicate use of the eponymous repeating circle (or *cercle de réflexion*, the best instrument at the time for precise coastal cartography) from Jean-Charles de Borda himself on the African coast in 1776. His experience of observation instruments in several military operations of the American War made Chastenet de Puysegur, despite his youth, one of the most competent hydrographers of the time and fully legitimated his appointment as head of the mission to Saint Domingue in 1784.³

His arrival was certainly important for local naval officers and administrators, because of the expected strategic results of his hydrographic campaign. However, it had a much more important echo in the colony, because of the immediate manifestation of his “magnetic” curative powers. Six years after Mesmer’s arrival in Paris and the beginning of the general craze for “animal magnetism,” Saint Domingue’s first “magnetic tub” was set up in the hospital of “La Providence,” in Le Cap Français, the capital of the north part of Saint Domingue.⁴

Chastenet de Puysegur was nothing like an ordinary charlatan: as a matter of fact, his name is very well known to historians of mesmerism, as his older brother, Armand-Marc-Jacques de Chastenet, marquis de Puysegur, was one of Mesmer’s most famous disciples, one who can be considered without exaggeration an enlightened precursor of medical hypnosis. For a few years, Antoine-Hyacinthe-Anne had been a fervent partisan of Mesmer, curing people himself whenever possible, and especially on the boats he was commanding: he was so convinced of the efficiency of Mesmer’s curative theories that he experimented almost every day on himself and ordered the ship’s surgeon not to bring any medicine aboard when he left Brest for Saint Domingue.⁵

Puysegur had learnt the techniques and theory of this new medicine which was claimed to be a universal panacea (curing blindness, vomiting, paralysis, osteoarthritis, and headaches) from Mesmer himself. From him, he had learned the art of mastering the magnetic flux supposedly running through the human body to relieve pains and physical torments. Mesmerism was also called “animal magnetism” because its theory was based on the existence of magnetic fluids that flowed through animate matter (similar to but different from the familiar mineral form of magnetism). The main idea was that most illnesses were provoked by an internal obstruction impeding the regular flux of magnetic streams through the body, this fluid filling any free space between things, living beings, and even planets. Following that principle, tub séances wherein the magnetic healer magnetized the patients

by means of savant passes over joints and the solar plexus were organized to provoke “crises” and “trances” which were the most efficient way to free the streams. The most visible part of the cure was the famous “tub” filled with magnetized water and metal filings. Gathered in a circle around it, patients were touching metal rods plunged in the tub, each patient holding the same rope through which the fluid was supposed to go from one to another. Some other accessories were an obsessing soft music (a fortepiano or, better, the famous glass-harmonica so precious to Mesmer) and a dark environment, to render his patients more impressionable. Information about the precise decorum that surrounded Puysegur’s séances in Saint Domingue is lacking, but they were probably very similar to those observed in Europe, as they were explicitly said to be organized following Mesmer’s precise instructions.⁶

An interesting witness of Saint Domingue life, a certain Morange (a plantation manager who regularly wrote to France to inform the proprietor he was working for) wrote on June 11, 1784 (only three days after Puysegur’s arrival): “Mesmer: this physician’s reputation is beginning to create a sensation here. [...] M. de Puysegur [...] is a great master [...]”⁷ On June 15, he added: “M. de Puysegur has established three chambers at La Providence in order to magnetize the patients.”⁸ A few days later, Morange continued his report: “M. and Mme Puysegur have come to ask for soup. We have seen the husband mesmerize one of his officers who suffered from a bout of fever. He made him cry, then laugh, with a fortepiano. Experiments have not yet begun for want of the necessary objects. Many are coming up to be treated.”⁹ Last, on June 27, he noted: “M. de Puysegur has begun his treatments.”¹⁰ As Moreau de Saint-Méry, a lawyer and the major chronicler of the 1780s in Saint Domingue, noted: “In the Providence Hospital you could see a tub and people with obstruction, gout or asthma assailing it.”¹¹

And indeed, Puysegur’s magnetic chambers seem to have met with quick and large popular success, attested by the *Affiches américaines*, the local newspaper, from the end of June 1784.¹² Moreover, Puysegur also found disciples to accelerate the spreading of Mesmer’s theories in Saint Domingue. Following Mesmer’s policy (he was linked to him by a precise contract), he founded a “Society of Harmony” in Le Cap in which as “Great Master” he gathered up to three promotions of “initiates,” and some “pupils,” for a total of more than twenty persons, including naval officers, physicians, colonists, and even an engineer.¹³ Each “initiate” had to pay a fee and sign a similar contract, including a clause punishing any disclosure of Mesmer’s secrets with the payment of 50,000 *écus* (about 150,000 *livres tournois*, an enormous sum) to the master.¹⁴ As a complement for this strategy of mesmeric expansion in the colony, he even received the support of two other disciples from the Paris

Society of Harmony: one physician and one surgeon, both recommended by Mesmer himself. This offered to Puységur the opportunity of keeping up both the teaching and practice of mesmerism in Le Cap despite long absences due to his hydrographical mission.¹⁵

We do not have many clues that could give us a precise account of Chastenet's and his disciples' medical activity during his first four months in the colony, but we do have a list of 131 cases, written out by the royal physician (*médecin du roi*) Arthaud, and his colleague, Côme d'Angerville, royal physician-surgeon (*médecin-chirurgien du roi*) in Le Cap Français, two of the most active opponents of Puységur's work in the colony. More than 100 patients was not a remarkably high figure for a town that counted thousands of inhabitants at that time, but those were "regular" patients, as the magnetic treatment was supposed to be continued for weeks, and often for months—and nothing guarantees, moreover, that the list was exhaustive.¹⁶ Among them, Arthaud and his colleague noted only five recoveries and more than twenty deaths. However, persistent rumors were running in the colony, as revealed by this account from Jean Trembley, a plantation owner, perfectly aware of Parisian debates involving Mesmer:

Two mesmeric tubs in this colony were directed by Monseigneur, the Count of Puységur, officer of the royal navy, and by other adepts. Marvelous cures that could hardly be attributed to any play of the imagination have been reported. A cripple brought from the plain to Cap François on a litter walked freely afterward. A female slave paralyzed for fourteen years was entirely cured in a short time without her realizing that she was been treated, etc.¹⁷

In Puységur's private papers, we can find also a certificate signed by an inhabitant of Limonade testifying to a temporary recovery.¹⁸

In any case, the controversy involving some of the most enlightened minds in the colony rapidly grew, not only as an echo of contemporary debates in France but as an expression of local intellectual vitality, which reveals some interesting points.

