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## Kanaval: a people's history of haiti

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# Kanaval

a people's history of haiti

Leah Gordon

*Fantom (Ghost)*

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*Kouvre fey*  
(Lanse kòd group called Curfew)







*Bounda pa bounda (Arse by Arse)*



*Chaloska (Member of the Charles Oscar group)*

History binds me to Haiti. Keeps taking me back there. And what a relationship to History Haiti Has. I used a seismic metaphor for “History and Haiti” only two weeks before the earthquake. So I’ll avoid that. But History as Lava, bubbling and spitting through cracks and craters, or as a volcanic steam, hissing and spouting through blow holes and geysers. Now there’s a thing. And I can sense it under every step I take in Haiti.

It’s not just a case of what a History Haiti Has Had. Though that has been pretty stellar in global terms. For me it is a case of How Haiti reveals its History. I have visited some Caribbean islands where it feels that History has been mopped up, rather like blood after an airport massacre, and then re-presented as idyllic views on restaurant place mats or murals on hotel walls. But those cities and nations feel history-less. Lands with weaker breaths of life or culture, beside the glut

of bars and hotels for tourists. Businesses utterly fearful of any wrong-footed historical connotations.

Haiti, as a Nation, uses every cultural tool in its box to transmit its History, from song to ritual, from drumbeat to dance step, from novels to paintings to sculpture. In Jacmel they tell the peoples History of Haiti via carnival. When Jacmel holds its pre-Lenten Mardi Gras festivities, troupes of performers act out historic tales in a whorish theater of cruelty and the absurd. Whatever the Jacmel Carnival lacks in sequins and sparkle, it makes up for in homegrown surrealism. This is people taking history into their own hands and molding it into whatever they decide.

So within this Historical retelling of the Slaves’ revolt, the Taino peoples, political scandals, class wars, and mystical beliefs, we find mask after mask, but rather than concealing they are revealing, story after story.



Lanse kòd (Rope Throwers)



Zel Maturin (The Wings of Mathurin)

History recapped, recaptured, and retold by the people, in whatever way or form they wish. Through disguise, gesture, and roadside pantomime. Finally, after seven years of photographic documentation I realized that the images were not enough; I needed the signifier alongside the signified. So I returned to Jacmel in a calmer, more tranquil, noncarnival period and spent a few weeks searching for oral histories. The stories behind the masquerade. I tracked down the leaders of the groups and asked them to tell me their tales. The final work is published as *Kanaval: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti* (Soul Jazz Publishing, 2010).

Here, for example, is the story about “Lanse kòd,” as told to me by Salvane Raphael:

“When I was a child, the Lanceurs de Corde were always my favourite group. But I wanted to do it on a much larger scale. I have a gym here in my yard and all my friends from this gym wanted to

join me. We have one hundred guys, all strong and fit. We are making a statement about slavery, and being freed from slavery. This is a celebration of our independence in 1804. The cords we carry are the cords that were used to bind us. We are always sullen and menacing and we never smile. The blackness of our skin is made with pot black crushed charcoal, *kleren* (cane spirit), and cane syrup mixed with a little water in a bucket. Although we know that slaves never wore horns, this is about the revolt of the slaves, and we wear the horns to give us more power and to look even more frightening. When we take to the streets we stop at the first crossroads, and at the blow of my whistle we all start doing push-ups. This is to show that even though the slaves suffered they are still very strong. Some of the slaves are so strong that they must wear chains to hold





*Nèg ak poupe (Man with Doll)*



*Jij (The Judge, from the Jwif Erran group)*

back their massive strength. I chose to do Lanceurs de Corde because I know and like the story—and in Carnival people like to be scared. We are the scariest. The Zel Mathurin are supposed to be frightening—but they are scared of us because they think that they will dirty their fancy satin costumes if they touch us. Also our costumes are much cheaper to make than many other costumes. No materials, no papier-mâché—just the charcoal and syrup mixture. There are three other groups of Lanceurs de Corde: Chaneur Gym, Protection Gym, and Couvre-Feu. The last group were our true competitors in strength and size, but their chief, Lafaille Hans, died a week ago. He spent the night dancing, ate a little mango, and dropped dead. All the Lanceurs de Corde from the town, hundreds of us, went to the funeral and did a performance as a homage to



*Esklav yo (The Slaves)*

a great master. We then went to his house and wrote our regrets on his wall. The leader of Chaneur Gym, Frisson Bellevé, died just last year of electrocution. I am worried that these are bad omens, but I will continue.”

See *Kanaval: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti*

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(with essays by Madison Smartt Bell, Don Cosentino, Richard Fleming, Kathy Smith, and Myron Beasley)

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