



Michèle Sterling

## *MAPOU*: In Search of a Sacred Haitian Woods

Some ancient myths and legends say that the Mayans knew “Yaxché” as the source that holds together the universe, our axis mundi. Yaxché roots bind humans to the underworld, her trunk supports middle-Earth, her canopy and long-hanging vines enfold souls ascending to the heavens. For others she was known as “Kapok the Mother Tree.” The indigenous Taino of the Caribbean Islands called her “Mapou,” the sacred portal to the spirit world. To still others this is the Ceiba, an ancient and majestic tree, one of the giants of this world, and native to the tropical forests of the Americas.

The indigenous Taino, of course, have perished; their brutal enslavement at the hands of the Spanish was genocide. Like the Arawak and the Caribe throughout the Caribbean, the Taino were erased and replaced. Alternates were forced from lands now known as Ghana, Togo, Benin,

and Nigeria. Brought to the Americas as beasts of burden, they made it possible for the Spanish and the French colonialist to conduct their lucrative commercial ventures.

Some say the slaves from western Africa carried with them the seeds of the Ceiba tree to the new lands. Others say the oceans carried the water-resistant seedpods from the Americas to western Africa. Either way, African slaves and then ex-slaves maintained the Taino reverence for Mapou down through the centuries to the present day. For they, too, have known Mapou as the connection between Earth and the worlds of human ancestral-spirits.

Three decades ago in Haiti, the Euro-American fear of “the other” was laid bare once again. Christian-American missionaries branded the tree evil because of its spiritual significance to the Taino and to former Africans. They had their believers burn the Mapou trees, deep within their trunks where the spirit of the tree was said to reside. Now, one can find an odd loner Mapou in the countryside, those very few that managed to escape the zealous missionaries and their followers.

There is one place in the northeast of Haiti where a pilgrimage is made every year to a large, protected gathering of the Mapou. It was here that in 1791 slaves gathered at Bois Caiman to consult their ancestors and Earth’s life-force. They were urged by those forces to revolt. And that spark ignited the world’s first Black revolution in the modern age.

I was not born in Haiti nor did I live there as a child although my parents were Haitian, and so I do have Haitian roots. I grew up in a northern Anglo environment, then a French one. Outside the summer visits from diaspora cousins, the cultural, racial and spiritual make up of the Caribbean remained foreign to my sensibilities, my formal education and my social conditioning. Nonetheless, deep within me, rooted in my viscera, or perhaps deeper still, there’s an unmistakable familiarity, a cellular resonance with Haiti. This allowed me to take it all in, like a familiar dream, knowing I would be protected, because however odd it all was, somehow I knew in some way I was home.

A few years ago I was living in Haiti when first introduced to the Mapou. Initially, I knew nothing about its importance, but I couldn’t help sensing the presence of a great elder: an entity of deep wisdom that was part of the Earth’s inner circle with all the secrets and insights that entailed. I was smitten with this fine specimen of nature’s deepest knowing, so I resolved to experience the Mapou personally and deeply.

Other than this one protected place, however, Haitians believed that the true power of Mapou had been lost forever. There were, of course, whispers of a few remote places in the country where Mapou were still united, strong and waiting. But these were just rumors, stuff of bedtime stories. Yet one rumor persisted; a place said to be hidden to everyone except a few. And so, I decided, it was there that my journey with Mapou would begin.

For years, I tried to get to the hidden place of the Mapou trees. I asked historians, botanists, travelers, conservationists and even commercial traders where to find this place. Not surprising most of them didn't know what I was talking about. I then asked those dabbling in Voodoo, the healing arts and adventurers and still nothing. A few said they'd also been looking for a hidden place of Mapou power for years, with no luck. Then one day I met an adventurer who said he knew an old herbologist who'd told him where to find this hidden place. He'd been trying to get there for years, but his plans always went awry.