The Scientific Controversy and its Developments

As historians have shown, the frontier between such a medical and physical theory and charlatanism was not easy to define. In Saint Domingue, as in France at the same time, the general craze for the amazing powers of science was peaking: hot-air balloon flights and demonstrations of electrical machines and cures or chemical manipulations did not spare Saint Domingue.¹⁹ In such a context, in Saint Domingue as in France,

mesmerism could have been nothing more for most people than another episode in the story of men's mastery of natural powers, from Newton to Franklin, passing by the Montgolfier brothers.

Nevertheless, Mesmer was a strange figure, dangerously flirting with the usual charlatan's style, such as Cagliostro's or the Comte de Saint-Germain's, who were operating at the same time. His greed for money and his supernatural buildups also made an unfavorable impression on academic physicians and scientists of repute who led the fight against him in Paris, more or less since the beginning of the 1780s. In Paris in 1784, two commissions appointed by the government, including the main scientific authorities of the time (among them Franklin), led an investigation, and published their accounts in the fall of 1784. Both concluded that Mesmer was a charlatan and that his pretended recoveries were no more than fruits of the imagination. From that date on, Mesmer's success progressively declined in Paris under the joint accusations of caricature and scientific discredit.²⁰

Thus, the Parisian controversy reached Saint Domingue at the same time as Puysegur, which is not without consequence. The quick reactions of people such as Arthaud or Côme d'Angerville can be accounted for by their determination to take an active part in the Parisian debates. As soon as July 27, 1784—Puysegur had by then been treating people in the colony for only a few weeks—Arthaud wrote to the Société royale de médecine; his letter was read out on September 28, 1784: "A disciple of M. Mesmer has been with us for a month. He has set up a considerable apparatus and gathered all sorts of patients. He has promised to cure them all. He has now been operating for a month; seven people have died."²¹

Such an involvement in the scientific debates of the home country is no extraordinary thing, as the intellectual elites in Saint Domingue at the end of the eighteenth century were clearly involved in the most dynamic networks of the Republic of Letters.²² The fact is that all through the controversy that opposed physicians from Le Cap to Puysegur, established physicians called the Société royale to witness, conveying information and relying on the institution to legitimate their fight. This is obviously a boon for the historian because it provides a precious source with which to approach the controversy.

In a letter to Arthaud, dated June 25, 1785, J. Fournier de Varenne, one of most fervent proponents of mesmerism in the island, brought up a novel point in the controversy, arguing that the effects of mesmerism could be different on different sides of the Atlantic Ocean:

It is very odd and very remarkable that physicians in Paris should deny the existence of animal magnetism while physicians in the New World admit the truth of it. Are physicians in America favored

with more good faith and honesty than European ones? Or can it be that the effects of animal magnetism are more strongly felt in the equatorial area? For the physicians' sake, I go for the latter opinion, which is, besides, in conformity with our [i.e. mesmerist] doctrine.²³

Could it be that Fournier de Varenne was invoking an American specificity as a means to disqualify the results of European scientific commissions, thus hoping to give a second chance to mesmerism on the other side of the Atlantic? As Robert Darnton underlined in his *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment*, mesmerism had also reached the United States in the early 1780s, thanks to Lafayette, who went back to America in 1784 bringing magnetic theories in his luggage. An ardent proponent of Mesmer, Lafayette had planned at that time to establish a few "Societies of Harmony" in the young country; but Jefferson, who was then the U.S. ambassador in Paris, successfully undermined his efforts by sending back to his country numerous anti-mesmerist pamphlets and scientific accounts he had found in Paris—and there were very many at that time.²⁴ Despite Lafayette's active proselytism in Philadelphia and elsewhere, despite his visit to some Shakers in whom he had seen a manifestation of "indigenous mesmerism," it seems he did not encounter the expected success, even if a booklet called *Nouvelle découverte sur le magnétisme animal*, published circa 1800, still claimed the authority of some correspondents in America.²⁵

Anyway, the fact that Fournier de Varenne claimed that magnetic streams could be different and have different effects in various points of the globe was not surprising, nor was the idea that European men and women were subject to some physiological transformation when they were transplanted under tropical and equatorial climates. The sallow-skinned Creoles and their languor or sexual disorder were commonplaces of the eighteenth-century medical discourse. Moreover, the question of magnetic variations and the various reports showing that electric fluid was less easy to produce in tropical colonies because of excess of humidity in the air had already brought to light such subtle physical differences.²⁶

As we can see, the debate was spurring many questions, echoing those in France but with some "local touches," and some doubts on the quality of experts from the Old World as relevant judges for any scientific question in America. Besides, the "radical" social and political discourse that often emerged in the wake of the medical strand of mesmerism (as Robert Darnton demonstrated) was not totally absent from the debate.²⁷ As a matter of fact, we find a reference to this aspect of the question, once again under the quill pen of the pro-mesmerist Fournier de Varenne. He expressed the idea that Mesmer's purpose was also to perfect social institutions, and first of all medicine, ridiculing the *Société royale de médecine* in Paris as a "schismatic

body of plotters, ... a monstrous deformed wart which has grown on the corpse of the antique Faculty, like a fungus on a decrepit tree."²⁸ This prompted a scathing answer from Arthaud, a royal physician (*médecin du roi*): "I suppose you should aspire to overthrow the social order and destroy it, since that would be the only means of returning to nature."²⁹

Reading such passages, it is tempting to construct a sociopolitical approach to the phenomenon, which would follow Darnton's work on Mesmerism, transposing it to the colonial setting. Puysegur's disciples would then be portrayed as second-rank physicians looking for some kind of social prestige and acknowledgment, trying to find their place beside the official hierarchy of science embodied in the *médecin du roi*, Arthaud, working along with the Royal Society of Medicine in Paris.³⁰ And indeed, for opponents of mesmerism, this episode had highlighted the lack of an authoritative scientific body in the colony, such as the Académie royale des sciences or the Société royale de médecine in Paris. As Arthaud wrote to the Société royale de médecine in September 1785, describing his campaign against Puysegur and his adepts, possibly with some affectation:

I assure you, Sir, there would be little merit in carrying out this project in any place other than a colony, but here double courage is necessary especially when one feels so distant—as we are—from the center of Government, the influence of the Graces and the encouragements which sustain the zeal and animate the undertakings of a society. Science is an exotic plant that has not yet taken root here; it is not yet known how to cultivate it, and I think it will be difficult to naturalize it here.³¹

This letter expressed much more than a simple recognition of the Paris medical society's prestige and authority, as it gives such a clear image of the idea of a scientific periphery and of the need to transplant metropolitan institutions to the colony. By that time, in fact, a small company of scientists and enlightened personalities (most of them physicians, lawyers, and planters) had already been living and developing in the colony for over a year, known as the *Cercle des Philadelphes*. And yet, this *Cercle* was born on August 15, 1784 (with its official status being approved by administrators in September 1784) in direct reaction *against* the mesmerian tidal wave that had been threatening since its beginning a month before to flood established medicine in the colony. As James McClellan noticed in his pioneering and wide-ranging book on that *Cercle*, "[N]o one disputes the role of Puysegur and mesmerism in triggering the formation of the colony's scientific society."³² The idea of Arthaud, here, as the natural leader of the

nine founder fathers of the new colonial enlightened society, was clearly to embody a scientific barrier erected against Puységur and his occult powers. It also aimed at claiming support and “encouragements” from “the government” and the colonial machine as a whole.

