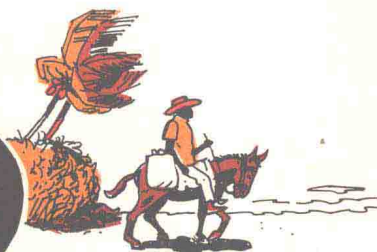
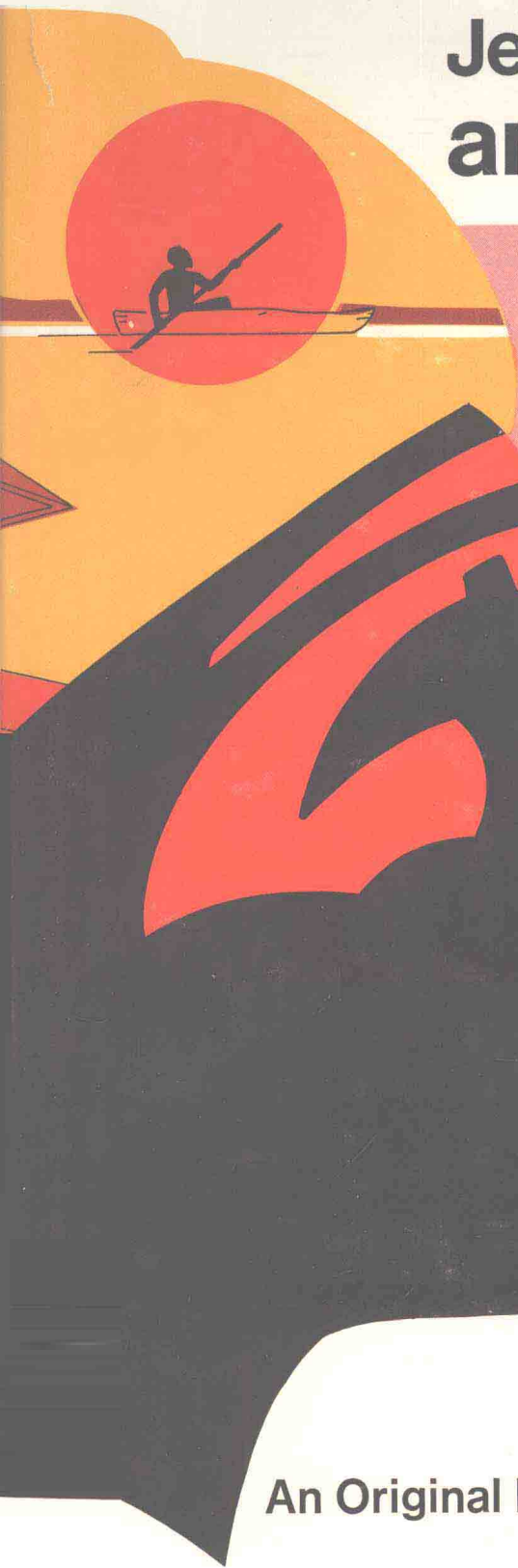


# Jean Price-Mars and HAITI

Jacques C.  
Antoine

Preface By Jean F. Brierre



An Original by Three Continents 

**Jean Price-Mars**  
**and**  
**Haiti**

*Jacques Carmeleau Antoine*

**Preface**  
**by**  
**Jean F. Brierre**

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## Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Mercer Cook, former United States Ambassador to the Republic of Senegal, and to Professor Maurice A. Lubin, from Haiti, professor of African literature at Howard University in Washington, D. C. My indebtedness to my two former colleagues at Howard University and friends of many years goes further. Mercer Cook, who has been my Good Samaritan ever since I left Haiti in 1945, was the originator of the idea of my writing the biography in 1969. He was then Chairman of the Department of Romance Languages at Howard, to which he had brought me three years earlier and had assigned me to teach a course on Haitian literature. He made the suggestion one morning as he told me the sad news he had just heard of the death of Price-Mars, two or three days after it had happened. As I accepted the challenge Mercer helped me all through the writing of the book with the generosity and thoroughness that characterise his personality, not only by his criticisms and suggestions, both general and detailed in respect of the book's composition, but also through the painstaking process of editing my Frenchified English from the first to the last page of the book.

