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THE CITADEL AS SITE OF HAITIAN MEMORY*

By *Frédéric Mangonès*

“A ce peuple qu’on voulut à genoux, il fallait un monument qui le mit debout” [For this people brought to its knees, a monument was needed to make it stand up].

These words that Aimé Césaire lends to Henri Christophe in his play *La tragédie du Roi Christophe* are a perfect illustration of the place that the Citadel occupies in the collective memory of the Haitian people. It is the symbol of the will of the people not only to free themselves from the chains of slavery but to keep, at any price, that painfully earned liberty.

In a world where slavery was basic to the global economy, our revolution, the first successful slave revolt after a decade of bloody war against the French, was perceived as a serious menace by the colonial powers which dominated the world. It is important, in this context, to remember that the French Revolution—which had abolished slavery in 1793—reinstated it in 1802, and that it was not until 1814, fourteen years after Christophe’s death, that the British abolished slavery in their Caribbean colonies. The need to protect our liberty was therefore a very real concern. Even the great American revolutionaries, for whom “All men are created equal,” were not very comfortable with the proximity of that army of ex-slaves which had defeated the Napoleonic army, the mightiest military machine of its time.

It is, therefore, under terribly adverse circumstances created by a virtual blockade by all the Western powers that we began our existence as a nation. Furthermore we simultaneously had to rebuild a country where all the infrastructure had been totally destroyed by ten years of devastating and bloody war. It is a remarkable sign of vitality that our fledgling nation survived that period of our history, as well as all the other periods, where, through diverse occupations and other affronts we were made to pay for our original audacity.

With these words, Amadou Mahtar M’Bow, then Director General of UNESCO, launched the campaign for the restoration of the Citadel:

For the first time in the history of the slave trade and colonization and even that of Humanity, slaves, descendants of Africans, to whom even the most basic attributes of the Human Condition were denied, had proudly conquered their liberty and proclaimed the Right to dignity of every Human Being.

*This paper was presented at a conference on “History and Memory in Afro-American Culture,” organized by the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research, Harvard University, at the Bellagio Study and Conference Center of the Rockefeller Foundation in Italy in July of 1990. It is reprinted here with the permission of the author and the W. E. B. DuBois Institute.

He stressed the importance of the monument as a symbol of liberty for all humanity and not only for the descendents of New World slaves. In 1981 the Citadel, Sans-Souci, and Ramiers were added to the list of World Heritage. But beyond its importance as a symbol of liberty the Citadel has another more prosaic significance as part of a network of fortifications inscribed in a national military strategy thoroughly thought-out and executed.

The history makers, champions of ontological supremacy of the white race, in order to erase the affront of the Haitian Independence had to prove that Napoleon's defeat was but an accident. They painted Christophe as an insane, cruel, megalomaniac being, and the Citadel as a useless monument whose cannons never fired a shot, but which had been built at enormous cost in lives and money for the sole glory of a demented king.

It is indeed true that it was important for the new leaders to demonstrate that they could match their former masters and even beat them at their own game. It is also true that, torn from their milieu under tragic circumstances and thrown together in a new environment with many different ethnic groups, the slaves, after a few generations, knew only their former masters' structure of authority. It should, therefore, not be surprising that Christophe, wanting to demonstrate his power, would create a royal court modeled after those of Europe. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that in domains such as the military and education, the king always surrounded himself with qualified experts and always insisted on excellence in all matters.

It is false to say that the Citadel is the useless work of a megalomaniac king. If one assumes, as it was generally accepted then, that the French were preparing to return, it becomes evident that a coastline as long as that of Haiti was nearly impossible to defend given the size and strength of the enemy's navy. On the other hand, the tactic of guerilla warfare had proven its worth. Since the time of marooned slaves our generals had demonstrated that our mountains constituted a practically impregnable line of defense. Consequently, Dessaline's strategy, outlined in his ordinance of April 9, 1804, was to make of the Plateau Central a granary protected by a chain of fortifications placed on the high points around its perimeter. The Citadel became the most important link of that chain.

Excavations and observations made during the restoration process of the past seventeen years suggest that the Citadel was built in several stages. The first was probably that of a relatively modest fort in the Vauban tradition. The original plan would have then been modified with successive additions in the course of the building process to arrive at the present dimension.

One can only speculate on the reasons which dictated these modifications. It is probable that beyond military and structural considerations was Christophe's will to create a monument. Colonel Marc Neuville, a French Army armament historian, Mr. Michel Mercier, UNESCO consultant, and Mr. Eddy Lubin, archaeologist of ISPAN, in their report on the Citadel's armament make the following comments:

It would be difficult to understand the role of the Citadel if one were to look at it strictly from the military point of view. It is also a manifestation of the King's power. Indeed one cannot ignore the importance of the influence of internecine quarrels on the

concept of the Citadel/Ramier ensemble. It seems that in over-fortifying the Citadel the intent was to create a veritable symbol of power as well as a refuge in the case of rapid retreat. One could consider the complex as a central *Place de guerre* with the capacity to shelter the king, his family, members of the court, the government, and a substantial number of troops. This concept of general shelter did exist during the French colony but was never implemented due to political and economic imperatives of the metropole. It is equally probable that other than these quarrels, many modifications and additions, observed during the research on the building, were the result of the fire caused by the explosion of the powder magazine in 1818.

As it appears today, the fort covers an area of approximately four acres and is the result of several building phases of which two have been identified thanks to detailed measured drawings, archaeological investigations, and structural analysis by the ISPAN/UNESCO team.