In a country besieged by unrest and peril, an adventurous temperament is a luxury most can't afford. It was a pleasure for me to find this kindred soul, Olivier. Together, we agreed we would make our quest happen. We planned our trip, first by boat and then on foot. Over the course of a couple of years Olivier and I set up seven trips. None came to fruition. It was not for lack of trying, but last minute things always got in the way. And then my kindred spirit became discouraged and moved on.

Another couple of years past, then one day I figured I had nothing to lose so I confided in an engineer who was working for me on a project. Something told me he'd be interested. He listened but said nothing. About a month later, he helped clarify some of my Créole in a sensitive parley I was conducting with a very problematic group, about an altercation with guns. After that business was resolved he came to me and asked if I was still interested in going to the hidden lands.

"And so you know of it? I asked. "It does exist? Then yes, most certainly. I don't understand why it's been so difficult."

"The people of that land don't want to be found," he said. "They have veiled it from anyone who wants to venture into this place." By veiling, it was clear to me that he spoke of spirit or non-physical forces.

It sounded both frightfully exciting and absolutely ludicrous, but somehow it made sense.

"So, how is this done?" I asked.

"You need a formal letter of invitation in order to pass through the veil and enter the land."

"And how do I get this formal invitation?"

He went silent. And remained so.

Two weeks passed before he responded to my question.

"You need to know someone on the inside who invites you".

“Well, that sounds a little like a chicken or the egg problem.”

“I can get you in. I know someone on the inside.”

“How?”

“I have history.”

I had the distinct impression that his history was filled with rich forgotten mysteries and risky ventures. Haiti I had learned was an island filled with unsavory characters, inscrutable perils, people who didn't want to be found, deep wells of mystery and complicated histories. The swapping of “contes” (storytelling) is a very old Haitian tradition and Haiti's favorite pastime. Although I was bursting with curiosity I decided to respect his privacy and not irritate him.

“I can make the overtures and see if I get a response,” he continued. “But you need to know certain things about this venture. These people practice the left-hand of Voodoo. They are cut off from the rest of us and want to remain that way. They distrust the modern world you and I live in. Maybe one day that will change, but at present it is important that you understand what you are facing. Theirs is a world of spirit, an elemental world where balance must be maintained, whatever the cost. Are you sure you want to experience this?”

“Yes. I do.”

Actually I was torn by various feelings and fears, but I wasn't going to back down.

“Of course, I go with you,” he said. “I will be your guide, interpreter, and I will speak for you.” Here again I understood he didn't just know someone on the inside. His tie with these people was old and deep.

However, I was curious about the idea of an interpreter. I knew he wasn't just talking about the spoken language since I was fairly fluent in Créole. These secretive communities, the left-hand of Voodoo, are greatly misunderstood and misjudged. I might react inelegantly to what someone said or did and cause an unsavory incident. So I decided to defer to my guide. It was another two months before Gabriel received a response to his request. Yes, he and his friend were welcome to the hidden lands.

I had confided in my friend Joëlle about this adventure. I didn't want to disappear without someone having an idea what I was up to. She was to be my tether to the outside. Instead she begged me incessantly to join us on our mysterious quest. Joëlle had introduced me to Tae-Kwon-Do and the weekly practice had helped me immensely through of few tight spots, mentally, so I figured I owed her. Besides, I felt the company of a friend would be both welcome and wise. Although, I must admit, her strong penchant for Catholicism made her desire for this

journey all the more incredulous to me. But I agreed, realizing, however, we would have no tether.

Climbing into the back seat of a weather beaten blue sedan, I dropped my duffle bag in the corner and collapsed, my body sprawled across the seat. The ride from the beach into the city was always a challenge. Joëlle sat in front. Gabriel was driving. I looked up from my makeshift bed and noticed all the windows were rolled down. Ah, no air-conditioning. It was definitely going to be a very long, hot and bumpy ride. I slipped my bandana over my nose dropped my hat over my face and settled in.

We headed south by way of the largest shantytown of the city, Carrefour. We inched our way through a blazing furnace, hemmed in by a ruthless mob of mud hardened sun scorched cars. Best make no stops along the way.