Maurice Lubin, who was still in Haiti in 1969 when I began to write the biography, helped me no less generously and thoroughly in doing for me the leg-work in Port-au-Prince, going indefatigably to one library after another to look for the source materials I wanted to have for the biography. Not only did he succeed in finding them, he took the pain of typing out a monumental amount of research notes which he sent me, even faster than I had expected to receive them, belittling always his efforts and trouble in locating and preparing these materials for me. And because he had maintained a close relationship with Price-Mars during the latter's last decade of life, serving on occasions as his secretary, Maurice's own perception of

the man was invaluable to me as I tried to capture the true personality of "the Uncle" who had lived almost one hundred years through so many different circumstances and the ups and downs of a Crusader-politician's life.

I have dedicated the book to both Mercer Cook and Maurice Lubin, not simply as a testimony of my appreciation for the help they gave me in the preparation and writing of the biography, but because they have labored on it along with me from the start, the three of us moved by the same admiration and affection we ardently share for the author of *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle* whose memory now belongs to the whole of mankind.

*Jacques C. Antoine*  
*Buenos Aires*

I will formulate the message of Jean Price-Mars in the following manner: "We are fighting the cowardly occupation of our territory by the American Marines. We will be free tomorrow. But once independence has been recovered, we have to begin the era of The Great Duty—purge ourselves of the last drop of slave blood in our veins, and according to Chekhov's phrase, burn the old robes which suffocate us and make us look ridiculous, the silly clothes we are decked out in, the paste jewels and the artifices of deceit. We must be ourselves, Haitian negroes, sons of titans who, alone and singlehandedly, broke off the chains of slavery."

Jean F. Brierre

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**Jean Price-Mars**  
*and*  
**Haiti**

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## Preface

### *Between Legend and Truth*

No one may choose his death, but each one has the opportunity to shape the path of his life through the underbrush of existing possibilities. It occurs to me, paradoxically, and without in the least wanting it, to square off life and death, as though one were not the natural conclusion of the other, death being the last phase and total, definitive eclipse of life.

Life starts to ooze death at the very moment of conception itself. The smallest tot faces old age and death at the moment of his birth. Siamese twins (death & life), together they track us, attending our highest joys and our seasonal brushes with confusion and despair. They plod on, the one the hidden nocturnal face of the other. Life inevitably engenders death, but it is death nevertheless which carves into the ice-chunk of terminal immobility the ineluctable immortality of temporal memory.

One lives fragmented in the eyes and in the ambiguous mirror of others. Everyone catches you up in his instant perceptions, through his various ocular deformities: near-sighted, far-sighted, or perhaps in a clear, unwavering gaze. You are a unique individual seen from different angles—profile, silhouette, straight-on—the mass of organized flesh which is your body.

Whether one wishes it or not, living means projecting some sort of image. There is a need to affirm one's physical and moral identity; a way, beyond one's bodily traits, one's stride, and one's expressions, of revealing oneself with a word, a look, a smile, a gesture—all those things which emphasize and make up a personality. There is also one's accent; a light glaringly harsh, or soft as a humid morning; the set of one's lips in anger or affirmation; an arm akimbo, or stiff as an exclamation point.

Gathered up in a set of fixed landmarks which the greediness of time cannot erode, in unwavering stances, the life of Jean Price-Mars is now, since his death on March 1, 1969, a definitive entity which some try to understand, and others try to dissect like Macabees, all in an effort to situate it properly in that fluid continuum called history.

None of Price-Mars' contemporaries, whether Seymour Pradel with his flair and dilletantism; Constantin Mayard with his endless sincerity; Pauleus Sannon with his good cheer, suavity, and eyes

fatigued by historical research, or Sténio Vincent (that orator of emptiness) with the sybaritic crown awarded him in the reign of the man who precipitated Haiti's decline: none of them (save in a footnote in an anthology or elementary textbook), were worth the curious and intelligent attention of any of the historians and researchers of my generation.