The Citadel has a special place in the traditional art of fortification in that it is the product of a synthesis between the doctrines of the two great masters of the art: Vauban (1653–1707) and the Marquis de Montalibert (1714–1800). Its plan, an application of the principles of the bastioned front allowing different parts of the building to mutually protect themselves, is of the Vauban school.

The application of the principle of vertical concentration of the fire power with several levels of bomb-proofing firing chambers arranged around a ventilation shaft and the integration in each battery of housing and artillery functions reveal the influence of the Montalibert school.

The armament of the Citadel consists of an artillery park of more than 150 pieces with a majority of them twenty-four pounds caliber. Eighteen pieces are placed on the Barbette battery and 124 in the firing chambers in the diverse batteries. Certain of these pieces from France, England, Spain, or Italy are masterpieces of military art of the eighteenth century. Approximately ten of them are still on their original massive wooden carriages, which is unique in the world. In 1820 there were eighty-six embrasures equipped with masonry pointing tables which today should be restored.

As fate would have it, the Citadel never had to defend itself and remains an unfinished work of surprising beauty. It is a witness of both the great mastery of its builders and the heroic fervor of the soldiers who fought for liberty. Today, in 1990, the restored Citadel offers its visitors not only the history of its construction, but that of a proud people who, barely out of slavery, built the first monument to the Black people in the New World.

This commentary by three recognized experts confirms that the Citadel is certainly not the fantasy of a megalomaniac king but rather the expression of leading theories of fortification of the time. Ongoing research by architect Patrick Delatour of ISPAN, suggests moreover that the Citadel is the prototype for the fortifications used to defend the Atlantic coast of the United States of America. The most convincing example of this is Fort McBright in Florida, built in 1830 according to the principles of the “Ber-

nard System," named after a former French army engineer of the Napoleonic armies, introduced to the United States by the Marquis de La Fayette. In this Fort, built twenty years after the Citadel, the configuration of superimposed batteries is surprisingly similar to that of the Haitian fortress. An important difference should be noted, however; the "Bernard system" is used for coastal defense, whereas the Citadel is located some fifteen kilometers inland at an altitude of 875 meters.

This brings us back to the original strategy of fortifying the high points of the interior. One should be reminded that, unlike the other powers of the region, Haiti had no navy to speak of, thus her coastline was undefended. Other than the economic, technical, and personnel problems that the creation and the upkeep of such a navy would imply, the colonial powers were determined to prevent by all means available the acquisition of such a navy, which would permit Haiti to export the slave revolt to the other Caribbean islands. It is said that when the English Admiral Maitland surrendered to Toussaint at Mole Saint-Nicolas in 1798, Great Britain agreed to defend the Haitian littoral if Toussaint promised not to export the revolution.

Christophe's heroic strategy, geared to prepare for a second war of independence, implied for the nation a permanent state of alert at a heavy economic price. After the great builder's tragic death, Jean-Pierre Boyer, Pétion's successor, reunited the whole island under his sole government. He chose to negotiate with Charles X's government France's formal recognition of Haiti's independence against payment of an outrageous indemnity of 150 million francs.

It is interesting to speculate on Boyer's reasons for paying such a ransom for our heroically won independence. He, perhaps, estimated that having conquered the whole island and thus eliminated immediate danger, it would be more economical to pay the ransom rather than keep an army in a permanent state of readiness. History, alas, has shown that his choice created other, perhaps heavier, chains.

In any case, at the fall of Christophe's kingdom and the strategy changes it brought about, the Citadel no longer had a role. Abandoned to the devastating effects of tropical environment, it entered, henceforth, the domain of popular myth and legend.

Every year during the Easter week a great number of pilgrims come to the Citadel. The daily register of the number of visitors kept by ISPAN since 1979 shows that on Holy Thursday the number of pilgrims reaches 5,000. They come from every part of the country and walk the long steep road up the mountain 2,000 feet above sea level to spend the day at the Citadel. This tradition is evidently an old one. The pilgrims whom we have asked admit not knowing the origins of this custom.

In fact, we do know that Easter is a period of very important rituals in both the Christian and Vodou traditions. It is possible that during the construction of the Citadel and its subsequent occupation by a garrison, Holy Thursday may have been the day when families were allowed to visit their relatives working or stationed there. This tradition could have persisted and taken the form we know today.

There is no history without memory, and it is to preserve and revive this memory that ISPAN has dedicated seventeen years of continuous efforts to safeguard the Citadel and other monuments of Christophe's time. This effort is reaching a turning point. The crucial phase of protecting the Citadel from water infiltration is coming to an end and the museum installations are beginning. Still remaining are the preser-

vation of the Sans-Souci Palace, the Site of Ramiers, and the effective implementation of a National Historic Park around the three monuments in order to preserve both the natural and human ecology of this important Lieu de Memoire of the Haitian people and the Black people, symbolic of "the right to dignity of every human being."

In spite of the failure of our people to build a strong nation, the Citadel, undeniably the work of Haitian people, remains a symbol of what this nation might have been. And at this crucial moment of our troubled history when, after thirty years of the most ferocious dictatorship we are struggling to establish the basis for a new beginning, the existence of this fortress should serve to remind us of the ideals and vision of Haiti. And perhaps, motivate a realistic evaluation of our past errors to revive the fervor and determination of our ancestors to finally realize the great destiny which they outlined for us.

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