In this sense, though it also expressed many other local and sometimes contradictory aspirations,³³ the *Cercle des Philadelphes*, built on the battlefield of an anti-mesmerist campaign under the protection of the Société royale de médecine in Paris,³⁴ can be seen as a transplantation of a social order of “science,” claimed as universal, from one shore of the Atlantic Ocean to the other. The image of an “exotic plant” is in that way relevant, as it suggests that such a conception of science had to be acclimatized. Decked in the full attire of French academic science (with its public meetings, *jetons*, competitions, publication of approved memoirs, and so on), it stepped onto the scene as a citadel besieged by the radical proponents of supernatural and occult knowledge—who were embodied in the rival “Society of Harmony” established in Le Cap at the same time.

Thus, thanks to the royal support offered by local administrators and the navy and thanks to the scientific credit given to established medicine by the official accounts published in Paris and brought to public knowledge in Saint Domingue, mesmerism seemed to have progressively disappeared from the colony by the fall of 1785, even if the last tub séances in Le Cap cannot be dated with precision.³⁵ A few years later, in May 1789, the *Cercle des Philadelphes* that had proved its usefulness in a much wider range of circles than the medical ones had become the *Société royale des Sciences et Arts du Cap Français*, the first royal academy in the French colonial domain. By that time, the most enlightened people of the Island had joined the Society, including former “initiates” of the disbanded Society of Harmony.³⁶ The scientific acculturation of Saint Domingue’s elite by the metropolitan Academic model was then completed, and the *Cercle des Philadelphes* never referred to Mesmer beyond the first year of its existence—even though the phenomenon, discredited in Paris, seemed to regain a new strength in the French provinces.³⁷ In 1798, Moreau de Saint-Méry could evoke the memory of this rapid fading in the following terms: “[T]he tub was deserted, and the paralytic they had brought had to be taken back home.”³⁸

The birth of a brand-new scientific normative institution benevolently protected by the Société royale de médecine in Paris³⁹ and the rise of a colonial scientific identity proudly built on the ruins of supernatural knowledge apparently sealed the destiny of mesmerism in the colony. Nevertheless, even if the official disqualification of “fanatics” and “simpletons” defending this “charlatanism”⁴⁰ had been achieved by the *Cercle des Philadelphes*

by the end of 1785, the idea of mesmerism was not quite dead in Saint Domingue.

Mesmerism and Vodou: Atlantic Cultural Cross-Fertilization?

Moreau de Saint-Méry, for example, evokes the fact that mesmerism had briefly found followers in the southern part of the island, far from Le Cap, especially among slaves and people of color: "Magnetism had its disciples, its apostles, and consequently its miracles in the southern department. But it was also ridiculed, and it died." However, he adds, "[T]he miraculous was rejected by all faiths, except those that admit of the Resurrection"—meaning the island's black population.⁴¹

There are indeed some clues justifying the hypothesis of a spreading of mesmeric theories and practices among the black population of the colony, both in the south and north. Although no blacks had been admitted in the "Society of Harmony" in Le Cap, some seem to have been cured thanks to "animal magnetism". Arthaud and Côme d'Angerville's list of patients treated by Puységur and his local disciples during the first four months of his presence in Le Cap reveals that at least ten people of color (including at least three slaves) had been treated in Le Cap at that time, coming from various places in Saint Domingue (Ouanaminthe, Saint Marc, Port-de-Paix, and Le Dondon).⁴² In all likelihood, people attending tub meetings could imitate some passes and other theatrical features to claim links with mesmerism (without having been granted (paying) permission by Puységur). Such forms of distribution are attested for example in the previously cited letter by Morange of July 23, 1784: "[T]here is a surgeon at Blin's place who magnetizes and operates faster than M. de Puységur. He sells his secret for 3300 *livres* to any newcomer. Lavaud had bought it and died of it."⁴³

Moreover, the idea of using Mesmer's treatment for plantation slaves as a large-scale treatment, in particular, seems to have seduced some masters, as did the idea of inoculation some years before.⁴⁴ This is shown by a letter from Morange in June 1784, on hearing that his master, Stanislas Foache, was following such a mesmeric treatment in Le Havre, France: "We know that M. Stanislas has been initiated into the mysteries of animal magnetism and that he is making ample use of it. Should he consider the effects beneficial, he will no doubt inform us and then inform his Negroes who could profit by these things."⁴⁵ However, he continues, regretfully noting that slaves (and maybe black people as a whole) were not Puységur's major concern, "M. de Puységur who is a great master, looks extremely hesitant [to cure slaves]; he is even reluctant to touch. It is wished that he should

reveal his secret for the good of humanity but he hasn't yet explained himself."⁴⁶

However, we indeed find one more trace of diffusion among the slave population besides the three slaves and the woman paralyzed for fourteen years mentioned above. As the planter Trembley notices,

A plantation owner on this plain [near Le Cap], made a big profit by magnetizing a consignment of cast-off slaves he bought at a low price. Restoring them to good health by means of the tub, he was able to lease them at prices paid for the best slaves. The rage for magnetism has taken hold of everyone here. Mesmeric tubs are everywhere. [But] today hardly anyone speaks of them any longer, perhaps because too much has already been said about them.⁴⁷

Such clues are unfortunately rare and difficult to find, even if we can still hope to find some more in plantation archives or private correspondence one day.