None of them, not even Dantès Bellegarde, corrupted by the outmoded, bourgeois, French culture, was able to transmit the multi-dimensional message left by the man who will forever bear the sobriquet of "The Uncle."

That Jacques Antoine, wounded patriot, with his sharp intelligence, his lucid, objective mind, builds this monument of inestimable value to our celebrated forefather, Jean Price-Mars, amidst a mind-boggling collage of defeats, courage, glory, shame, treachery, ambiguity, opportunism, cowardice and precocious ambition that runs through our history testifies that the pedestal on which he places our hero is one of gratitude and collective fervor.

The backdrop of his childhood in the North of Haiti, at once pathetic and heroic, where certain generals and intellectuals were transformed into guerilla chiefs and vectors of calculated violence, but dominated nevertheless the statue of King Henry Christophe in all its grandeur, and his two-hundred year old Citadel; in a climate of ecumenical tolerance (with a Protestant father, Catholic grandmother, and with the Voodoo drums summoning him in the tropical night with their throbbing rhythms); with the family cult devoted to his grandfather Jean Belley, called Mars, first deputy from the colony of Saint Domingue to the French National Convention; with the geological accidents which mark the boundaries of his native village; the first textbook, the first bible...all these things made up the rites of initiation for this boy into the society of man.

On the first reading of this historical exegesis by Jacques Antoine, I had the impression that he had written a slice of the history of Haiti which already pregnant with Jean Price-Mars, would later swell into major events, crossing the dawn of the twentieth century, and continue with the unfurling of flags on January 1, 1904, a day of pomp and glory, the Centennial of Independance. I thought he would record Price-Mars' first adolescent footsteps, up to the point where his awakening would make this son of a well-known peasant from Grande Rivière du Nord the man predestined to liberate the conscience of an entire generation.

I know that linear time is still just time, and that it never really "crosses" anything, and that it is we, who, needing an illusory security, and who are harried by an unending hunger to remember the past, sacrifice real life by inscribing it in our chronicles without which we would not be in a "civilized" state.

At first, I had the impression that the real center of interest in this large book was not really Jean Price-Mars, he being but a pretext

chosen as a sometimes hazy example of tragedy, but history, methodically thought-out by a wary historian.

Re-reading the work—one must always re-read—showed me that the union of history with historiography, like biology with histology, can be felicitous.

Indeed, the stature of the man in question, with his self-esteem bound up with the true Haitian people, his unrivalled cultural activism, his exemplary humility which was not without its controlled anger, cries and barbs demands that his magi's profile, his sage words, his venerable kindness so similar to that of African teachers and elders in the shade of the palaver tree, ought not to be shown in a private studio for the "happy few," but on the vast screen of life lived differently by all its varied protagonists; the screen itself of *history*, beautiful, painful and tragic, of the Haitian people.

I have perhaps already said it, but I want to emphasize it further without in the least diminishing the honest historian's objective and almost neutral style, his vision of men and events, that I admire his pen which never spews bitter ink, scratches across the paper or tears the page.

Had I been able to write the same work, even if to do it I had only a slab of basalt, I would have, with a flint searing with a pre-historic and savage anger, carved, in all its pathetic truth the face of a unique and integral, black Haitian. In his time, he was the only leader, in the bosom of a perfectly assimilated elite, who was conscious and proud of his African origins.

I would have had another approach to the man, simply because I am not, and never could be, an historian like Jacques Antoine. It must be a question of culture and temperament because even in my old age, I am still deeply moved by an implacable anger.

I am fond neither of iconography, nor of monumentalism, but dear to me are Papa Ibra's seemingly simple pencils and ink which speak succinctly in blood and flesh of untouted courage which exhausts its strength, foundations and truth in the single certainty of being right today and tomorrow.

For today: No one dares contest the good initiated in *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle*, in which Price-Mars, in his uneven, not always well-disciplined style (which marks all his books) speaks of the African origins of the Haitian people and denounces, without playing the street-corner prophet or the rabble-rouser, the imbecilic bovaryism of the scholars and so-called elite of his time—bovaryism which earned them the arrogant remark of Wilhelm II, forerunner of Mr. Adolf Hitler: "That fistful of negroes barely tinted with French civilization."