I lay quiet on my spring-less bunk and resigned myself to the journey, while witnessing, with fascination, a devastated and scorched land teeming with life. Cars crept, a steady flow of market women walked by. Their graceful sway, baskets of freshly farmed goods expertly balanced on their heads. Laborers moved along with tools also balanced on their heads. Stray dogs and pigs loitered along the road looking for scraps to eat. The air was filled with honking, clanging, clattering, insult shouting, radio advertising: the unrestricted blaring sounds of an overly crowded tropical sub-city. Some passers-by were curious. They peered inside the vehicle, smiling a good morning. Others with glazed-over eyes merely braced themselves for another blistering day.

A few yards from the road was a line of brightly colored kiosks, plastered with signs and stacked with retail goods. Micro businesses. Survivors in freshly starched shirts re-inventing, improvising, eager to offer whatever you might need in order to pull together enough pocket change for tonight's dinner. And yet in this painfully deprived environment creativity thrived and, despite such never-ending hardship, resilience abounded.

Beyond the harsh cacophony on the road, with its carnival colored kiosks, a sea of rusty corrugated roofs sat upon rectangular single-room quarters. Pastel cubes washed out by the elements and incrustated by the life histories of their keepers. Hundreds of such dwellings were packed together up and down narrow dirt-beaten paths. It was early morning and you could already feel the searing inferno slowly consuming you, harsh sunbaked air filling your lungs. Every house, every person, every square inch was covered in dust. And here, as in too many poor and neglected countries, the toilet-less shantytown dust was greatly generated by dried human and animal feces; another horrifying, dehumanizing reality lived by billions.

And yet, like neighborhoods everywhere I heard the sounds of children playing and laughing, dogs barking, someone singing along with the radio, those warm and comforting sounds of life hovering above the crushing misery.

The journey promised to be a long one so I settled in and let my mind drift to past memories of my search for the hidden Mapou wood and the sacred portal to the spirit worlds. I closed my eyes and remembered.

**Lilli and I** grabbed our duffle bags and walked along the gangway to a 45-footer moored at the end of a long sun-bleached wooden dock. Like fishing boats of its kind anywhere, it smelled of the sea, rust, fish guts and petrol. The motor burred a low guttural rumble that bubbled up water.

It's first light: faint and hazy. The sky, an aquarelle awash with blue-greys, slips into waters of lavender-blue. Clouds of smoky dragon's breath dot the sky, a cool breeze floats from the sea as a golden sun awakes from its sleep. Fishermen prep for departure.

Two dilapidated docks are now teeming with half-naked fishermen unloading nets with catches big and small. Market women in flowing skirts, balance baskets on their heads loaded with fresh fruits, vegetables and loaves of bread. They weave their way in and out of the crowd. Laborers upload fresh cut lumber, burlap bags of grain, and boxes of colorful packaged sweets, while passengers with bundles and bags depart from or board boats heading for the provinces. Slim muscular dark-skinned bodies, young and old bustle about old docks set on tarred and waterlogged pylons sunk into choppy warm seas. Our dingy sea-worn bucket was the only motorboat anchored there. The others were old wooden lateen-rigged commercial sloops unchanged from the Haitian 17<sup>th</sup> century buccaneer vessels.

Cité Soleil is a coastal shantytown extending Port-au-Prince to the northeast. It was built under the notorious dictator, Papa Doc Duvalier, as a hub for provincial trade and named Cité Simone for his villainous wife. Renamed Cité Soleil or "City of the Sun," it is now at the heart of the most infamous gangs and violence in the country. A place you entered at your own peril. But then again, like so many such places around the world, life goes on and most locals simply make the best of it. Just watch your step.

Our skipper, a tall golden-skinned and bearded metis male in his forties was making his usual run; a week off the coast chasing wild catch in the Caribbean. He'd been told by our mutual friend Olivier, a "boat and plane man" for the rare tourist, that Lilli and I were looking for a little known valley with a large gathering of mystical Mapou trees. Apparently this place could only be entered by the sea via a discreet cove hidden from the coast; if you knew where to look you could land safely, then hike inland to the mystical valley. We asked the skipper if he could take us near there. He agreed and admitted the distraction would amuse him.