Of great interest, then, is the mention of mesmerism in two rulings from the Conseil supérieur du Cap, in reaction to repeated nocturnal meetings of black people, just a few miles south of Le Cap, in the La Marmelade district, a recent place mainly cleared by the work of first generation slaves, most of them from Congo. In the first one, dating from May 16, 1786, the Council forbade all people of African blood to join such night meetings in which had been noticed "convulsions" and manifestations of the "false prodigies due to this would-be magnetism [...] usurped by Negroes and disguised by them under the name of *Bila*"—a term referring to Vodou practices.⁴⁸ The second one, published on November 23, 1786, condemned three slaves named Jérôme Poteau, Télémaque, and Jean, found guilty of "having held nocturnal meetings of slaves, fraught with superstition and tumult, in several houses of the La Marmelade district and other nearby places under the pretence of magnetism."⁴⁹ At the end of the century, Moreau de Saint-Méry evoked this episode in the following terms:

One certainly does not expect to hear that La Marmelade had been the place chosen to bring to fruition the ideas of magnetism suited to the views of those who propagated them. They appeared in La Marmelade together with the hoaxes of the 'Illuminated,' the repulsive tricks of the Convulsionaries and excesses of profanation because their aim was to reap the profits of swindling.

and he then spoke about "chimerical mysteries," "superstitions," and "shameless charlatanism."⁵⁰

However that may be, the reading of the two rulings of 1786 and of the related judiciary archives kept in the lawyer François de Neufchâteau's papers reveals that what happened at that time in plantations near Le Cap, the north part of the island, was seen by many as much more than a trivial event involving unscrupulous charlatans.

The 1786 archives refer to ceremonies that systematically take place “by night in secluded places” and involve “very numerous people.” During these ceremonies, the decree of May 16 continues,

[T]he miraculous operator has the subjects who ask to submit to his power brought to him into the circle. He does not limit himself to magnetizing them in the modern sense of the word. After the magician has caused stupor or convulsions in them using both the sacred and the profane, holy water is brought to him since he pretends it is necessary to break the spell that he had previously cast on the subjects [...].⁵¹

The Substitute of the king's prosecutor (*substitut du procureur du roi*), in his closing speech for the prosecution, evoked in the following terms an account given by a white witness of the scene:

M. Jacquin, M. Estève's bursar, says that in the course of last July he clearly saw through the slits in the wall of Negro Jean Lodot's cabin, Negro Jean himself [another slave judged during this trial] among a numerous assembly, kneeling before a table covered with a rug and lighted by two candles, raising a fetish at intervals; that he could not clearly distinguish the kneeling and silent Negroes during the ceremony; he adds that he has afterwards found two machetes crossed on the spot where Negro Jean had operated. A certain Dimanche, Negro slave on the Estève habitation says [...] that those assemblies were called *mayombe* or *bila*. He describes in detail the ceremonies held there: leaves taken from raspberry bushes, avocado and orange trees were put in their hands, they were asked to kneel and then given *tafia* to drink in which he mixed pepper, garlic and whiting; and once the drink had made them fall the said Negro struck them with a machete to make them stand up again. He adds that Negro Jean carried a little bag strapped on his shoulder containing a crucifix, pepper, garlic, gunpowder, nails and a small case.⁵²

As we can see and as Gabriel Debien and Pierre Pluchon have shown, these accounts are clearly describing manifestations of the Vodou cult, attested at that time in similar words by several witnesses. As a matter of fact, this trial is a trial against Vodou, in which Le Cap judges saw, or feigned to see, a mere manifestation of the familiar Puysegur's “animal

magnetism.” Even a rapid glance at the papers we have today in our hands shows clearly that what is at stake, in that story, is nothing but the place and status of black religious and magical practices, in a colony of 350,000 black people severely ruled and dominated by a minority of only 25,000 whites.

At this stage, a passage of the ruling of May 16, 1786 provides another element for analysis: “It would be extremely dangerous for this colony ... to leave in the hands of Blacks an instrument that physical science only handles with great wariness, and which lends itself so easily to excesses and conjurers’ tricks, common among Negroes and venerable in their eyes.”⁵³ First, it reveals a persistent doubt concerning the real effects of mesmeric theories and practices, and it underlines the feeling that any appropriation of a European knowledge, “usurped” and “disguised” by black people, represents a potential risk for the colony.⁵⁴ Second, it underlines that the major fear of the judges was to see any charismatic leader taking advantage of such “illusions.” As a matter of fact, such a suspicion of the use by black slaves of any kind of European knowledge—knowledge supposedly giving power over men—was part of the campaigns led on the field of symbolic power by both white masters and black slaves. In that sense, the use of “holy water” in the Vodou ceremonies could be considered on the same level as the use of mesmeric “tricks,” both things participating in increasing sacred and symbolic power held by Vodou officiates.⁵⁵

At that point, indeed, older fears were revived. Behind the harsh condemnation of those occult practices loomed the fear of poisonings. In the late 1750s, that fear had taken the shape of a fugitive slave born in Africa, known as Macandal, suspected of having mounted a vast project for poisoning the entire white population of the island. His trial had brought to light his supposed knowledge of some secret toxic properties of plants but also some magical practices that had endowed him with a very special credit among black people. That was confirmed in the verdict of January 20, 1758, which found him

guilty of crime among the Negroes, having corrupted and seduced them by tricks and encouraged them to indulge in impieties and profanations in which he was himself involved, having introduced holy objects in the composition and use of allegedly magical parcels meant for evil spells which he concocted and sold to Negroes; for having besides prepared, sold and distributed all kinds of poisons.⁵⁶

Condemned to death and burnt alive on the public square during an execution fraught with dramatic developments, that poisoner durably

and strongly impressed black people's minds. And indeed, his name is still present today in Haitian memory as it is in the Vodou cult: a *loa* or *lwa* (a major spirit participating in the cult) is called *Macandal*, and the term *macandal* still today designates a talisman made of various elements gathered into a small packet.⁵⁷

For the colonist, that episode in which African knowledge of poisons, magical ceremonies, and phantasms of servile revolts were mixed was still looming as a threat nearly thirty years later. "And who knows"—stated the May 1786 ruling—"who could tell how far initiators or convulsionaries of the Macandal type could one day carry this fanaticism and delirium?"⁵⁸ In the minds of the colonists in 1786, magnetism was close to becoming an element of the feared black resistance to both European domination and European rationality, regularly expressed in mysterious nocturnal assemblies fraught with menace.

The idea that mesmeric elements could have been included in Vodou ceremonies is, of course, relevant, as Vodou (unlike mesmerism, which defined itself among its white European officiants as a rigid constituted knowledge) represents a body of knowledge, practices, and beliefs built on a constant cultural cross-fertilization with local and recent traditions, Catholic culture, and prestigious knowledge brought directly from different parts of Africa (especially Dahomey and Congo) by incoming slaves. However, today's Vodou does not reveal any visible or tangible connection with Mesmer: no tubs, no clear reference to Puységur, Mesmer, or any of their locally known disciples. Moreover, "mesmerism," "magnetism," and "would-be mesmerism" never appeared in judiciaries' sources of that time in Saint Domingue as anything other than European *words* used by white judges for describing various parts of Vodou rites, for which we have existing, older descriptions. Therefore, even if we should not neglect the attractive and appealing possibility of a long journey of mesmeric knowledge from Vienna to Saint Domingue's plantations, passing by Paris and Le Cap, we must be cautious, as these descriptions of black mesmerism seem to have been nothing but a smokescreen set between the rationality of French judges, and the frightening manifestation of black Vodou nocturnal ceremonies.⁵⁹ In that context, the use of words designating at that time a familiar and reassuring form of charlatanism was doubtless a way to publicly disqualify any kind of black occult knowledge and also gave words to judges to describe and condemn such a mysterious phenomenon, characterized by both impressive "trances" and hypnotic effects. In the same way, as they definitively closed the mesmeric files, the judges opportunely avoided any request for further scientific inquiries from the *Philadelphes* on such elusive, mysterious and

irreducible black knowledge—deliberately excluding it from European spheres of interest.