*Ainsi Parla l'Oncle* appeared in 1928 at the height of the American occupation. The country was on edge. A wave of extreme nationalism had aroused all strata of society. Bands of peasants, armed only with gourds and machetes, were going off to

protest the crushing taxes, to confront the North American monsters whose sons and grandsons, despite their napalm and bombers, would be defeated in Vietnam by bamboo arrows and rice bullets. It was the genocide of Marchaterre.<sup>1</sup>

Other politicians whose names it is unnecessary to mention here, thought that this genocide would have had echoes throughout the world.

With calm, an orator less flamboyant than the blustering Pierre Hudicourt, Price-Mars, whom the Ku Klux Klan had harrassed in the heart of the American bush, knew that the geographical dimensions of his country, and the audacity of its revolutionary origins relegated Haiti to be but a dot on the globe, and that no European state would forgive him for unfurling the flag of freedom in the very center of the slaving nations of the Americas, sluts of the world.

Nobody except a few intellectuals understood Price-Mars and his evangelical mission. I use the word "evangelical" in its absolutely profane meaning, intentionally avoiding the word "message."

It is thanks to him that the Indigenist Movement was born which would spawn a truly great generation of totally Haitian writers, from Jacques Roumain to Regnor Bernard, René Belance and Paul Laraque.

Price-Mars had the courage to study the Voodoo religion (for it is indeed one) which comes from Ife, Nigeria, and which arrived in the holds of the slave ships along with the deported Dahomean peoples.

This monotheistic religion which people confuse with sorcery and magic was first explained by Price-Mars. And because he was black and didn't speak in Greek decrees, they accused him of participating in Voodoo-like black masses. And simply because he enunciated this truth: that magic and sorcery exist on the fringes of all the revealed religions. But when my mentor Jacques Roumain wrote on the "Sacrifice of the Assotor Drum," the most vocal païen to the Voodoo religion, they didn't accuse him of practicing it. That was because Jacques Roumain who, like Senghor, had Paul Rivet for his teacher, and who had the courage to renounce his heritage as the grandson of a President of the Republic, found favor in the eyes of the very elite whom he had scorned.

My mentor (Roumain—I would say in other circumstances why I call him thus) would perhaps not have been inscribed in the roll of upstanding Haitian citizens had he not known Price-Mars who wrote with such talent and friendship the preface to Roumain's *Enchanted Mountain*.

I will formulate the message of Jean Price-Mars in the following manner: "We are fighting the cowardly occupation of our territory by American Marines. We will be free tomorrow. But once Independance has been recovered, we will have to begin the era of The Great Duty—to purge ourselves of the last drop of slave blood

in our veins, and according to Chekov's phrase, burn the old robes which suffocate us and make us look ridiculous, the silly clothes we are decked-out in, the paste jewels and the artifices of deceit. We must be ourselves, Haitian negroes, sons of titans who alone and singlehandedly broke the chains of slavery.

The legend did not wait for Price-Mars' death to cover him sometimes with an aura of mysticism or haughty grandeur, sometimes with a corset which did nothing whatever to shield him, but which only served to repress the natural boundings of a heart forced into restraints.

He had begun to die well before 1966, on that morning when he understood that fate was slowly but surely burying his tools of knowledge, those beacons of discovery embodied in his sense of sight. The man I met, for the last time at the world-wide meeting of Africa and the Diaspora, the First World Festival of Negro Arts (at Dakar)—did he feel diminished by the everlasting sunset which the death of his eyes presaged? In the company of an aeropagus of learned men, writers, historians, sociologists, researchers, literati, did he feel that he was becoming useless and already marginal? Did he have the feeling that, while living, oblivion was already surrounding him? I do not know. But nothing is sadder than a smile which fails to light the face; than the almost staring eyes which barely distinguish vague forms in a fog which grows thicker with each passing day.