Haitians are warm and amiable, exceedingly friendly, gregarious, and talkative. You don't really notice that they're not forthcoming. They won't tell you things you should know to safely navigate the environmental, political and social waters, even if it can mean harm to you. They may enjoy your company, but they have learnt to keep knowledge close and private. However friendly they may be, they are actually very much unknowable, puzzling, or perhaps simply taking care of themselves. Survival, I have learnt, makes it so.

When we asked the skipper, Jean-Paul, if he wanted to come along on our adventure to the hidden valley, he said that once we got to the area in question he'd be happy to lend us his aluminum dinghy with a motor and a guide to get to the cove. As for his coming along, he simply said no thanks. If he had told us, why he wouldn't go, we probably would have decided not to go either.

Every corner, every tiny nook and cranny on this fisherman's vessel was taken up with market women and other travelers huddled together, clutching bundles and getting ready for the long hours ahead. Lilli and I stood for a while surveying the tight space, studying its possibilities for sitting and sleeping, when two elderly market women nestled together mid-boat waved us over with enormous engaging smiles. They had obviously found the best spot and were generously proposing we share it with them. Without hesitation we headed for their spot, dropped our bags as back support, and thanked our angels by sharing goodies we had brought as dinner. In turn, they brought out homemade sweets and shared them with us. Immersion in créole, finger food, and family stories with amiable companions on a journey; this was just the ticket.

Merging skies and waters, dissolving clouds, transforming winds, rhythms of the boat on liquid terrain, time no longer had meaning. Terra firma was suspended. Peace.

In water we experience life's deepest primordial rhythm. We are made so much of water that the seas speak to us with the most familiar, most primordial, most profound connection. Flight on wind and water is both ancient and yet forever alien to us. And therefore boat life is a life of trust in the wild, faith in life itself, and a connection to our deepest roots. The seas cradle us like dependent children living among the timeless and ageless stars. And for Lilli and I our next days and nights were cradled on this sea, sleeping the sleep of innocence.

After days bopping and swaying and hours in ports watching the unloading and loading of both cargo and passengers, our traveling companions long gone, our sea bucket was finally left with a handful of seasoned fishermen and their skipper. For the next few days we reentered that trance brought on by the lulling and wooing of primordial waters where communication was minimal and unnecessary for connection was all around us.

Lilli and I sat in a minuscule aluminum dinghy tied to a slender pier at an isolated way station in a remote part of the country. The blazing sun had journeyed in and out of clouds all

day and was now beginning its slow descent toward sundown. We waited on our guide. The featherweight craft countering every wave, protesting every movement its mini motor bopping up and down while the waters teased us for wishing to leave the dock near dusk.

“It’s a bit late to start a journey to a little known and remote land filled with tales of unquiet spirits,” I muttered. Lilli said nothing, but her nervous smile confirmed my feelings.

We had waited so long for this trip. And so I dismissed the painful reality that when people hold too tightly to plans they fought so long for, they often make poor decisions. Hence when our guide finally showed up, disregarding the sun’s descent, we jumped up and were on our way, come hell or high water.

Three frail silhouettes in a tin can pushed away from firm land and into the setting sun. One could sense the hidden fierceness beneath us, and the untamed lands ahead. Three hearts were truly beating as one, in fear, excitement and resolve.

The journey was relatively short and pleasant. The dinghy skated effortlessly over the dark mercurial waters. A golden sun slid out from behind the clouds for its final descent before slipping into its crimson shroud and sinking into the sea. We turned into a hidden cove.

Months earlier we’d met a very aged houngan in the blue mountains who told us that if ever we found the forbidden cove and through it attempted to enter the secret lands of the mystical Mapou we might not make it inside, and we would not be welcomed. The people here are fiercely xenophobic and no one enters. However information about this area of the country was very thin. We’d heard talk, stories, and bedtime warnings. We dismissed the stories and decided to find out for ourselves.