However that may be, neither the verbal stifling of the Vodou phenomenon (which was reduced to the status of second-rate mesmerism) nor the exemplary condemnation of the nocturnal assemblies to which it gave rise in several places in the colony succeeded very far. The symbolic and social power of Vodou was actually to play a role (doubtless important, albeit difficult to evaluate) as a strong stimulation for combatants in the black Revolution which made Saint Domingue flare up in 1791.⁶⁰

Conclusion

As we can see, the story of mesmerism in Saint Domingue had been much more than a simple episode of colonial medical life. Introduced with some success in the colony by one of its stronger supporters in 1784, it raised local debates among scientists and colonists and certainly contributed to reinforce intellectual links between colonial intellectual elites and French academicians. As a consequence, it directly led to the birth of the first French colonial academy, well known as the *Cercle des Philadelphes*, which became in 1789 the *Société royale des arts et lettres du Cap Français de Saint Domingue*. Seen as a scientific theory, mesmerism provides an interesting opportunity to observe *in vivo* the spreading of a coherent body of both scientific and occult knowledge through the Atlantic toward the European and African worlds rooted in Saint Domingue. As it provoked internal and external scientific debates under the watchful eye of royal institutions in France, its spread in the colony can be seen as a major moment in the building of a scientific identity for local enlightened minds. Used as a rebellion flag by some enlightened colonists fighting against the supposed universality of European expert knowledge and (moreover) portrayed by colonial magistrates as a threatening weapon in the hands of slaves willing to overthrow the whites' domination, mesmerism in Saint Domingue appears as a fascinating catalyst of tensions and fantasies, belonging to that mysterious part of knowledge that makes historical anthropology so interesting.⁶¹

The short but intense episode of Saint Domingue mesmerism is also one of the rare occasions that allow historians to glimpse a part of the secret knowledge of black slaves, usually obscured in written sources. European “mesmerism” and its “mesmeric trances,” thought of by colonists, physicians, and judges as an occult power, provided them with the perfect words and tools they needed to understand and vilify such a strange (and to them incomprehensible) thing as Vodou—thus building behind a

smokescreen the elusive figure of a seductive shared and changing Atlantic knowledge.

Notes

- 1 Gabriel Debien, "Une nantaise à Saint Domingue (1782–1786)," *Revue du Bas-Poitou et des Provinces de l'Ouest*, 83: 6 (1972), 413–36, cited and translated in James E. McClellan, III, *Colonialism and Science: Saint Domingue in the Old Regime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 177.
- 2 For overviews of Saint Domingue and its population on the eve of the Revolution, see Stewart R. King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig: Free People of Color in Pre-Revolutionary Saint Domingue* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001); Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 15–35; and John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint Domingue* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
- 3 Archives Nationales, Paris (hereafter AN), Marine C7 61, dossier Chastenet de Puységur. For details on his cartographical work, see François Regourd, "L'expédition hydrographique de Chastenet de Puységur à Saint-Domingue (1784–1785)," in Hubert Bonin and Silvia Marzagalli, eds, *Négoce, Ports et Océans: XVIe-XXe siècles* (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2000), 247–62.
- 4 In 1782, the *médecin du roi* Duchemin de l'Étang had already written to the Société royale de médecine in Paris about the arguments he used against a local admirer of Mesmer, but there were at that time no tubs nor any kind of magnetic cures in the Island; Bibliothèque de l'Académie de Médecine (Paris), collection of the Société royale de médecine (hereafter BAM SRM), 167, file 1: letter from Duchemin de l'Étang, October 1, 1782.
- 5 "M. De Puysegur Lieutenant de Vaisseau a exigé que le Chirurgien de ce vaisseau qui mis à la voile pour l'Amérique n'embarqua dautres remedes que ces instrumens promettant bien de prévenir et guerir toutes les maladies par sa vertu magnetique": BAM, ms 10, p. 157, session of Tuesday, April 27, 1784 (Plumitif des procès-verbaux de la Société royale de médecine).
- 6 For a general overview of mesmerism at the end of the eighteenth century, see, among others: Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968); Charles C. Gillispie, *Science and Polity in France at the End of the Old Regime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), ch. 4 ("Scientists and Charlatans"), esp. 257–89; Bertrand Meheust, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité, 1784–1930*, 2 vols (Le Plessis-Robinson (France): Institut Synthélabo, 1998); Jean-Pierre Peter, "Introduction," in Armand-Marc-Jacques de Chastenet de Puységur, *Un somnambulisme désordonné? Journal du traitement magnétique du jeune Hébert*, ed. Jean-Pierre Peter (Le Plessis-Robinson (France): Institut Synthélabo, 1999); Franklin Rausky, *Mesmer ou la révolution thérapeutique* (Paris: Payot, 1977); Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 189–225.