Already doomed to reside in a country which to this day stinks of blood and cadavres, a huge open-air slaughterhouse, now blindness forced him into a second, more shadowy exile, where the microbes of anguish and the vermine of introspection multiplied.

To his contemporaries who reproached him for his luke-warm response to the American occupier, I will answer that he was not one to man the barricades and strut across the stage. He thought that for the Haitian people, whose North American centurions had created a disaster in the quagmire of genocide, there should be a covenant of conviviality, a future full of light and justice.

To those who say he denied his home region of the North, I will say that cultural logic, the only one he respected, demanded that he be close to the center of the battle, which did not simply take place in the streets and on parade.

They accuse him of a neutrality born of calculations, dubious stratagems, ambiguous postures, lofty mandarin-like retreats, and a certain impermeability to anything which was neither history nor sociology.

On the other side, they would like to lock him up in a stifling chapel, smother him in incense as though in some cultist shrine, far from the iconoclastic crowds as if, disembodied from birth, he had not been subject to the weaknesses and errors inherent in the human condition.

It is between these two currents of legend and demystification that I place Jean Price-Mars.

For tomorrow: What does it matter that people have distorted his message? It stays alive in the heart of the real country. "The Uncle," already having become a legend, will die of chagrin, an internal exile, clothed in dignity, facing the shame of the last quarter century in Haiti. But his austere silence spoke more potently than any cry, for, like Simon Bolivar, steeped in disgust, he will have ploughed the seas.

*Jean F. Brierre  
Dakar, Senegal 1980*

<sup>1</sup>Place in southern Haiti, close to Cayes, where several peasants died under the bullets of the U. S. Marines in 1929.

# One

## The Seed and the Soil

The year 1876 was a very good one for the peaceful and industrious Jean Eléomont Mars. Until then, he had devoted his time solely to his family and business in his Commune of Grande Rivière du Nord, far from the political turmoil of the nation's capital. That spring, however, Grande Rivière elected him to the House of Representatives and he made his first appearance on the political scene. The enthusiastic youth throughout the nation heralded the results of the general elections as the beginning of a new era of political freedom. And on October 15, Eléomont Mars had further cause to rejoice. He became the proud father of a boy, his first child after two years of marriage.

Traditionally, general elections were conducted under the vigilant eyes of the local military authorities who usually sent their kin to the capital as deputies. In some cases the successful candidates were handpicked in advance by the central government. Occasionally, the "elected" deputies had never set foot on the soil of the communes they represented. Apparently Eléomont Mars had been elected by the free choice of the townfolk because of his personal reputation and the prestige of his family. At that time, Grande Rivière du Nord was, and had been for many years, the political fief of the Sam family, of which Eléomont's wife was one of many offspring scattered throughout the Northern Province and the metropolis, Cap-Haitien.

Eléomont's mother-in-law, Mrs. Elizabeth Godart, was a first cousin of General Tirésias Simon Sam, one of the most prominent military men on the Republic's political scene for a decade since the Salnave Revolution. He had been a member of the Committee of Public Safety that Salnave's partisans had set up at Cap-Haitien following the hero welcome the city had given Salnave in May 1865.<sup>1</sup> At the time of Price-Mars' birth, a sister of General Simon Sam was living at Grande Rivière du Nord; she was the wife of General Séide Télémaque, Commanding Officer of the county, the most important of the strategic positions in the Northern Province.

When Eléomont Mars was elected deputy, the Domingue Administration had lost the confidence of the Haitian people because of the heavy financial burden it had put on the country by

negotiating various loans from foreign investors. These loans worked almost solely to the advantage of an arrogant and aggressive group of local businessmen and military officers who had gathered around Vice President Septimus Marius, a nephew of General Domingue and the real leader of the government.

As early as May 1875, while the rumor of revolution was being whispered about Port-au-Prince, the government ordered a number of arrests, including that of General Boisrond-Canal.<sup>2</sup> But he was warned soon enough to gain asylum in the American consulate at the capital. In this atmosphere, the government had its hands full and could hardly have militarily controlled elections in line with the practice established by the nation's first President, Alexandre Pétion, in 1806.