Our light craft approached a severely dilapidated slip of a pier, with no one in sight. Our guide, Dieudonné, tied the vessel to the wobbly piling and we stepped onto the waterlogged platform. Still no one, but in front of us perhaps sixty meters ahead we noted a series of mud huts scattered along a barren landscape, two dozen or more small windowless earthen shelters. Through the doorways’ inner void appeared dark-skinned, morbidly emaciated figures dressed in black, ash-covered faces with eyes as hard as gravestones.

“Good evening” Lilli called out with a nervous smile. We had agreed her Créole was truly Haitian and would be better received than mine.

“We’ve come from the way station across the waters on our way to the valley beyond your hills.” No response only stares in silence. “We’re just passing through. Perhaps you can point us on our way. We do not wish to disturb you. Please have a good evening.”

Dieudonné whispered, “Don’t talk to them. Just follow me”.



“You know this place?” I asked. “You know these people and how to get to the valley?” He remained silent, obviously frightened. Finally he said, “Move very slowly. Don’t stop, look no one in the eye. We must carry the dinghy through a passage between the hills to a pond, and cross it to the valley where we’ll be safe.”

“Safe? What...”

“Please, no questions. We must go. Now! ...”

We picked up the dinghy and as purposefully as possible without showing our discomfort we headed for the passage between the hills. Walking, heads downward, eyes noting the punitive, bitter earth. I noticed there were no young children, no domestic animals, no chickens or goats, not even a cat or dog. Something was definitely not right. I closed my eyes and felt it. Living among them was a very dark and cruel tragedy that still held much power. We kept walking.

The heavens had darkened, leaving a swath of blazing crimson as the sun dissolved behind the hills. A dark night indeed slithered toward us. I stopped and mumbled, “We’ll never make it,” then turned to see Dieudonné frozen, terrified.

“God damn it!”

I was infuriated with myself. I knew. I knew it when we left the way-station, no, I knew it when Jean-Paul let us go without a word, the expression on his face saying, “he didn’t know if he’d see us again.” I also felt it when Dieudonné was given the job of guide and his body seemed resigned to the gallows. I always knew, and knew it now seeing those faces staring out from the void. The aura of death was all around. “My damn need to see things through will get us killed”, I thought.

I stopped. No declaration was needed. Lilli glaring at me mumbled two words that summed up what I intuited, two words I have never forgotten “Apocalypse Now”. (Yes I’m afraid those are the words she uttered, and they were effective). My soul froze at the sheer horror. Being of one mind we pivoted, with the dinghy, shuffling hurriedly back to the shore, unconcerned with appearances. The sky was nearly black. A slit of blood red was all that lit the horizon.

I looked toward the mud huts. “Oh, no.” Our hearts sank in unison. The hills revealed a gathering of human silhouettes standing motionless, static, like barren trees in the moonlight. Dieudonné was in a near panic. What he knew I didn’t dare ask. We moved as quickly as our legs would carry us without running, without showing fear. The mute crowd began their walk soundlessly, in solidarity, down towards the water, toward us. Finally, we dropped the dinghy into the water. Dieudonné jumped in and was on top of the motor before Lilli and I could climb

in. He pulled and pulled; it wouldn't start. I looked up to see skeletal bodies entering the water after us. These wretched souls were unstoppable, their eyes of stone, their faces carved out by torment and ruin, the air thick with horror and death. "God help us".

Lilli and I plunged our hands into the sea and paddled with fury, but to no avail while Dieudonné fought with the motor over and over again. Arms were grabbing, grasping, snatching, seizing, -- death a breath away.

It's a funny thing the synchronization of minds. In the corner of our eyes, Lilli and I both spotted two poles lying in the water near the pier. Instantly she took one and stood up placing it on the right side of the tiny craft. I took the other and stood beside her and placed my pole in the water on the left side of the boat. Without a word we pushed our poles into the sand. A couple of thrusts and we were out of reach of frenzied arms. Two more shoves and we'd be in deep waters, but not far enough away to be out of the reach of swimmers and too deep to reach bottom with our poles.