- 7 “La réputation de ce médecin commence à faire sensation ici [...] M. de Puységur, qui est un grand maître (...)”: Maurice Begouën-Demeaux, *Mémorial d’une famille du Havre (1743–1831)*, vol. 2: Stanislas Foache, *négociant à Saint-Domingue, 1737–1806* (Paris: Société française d’Histoire d’outre-mer, 1982), 94.
- 8 Begouën-Demeaux, *Mémorial*, 94.
- 9 “M. et Mme de Puységur sont venus nous demander la soupe. Nous avons vu le mari magnétiser un de ses officiers qui avait un accès de fièvre. Il l’a d’abord fait pleurer, ensuite rire avec un forte piano. Les expériences ne sont pas encore commencées faute des objets nécessaires. Beaucoup de monde se présente pour être traité...”: Begouën-Demeaux, *Mémorial*, 94 (June 19, 1784).
- 10 “M. de Puységur a commencé ses traitements”: Begouën-Demeaux, *Mémorial*, 94.
- 11 “On vit à la Providence des hommes, un baquet, qu’assiégèrent des obstrués, des goûteux, des asthmatiques”: Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l’isle de Saint-Domingue*, 2 vols (Philadelphia: chez l’auteur, 1797–98), new edition by Blanche Maurel and Étienne Taillemite, 3 vols (Paris: Société française d’Histoire d’Outre-mer, 1984), 1: 345 (all further references are to this edition).
- 12 For details, see McClellan, *Colonialism and Science*, 178–9.
- 13 BAM, Académie royale de Chirurgie, 25, file 14. Letter from Arthaud and Côme d’Angerville, Le Cap, September 23, 1784. Correspondance Morange-Foache, cited in Begouën-Demeaux, *Mémorial*, 95. Also AN Marine 2 JJ 104, bundle 3, piece 12 (draft of a letter from Chastenet to Bellecombe, September 17, 1784).
- 14 AN Marine 2 JJ 104, bundle 1, piece 2 (dated February 2, 1786). Another case of a similar contract is cited in Gabriel Debien, “Assemblées nocturnes d’esclaves à Saint-Domingue (La Marmelade, 1786),” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 44 (1972), 273–84, at 273, note 5 (document sold by auction at the hôtel Drouot in 1967).
- 15 AN Marine 2 JJ 104, bundle 3, piece 12 (draft of a letter from Chastenet to Bellecombe, September 17, 1784). According to Morange, cures were interrupted for a few weeks in July 1784: “[Puységur] laisse les magnétisés dans l’embarras [et ses premiers disciples n’ont sans doute pas ses qualités...];” Begouën-Demeaux, *Mémorial*, 95.
- 16 One of the main criticisms made of Puységur was indeed that people were not cured, but only temporarily relieved. The list is kept in BAM, Archives de l’Académie royale de Chirurgie, box 25, file 14.
- 17 Gabriel Debien, “Profils de colons. I. Jean Trembley,” *Revue de “La Porte Océane,”* 11: 113–14 (1955), 14–19, 8–10, translated by McClellan, *Colonialism and Science*, 177–8.
- 18 AN Marine 2 JJ 104, bundle 5, piece 4 (Chastenet de Puységur papers). Such certificates were common for Mesmerian practitioners, always concerned with proofs of success.
- 19 Charles C. Gillispie, *op. cit.*, ch. 4 (“Scientists and Charlatans”), 257 and following; Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility*; Patricia Fara, *An Entertainment for Angels: Electricity in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2002);

- McClellan, *Colonialism and Science*, 168–71; François Regourd, “Sciences et colonisation sous l’Ancien Régime: le cas de la Guyane et des Antilles françaises, XVIIe–XVIIIe siècle,” doctoral dissertation (Université de Bordeaux III-Michel de Montaigne, 2000).
- 20 For more details, see Darnton, *Mesmerism*, ch. 2 (46–81), and works cited in note 6.
- 21 Letter from Le Cap, July 27, 1784. BAM SRM 136, file 1, piece 24: “Nous avons icy depuis un mois un disciple de M. Mesmer. Il a établi un très grand appareil, il a rassemblé les malades de toutes les espèces. Il leur a promis à tous qu’il les guérirait. Il y a déjà un mois qu’il opère, et il y a sept personnes mortes.”
- 22 James E. McClellan, III and François Regourd, “The colonial machine: French science and colonization in the Ancien Regime,” *Osiris* 15 (2000), 31–50; François Regourd, “Lumières coloniales: les Antilles françaises dans la République des Lettres,” *Dix-huitième siècle* 33 (2001), 183–99. On the general context of medical history in eighteenth-century Saint Domingue, see Isabelle Homer, “Médecins et chirurgiens à Saint-Domingue au XVIIIe siècle,” thesis for the diploma of *archiviste paléographe* (École Nationale des Chartres, 1998).
- 23 BAM SRM, 136, dossier 1, pièce 25. Letter from Fournier de Varenne to Arthaud June, 25, 1785: “Il est très singulier et très remarquable que les médecins de Paris nient l’existence du magnétisme animal, et que les médecins du Nouveau Monde avouent sa réalité. Les médecins de l’Amérique ont-ils plus de bonne foi et de probité que ceux de l’Europe? Ou les effets du magnétisme animal sont-ils plus marqués dans le voisinage de l’Equateur? Pour l’honneur des médecins, j’adopte cette dernière opinion, qui est d’ailleurs conforme à notre doctrine.”
- 24 Darnton, *Mesmerism*, 88–90.
- 25 *Nouvelle découverte sur le magnétisme animal, ou Lettre adressée à un Ami de Province, par un Partisan zélé de la Vérité* (no place, no date [circa 1800]), 61.
- 26 The irony of this point is that a few years later, this climatic difference between France and Saint Domingue is invoked by Moreau de Saint-Méry, as an inverse demonstration: “Soit que le climat se prêtât moins aux illusions, soit que la marche rapide des maladies qu’on y éprouve fût plus propre à montrer l’insuffisance du moyen, les faits vinrent à l’appui de la contradiction, le bacquet fut déserté et il fallut rapporter le paralytique qu’on y avait amené;” Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description* (1984), 1: 345. See also McClellan, *Colonialism and Science*, 174, and François Regourd, “Sciences et colonisation,” 351.
- 27 Darnton, *Mesmerism*, ch. 3 (82–105).
- 28 BAM SRM 136, file 1, piece 25 (letter of June 25, 1785): “un corps d’intriguans schismatique, [...] loupe monstrueuse et difforme qui s’est élevée sur le corps de l’antique faculté, comme les agarics croissent sur les arbres tombés dans la décrépitude.”
- 29 “Je suppose que vous devez aspirer à renverser l’ordre social et à le détruire puisque c’est le seul moien de revenir à la nature”: BAM SRM 136, file 1, piece 25 (letter of July 27, 1785).
- 30 The list of initiates includes, for the first promotion: “M. Laval, médecin; M. Desvarenes [i.e., Fournier de Varenne], Ch[evalier] de Saint-Louis; M. le Marquis de Cadush, habitant; et M. de Malouet d’Alibers, Commissaire de la Marine.” For the second promotion: “M. Worlok [i.e., Worlock], M. de Courjolles