Two political parties emerged from the helplessness of the Domingue regime: the Liberal Party, under the leadership of Jean-Pierre Boyer Bazelais, and the National Party under Demesvar Delorme. Boyer-Bazelais was the scion of a prominent family in the capital, the grandson of the second president of the Republic. Delorme, a celebrated writer and a great orator, was born in Cap-Haitien.

There was little ostensible difference between the programs of the two parties: both proclaimed their allegiance to the republican form of government, their determination to respect the law and in general to follow the democratic process; both promised to bring order to the State's finances, to develop agriculture and expand industry and trade. Likewise, they both stressed their firm resolve to extend public instruction to all strata of Haitian society.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this apparent agreement on campaign issues, the parties were profoundly divided by an underground current of suspicion of a problem dating from colonial times: the Color Question. For the majority of the Liberal Party's adherents were the offspring of the former colony's class of freemen, most of them mulattoes, whereas the overwhelming majority of the National Party came from the people or pretended to be the true friends of the Haitian masses.

In reality, however, since independence Haiti had remained a military establishment whose generals had continued the colonial tradition of political ambition. Thus, except for President Boyer's twenty-year dictatorship, the country had gone from one general to another and from one Constitution to another in an attempt to satisfy with words the powerless intellectuals of the nation.

Deputy Eléomont Mars had married Fortuna Delcour Michel in 1874. During that year General Michel Domingue was elected President under a Constitution providing an eight-year term of office. But on October 15, 1876, when Eléomont's son was born, there was a new president. General Boisrond-Canal was elected on



July 17 after an infuriated populace, shouting in the streets that Domingue and Marius were stealing the people's money, had overthrown the government. Domingue was wounded in the arm and Marius was killed in the streets while, on the latter's order, the Republic's gold reserves—the product of a recent foreign loan—were being transferred from the State's bank to a ship in Port-au-Prince. The money was presumably on its way to Les Cayes, the chief city of the Southern Province, to which Septimus Marius had decided to move the seat of government for its security.

Fostering the illusion of the intellectuals that a new era of political freedom had been born with the elections of 1876, the House of Representatives elected as its president, Hannibal Price, who had been banished from the country by the Domingue government.<sup>4</sup> Like Boyer Bazelais, Hannibal Price was a staunch liberal. He was also a brilliant and forceful orator. Although a mulatto from Jacmel, he had much in common with his black colleague from Grande Rivière du Nord whom he had probably met at some time during his tenure as President of the Commercial Court of Cap-Haitien. Both men had been farmers, exporting coffee beans, mahogany and hardwood. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, both were Protestants, members of a minority religion in an officially Catholic country. Price's grandfather, a former British marine of Wesleyan faith, had come to Haiti on a religious mission, had married a Haitian woman, and had died in the country.

Eléomont Mars' Protestantism could be traced to the migration of several American Negro Baptists to Haiti between 1823 and 1845.<sup>5</sup> The first of these was Thomas Paul of Massachusetts who arrived in Cap-Haitien in December 1823, distributed many Bibles and baptized a small group of believers in the Bay of Cap-Haitien. In 1849 another American Negro, Samuel Waring, came to the Northern Province and set himself up in the coffee business at Dondon, some ten miles south of Grande Rivière du Nord. After founding the first permanent Baptist church there, he went on to establish another in Grande Rivière and others as well in various towns and villages of the Northern Province. By the time of Price-Mars' birth, the Baptist churches in Grande Rivière du Nord, Dondon and Cap-Haitien, to which Waring eventually moved and later died, were solidly based and vying with the Catholic Church for new converts.<sup>6</sup> Eléomont Mars was one of the products of this Evangelical proselytizing. Whatever the cause of his respect and affection for Hannibal Price, he paid him the compliment of naming his son *Price*.

Price-Mars' birthplace, as well as the county in which it is located, got its name from the river that crosses the region on its way to the Bay of Cap-Haitien. From colonial times, the region has been regarded as one of the most fertile in the area as well as one of the