Dieudonné, tears streaming, arms unceasingly worked the motor. Lilli and I gave one last momentous shove, then dropped the poles and sat down in the boat. Spent. We waited. The soggy throng moved toward us. Then, behind me in the dark, a tiny burst, the boat jumped, and we were off. The motor had come alive. Dieudonné's tears were now flowing freely as were ours, and so were our shouts of laughter as the vessel grew wings and flew us into the good night with its thousands of stars.

The skipper, Jean-Paul, never asked us about our adventure. And I learnt, that day, that when tragedies and wretched misery push anyone beyond their humanity, as it was for that little village, horror awaits. I never shared this story with anyone, until now.

**I woke up** from my dreadful reverie with a tremendous jolt. Our sweltering little blue sedan had flown over a colossal pothole, slalomed to the other side of the road, and came to a screeching halt, while a donkey stood there in the middle of the road, calm-as-you-please nibbling on something, indifferent to the clouds of dust kicked up by our vehicle's brouhaha.

On road-less jaunts anywhere one doesn't always keep to one's own side of the road; you go where the potholes dictate. When you're faced with an on coming vehicle, well, you negotiate who will lead in the dance, and this usually depends on who gets to the dance floor first. But the traveler's code of courtesy, carved-out on ancient cart-driven road-less journeys not so different from this, still reassures us that whomever you're facing, it all tends to work out in the end.

"Ouch!" I complained, rubbing the back of my head. "I could swear I heard a crack or split; something broke. Ah, my reading glasses! No matter, I won't be doing any reading here anyway." This verbiage was for my benefit only. My companions, on the other hand, were deep in a political conversation about "The Beast" and its disruptive presence in the country. "The

Beast” is the name given by many countries around the world to the United Nations’ forces when they settle in your country. Gabriel and Joëlle were reexamining old and familiar arguments about the artificially inflated cost of living due to the U.N., the double standard in U.N. salaries paid to locals versus northern foreigners and, the fact that they left behind unfinished, often unusable, impractical projects. Also how a whole damned new cycle of projects began when the next U.N. group arrived, all of this turmoil leaving the country poorer and in greater debt than before.

In short, they argued U.N. forces along with the global weapons industrial complex form a new economic colonialism. And the citizens of the northern, modern, richer countries are under the insidious delusion that they are doing the charitable thing. As I said, it’s a familiar argument.

I slid what was left of my reading glasses into my pack, rearranged my duffle bag as an armrest, and settled by the window with my feet resting on a smaller daypack. I felt the sun smolder and the car blister; it was noon.

Gabriel steered the sedan around the donkey, leaving her deep in her meditation. We were off, once again dancing the rumba with our bumps and slaloms, our encrusted sedan boogying in and out of dust clouds. We bopped and swayed past roadside bushes, blanketed in dust, slithered through parched, windswept flatlands, and stumbled on trees huddled together seeking solace from the scorch and the desolation. All contrary to the cool green hills in the distance.

In time we sought grassy bushes to relieve ourselves, without making a spectacle for the passing truckers with their colorful straw-hatted travelers sitting on mounds of mangos, bananas and coconuts in the back of the their trucks. Down the road, we finally found refuge under a single shady, rather aged oak tree and for a while escaped the interminable heat and devoured soggy but deliciously spicy sandwiches.

It was a scorching midday when I rearranged my bag yet again, eased once more into a comfortable meditative pose and hid behind my rather large straw hat to continue my reverie -- recalling another story of my search for the elusive sacred Mapou wood.

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Michèle Sterling, a writer and essayist, studied in Paris, earned a BA in Political Science in Montreal, as well as an MA in Consciousness Studies in San Francisco. Her doctoral work explores direct communication with the wild through empathic mergence with dolphins.

Image: [Trunk and roots of Mapou tree 3 Cyphostemma mappia.jpg](#) by [S Molteno](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).