- [i.e. Courrejolles], ingénieur; M. Laborie, avocat; M. Gulman, habitant.” And for the third: “M. Joubert, habitant, ancien chirurgien; M. Rousseau, habitant; M. de Gudy, lieutenant de vaisseau; M. de Fourneau, négociant” (BAM ARC, box 25, file 14). Some of Puysegur’s disciples were nevertheless quite highly regarded by French scientific institutions, like Siméon Worlock, in particular, who had been the main agent of inoculation in Saint Domingue in the 1770s (which certainly explains his curiosity for innovative medical theories). He was well known and recognized by the Royal Society of Medicine, from which he received a gold medal and the official title of “correspondant” in September 1784, for an important dissertation on epizootic disease (BAM ms 10, Plumitif des procès-verbaux de la Société royale de médecine, 244, session of Tuesday, August 31, 1784; and *Journal de Physique* 25 (1784), 393).
- 31 BAM SRM 136 file 1, piece 26: letter from Arthaud, Le Cap, September 10, 1785: “Je vous assure, Monsieur, qu’il n’y aurois pas grand mérite à suivre ce projet dans tout autre lieu qu’une colonie, mais il faut icy un double courage, surtout lorsqu’on se voit éloigné comme nous le sommes du centre du Gouvernement et de l’influence des graces et des encouragements qui soutiennent le zèle et animent les travaux d’une société. La science est une plante exotique qui n’a point encore pris racine icy; on ne sait pas encore l’y cultiver, et je crois qu’elle s’y naturalisera difficilement.”
- 32 McClellan, *Colonialism and Science*, 179.
- 33 François Regourd, “Sciences et colonisation,” 396 and following. James E. McClellan, III, “L’historiographie d’une académie coloniale: le Cercle des Philadelphes (1784–1793),” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 320: 2 (2000), 77–88.
- 34 As a matter of fact, the Société royale de médecine sent to Arthaud and the Cercle some declaration showing its “satisfaction” to see such a cercle born in Saint Domingue: “J’ai transmis au cercle des philadelphes les deux lettres dans lesquelles vous exprimés, au nom de votre compagnie, la satisfaction qu’elle a éprouvé de son établissement;” BAM SRM 136, file 1, piece 26: letter from Arthaud, Le Cap, September 10, 1785.
- 35 Puysegur left Le Cap Français for Brest on July 31, 1785: AN Marine C6 872 (“Rôle d’équipage de la corvette du Roi *Le Vautour*, pour 1784–1786”), fol. 1. Yet in December 1784, the governor of Saint Domingue and the Minister himself strongly invited Puysegur to stop the publicity around his mesmeric cures (AN Marine 2JJ 104, bundle 1, piece 4). In October 1785, one of Puysegur’s friends, the colonist Ladébat, confirmed in these terms the slow decline of the Lodge of Harmony in Le Cap, in a letter to Chastenet de Puysegur’s wife: “The Lodge keeps meeting regularly in Le Cap, every month I think. But [the lack of] M. de Chastenet’s knowledge leaves an irreparable vacuum, which turns the proselytes away” (“Il y a loge au Cap régulièrement, je crois tous les mois. Mais les connaissances de M. de Chastenet font un vide irréparable qui écarte les prosélytes”); AN Marine 2 JJ 104, bundle 5, piece 8 (letter from Ladébat, October 30, 1785, to Mrs Chastenet de Puysegur).
- 36 The engineer Courrejolles, for example, rapidly joined the Cercle (*Tableau du Cercle des Philadelphes*, AN Col F3 81, ff. 145–6), and even one of the more virulent proponents, Fournier de Varenne, appears as an official member on the 1787 list of members, as well as Worlock: *Tableau du Cercle des Philadelphes*;

établi au Cap-François avec l'approbation du Roi, le 15 août 1784 (Cap-François: de l'Imprimerie Royale, 1787), 4 pp.

- 37 Mesmer, in particular, made a triumphant tour all around France in 1786; Darnton, *Mesmerism*, 67.
- 38 Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description* (1984), 1: 345.
- 39 As McClellan has shown, “seven members of the Cercle, including Arthaud and Warlock, became correspondants of the Paris medical society. Vicq d’Azyr, permanent secretary of the Royal Society of Medicine, pronounced the *éloges* of three Philadelphes: Lefebvre-Deshayes, Joubert de la Motte, and Cosme d’Angerville”: McClellan, *Colonialism and Science*, 355 n. 24.
- 40 These terms are those used by Artaud in his letter to Vicq d’Azyr of September 10, 1785: “il n’y a plus que quelques fanatiques et quelques imbéciles qui defendent cette charlatanerie,” (BAM SRM 136, file 1, piece 26).
- 41 Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description* (1984), 1322, cited and translated in McClellan, *Colonialism and Science*, 177. For a general overview of black medical practices and knowledge in Saint Domingue at that time, see Karol K. Weaver, “The enslaved healers of eighteenth-century Saint Domingue,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 76 (2002), 429–60; and her recent book *Medical Revolutionaries: the Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), in which ch. 6 (98–112) deals with the mesmeric episode in Saint Domingue and its supposed influences among black healers.
- 42 The list includes “Le nommé Guirgny, carteron libre d’Ouanaminthe, aveugle, sorti en même état depuis trois mois”; “la nommée Rozette, mulâtresse de Madame Bailly au Cap, attaquée de douleurs de tête et migraine, sortie en même état au bout d’un mois”; “La nommée Bibiche, mulâtresse de St Marc attaquée d’une suppression au Baquet depuis un mois”; “La nommée Marianne mulâtresse de St-Marc attaquée d’une goutte sereine à l’œil au baquet depuis trois mois”; “Adam, nègre libre ancien Courier attaqué de la vue, au baquet depuis quatre mois”; “Le nommé Moreau, Mulâtre du Port de Paix attaqué de douleurs. Au baquet depuis un mois”; “La nommée Jeanne Carteronne libre fille de M. Moreau habitant au Dondon attaquée d’un Gros rhume a été magnétisée pendant un mois ce qui lui a occasionné des fièvres lentes. Son rhume a dégénéré en pulmonie, est morte en heptisie le 21 [septembre]”; “La nommée Claire, mulâtresse attaquée de la poitrine a été magnétisée pendant deux mois est devenue pulmonique et est morte le 21 [octobre]”; “Une négresse de Madame Veuve Dorée, Magnétisée par M. de Puiségur”; “Un nègre de M. de Cadusch, magnétisé par son maître”; a list to which we could even add an eleventh black person involved in the mesmeric cures as guardian of a patient: “Une Pauvre Petite Blanche âgée de dix ans dont Adam nègre libre prend soin, aveugle au baquet depuis quatre mois,” BAM, fonds de l’Académie de Chirurgie, 25, file 14.
- 43 Letter from Morange to Foache, July 23, 1784, cited in Begouën-Demeaux, *Mémorial*, 95.
- 44 The years 1760–70 had seen a major inoculation wave in Saint Domingue’s plantations, conducted by planters and physicians for thousands of black slaves (Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description* (1984), 224–5, 250, 1068, and McClellan, *Colonialism and Science*, 144–5).

- 45 Begouën-Demeaux, *Mémorial*, 94.
- 46 “[...] à propos des esclaves [...] M. de Puysegur, qui est un grand maître, paraît très réservé; il répugne même à toucher. On désire qu’il donne son secret pour le bien de l’humanité, mais il ne s’est point encore expliqué”: Begouën-Demeaux, *Mémorial*, 94.
- 47 Gabriel Debien, “Profils de colons. I. Jean Trembley,” cited and translated by McClellan, *Colonialism and Science*, 178.
- 48 “Faux prodiges de ce prétendu magnétisme [...] usurpé par les Nègres et déguisé par eux sous le nom de Bila”: AN, 27 AP 12 (papers from François de Neufchâteau), cited in P. Pluchon, *Vaudou, sorciers empoisonneurs de Saint-Domingue à Haïti* (Paris: Karthala, 1987), 66–7. “Bila” (from a Bantu word for “drawing”), according to J. Kerboull, designates a sacrifice table (Jean Kerboull, *Le vaudou: magie ou religion* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1973), cited in P. Pluchon, *op. cit.*, 67). On Vodou, besides Pluchon’s work, see, among others: Howard Justin Sosis, “The colonial environment and religion in Haïti: an introduction to the black slave cults in eighteenth-century Saint Domingue,” Ph.D. dissertation (Columbia University, 1971); Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York: Schocken books, 1972); Laënnec Hurbon, *Les mystères du Vaudou* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).
- 49 “... Avoir tenu des assemblées nocturnes superstitieuses et tumultueuses d’esclaves, dans plusieurs habitations du quartier de la Marmelade et lieux voisins, sous prétexte de magnétisme” AN, 27 AP 12 (papers from François de Neufchâteau), cited in P. Pluchon, *op. cit.*, 68. Gabriel Debien, “Assemblées nocturnes,” 279 and following.
- 50 Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description* (1984), 275–6: “On ne s’attend surement pas à apprendre que la Marmelade a été le lieu qu’on avait choisi pour y faire fructifier les idées du magnétisme, assorties comme en Europe, aux vues de ceux qui les propageaient. Elles ont paru à la Marmelade accompagnées des farces des Illuminés, des scènes dégoûtantes des Convulsionnaires et des abus de la profanation, parce qu’on voulait arriver aux profits de l’escroquerie.” He writes later of “mystères chimériques,” “superstitions” and of “charlatanisme effronté.”
- 51 *Arrêt* of May 16, 1786 (Conseil supérieur du Cap), in AN, 27 AP 12 (papers of François de Neufchâteau), cited in Pierre Pluchon, *op. cit.*, 66: “L’opérateur miraculeux se fait représenter dans ce cercle des sujets qui demandent à subir son pouvoir. Il ne se borne pas à les magnétiser, suivant l’acception moderne de ce mot. Après que le magicien leur a causé de la stupeur ou des convulsions, mêlant le sacré au profane, il se fait apporter de l’eau bénite qu’il prétend nécessaire pour désensorceler ceux qu’il a mis en crise...”
- 52 AN, 27 AP 12, cited in Debien, “Assemblées nocturnes...,” *op. cit.*, 279: “M. Jacquin, économiste de M. Estève, dit que dans le courant du mois de juillet dernier, il vit clairement à travers le clissage de la case du nègre Jean Lodot, le nègre Jean au milieu d’une assemblée considérable, ledit nègre à genoux devant une table couverte d’un tapis et éclairée par deux chandelles, élevant à différentes distances un fétage [fétiche], qu’il n’a pas pu bien distinguer les nègres à genoux et en silence pendant cette cérémonie; il ajoute avoir trouvé deux manchettes [machettes] croisées à terre à l’endroit où opérait le nègre Jean. Le nommé Dimanche, nègre esclave de l’habitation de M. Estève, dit qu’il s’est plusieurs fois

trouvé aux assemblées que le nègre Jean tenait sur l'habitation de M. Estève, son maître; que ces assemblées se nommaient *mayombe* ou *bila*. Il ajoute le détail des cérémonies qui s'y pratiquaient, telle que de leur mettre dans les mains des feuilles de framboisier, d'avocat et d'oranger, de les faire mettre à genoux et dans cette posture de leur donner à boire du tafia dans lequel il mêlait du poivre, de l'ail, du blanc d'Espagne et que cette boisson les faisant tomber, ledit nègre les relevait à coup de manchette. Il ajoute que le nègre Jean portait sur lui en bandoulière un petit sac dans lequel était un crucifix, du poivre, de l'ail, de la poudre, des cayous, des cloux et un étui."

53 AN, 27 AP 12, cited in P. Pluchon, *op. cit.*, 66–7.

54 The expression is in the text of the ruling: "usurpé par les Nègres et déguisé par eux sous le nom de Bila," cited in P. Pluchon, *op. cit.*, 67.

55 Such a perspective can be compared to what Vincent Brown has brought to light in an article on Jamaican slave society at the same time. Studying the question of Obeah and supernatural beliefs underlying the confrontation between white masters and black slaves, he shows how much the "political potential" of any supernatural belief, whether its effects were attested or not, was of great concern for white judges: Vincent Brown, "Spiritual terror and sacred authority in Jamaican slave society," *Slavery and Abolition* 24 (2003), 24–53.

56 P. Pluchon, *op. cit.*, 171–2. See also the chapter by Parrish in this volume.

57 P. Pluchon, *op. cit.*, 218 and following. See also Laënnec Hurbon, *op. cit.*, 40 and following chapters.

58 AN, 27 AP 12, cited in P. Pluchon, *op. cit.*, 67.

59 On this point, I would be much more cautious than Weaver, *Medical Revolutionaries*, 98–112, (ch. 6, entitled "Magnetism in eighteenth-century Saint Domingue: the case of the enslaved magnetists and their fight for freedom). Studying this possible cultural cross-fertilization, Weaver indeed asks "Was it Mesmerism?" (109), and immediately answers "We may never know," but then states, without citing convincing evidence, that "Mesmerism definitely influenced vodou" (110), that "the practice of mesmerism by slaves was a political act of revolution," and that the nocturnal vodou assemblies in La Marmelade (preceding the black insurrection in Saint Domingue) were "mesmerist meetings" (112), which is a seductive, but risky extrapolation. This point indeed fits well with her convincing thesis that enslaved healers played a major role in the Haitian Revolution, but the fact is that we have no clear evidence, so far, that any kind of "mesmerism," strictly speaking, was a part of that story.

60 On this point, see in particular Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 101–2; and the articles by David Geggus collected in his *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), especially "Marronage, Voodoo, and the Saint Domingue Slave Revolt of 1791" (69–80), and "The Bois Caïman Ceremony" (81–92).

61 On the links between history, memory, religion and identity in the Haitian context, see, among others: Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 31–107.