

The Role of National Anthems in Constructing National Identities in the Atlantic World

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Beginning in the late 18th century, the Atlantic world experienced a birth of new states rooted in common ideas such as liberty. These newly created nations were no longer connected by ethnic similarities, but instead by ideas and values, bringing together people of more diverse backgrounds than nation-states in the centuries before. New legal systems and governments outlined these new ideas in constitutions, but this was mere state-building. Identity on the other hand, is rooted in *nation* building. The births of the French Republic, the United States, Liberia, and Haiti involved revolutionary action that united them during their struggle against superior powers. However, this unifying idea of revolution tends to fade once the oppressor is removed, resulting in crucial years of instability. One way to unify people during this time was music. Historically, music has played a central role in forming cultural identities. For many years, music was intrinsically tied to ethnicity, serving as a form of homogenous bond. In the absence of homogenous bonds, members of these new countries combined music with the states' foundational ideals, leading to the creation of national anthems. National anthems combined shared ideas, values, and history in an emotional context, ingraining these unifying forces into a new culture and creating national identities in nascent, revolutionary states.

During the French Revolution, Claude-Joseph Rouget, a captain in the French army, composed "La Marseillaise," a national anthem for the new French Republic. When it was written in 1792, radical ideas of overthrowing aristocratic rule in search of liberty dominated the political and social scene. The anthem is a violent call to arms to defend against the invasion of anti-revolutionary, Austrian and Prussian troops.¹ The translation reads, "Against us tyranny's/Bloody standard is raised" and that "It is us they dare plan/To return to the old

¹ "What's the Meaning of La Marseillaise?," BBC News. November 17, 2015. Accessed May 8, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34843770>.

slavery,” uniting French citizens around the threat to their foundational ideas of liberty and equality.² Rouget’s emphasis of “Liberty, cherished liberty” contributes to the fact that the anthem is not an aristocratic song, but one about “the people” and their equality.³ ⁴As the revolutionary country continued to survive, it became necessary to remind its people about the history of their common values in order to keep them unified as a people. In particular, the ubiquitous violence throughout “La Marseillaise” is essential in conveying the struggle for the values that created the new country in the first place.

While written documents can recount the history of the struggle for liberty, such a medium is less unifying than an anthem that evokes strong emotions for all who hear it. In fact, the original purpose of the anthem was to rally together the French people in defense of their recently won freedoms. This anthem was a more effective rallying call than other mediums because it successfully employed emotions to unify people around their values. This is exemplified by an unnamed English historian who wrote that “the sound of it will make the blood tingle in men’s veins ... with hearts defiant of death, despot, and evil.”⁵ “La Marseillaise” was effective in creating a national identity because it transformed ideational bonds into emotional bonds of common values, to the point where the song itself became “a symbol of revolutionary nationalism.”⁶ La Marseillaise was grounded in the same shared ideas and values of the new French Republic, but its emotional incorporation of such abstract concepts constructed a national identity, rooted in the heart.

² “La Marseillaise - English Lyrics,” La Marseillaise - English Lyrics. Accessed May 10, 2019. <http://www.marseillaise.org/english/english.html>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “What’s the Meaning of La Marseillaise?.”

⁵ Alex Mitchell, *Republic or Death!: Travels in Search of National Anthems*, (London: Random House Books, 2015), 2.

⁶ Paul Hanson, “La Marseillaise’ and French Nationalism,” In *The Book of Days: 1987*, (Ann Arbor, Pierian Press, 1986), 370-71.

Named after the flag of the United States, the “Star Spangled Banner” did not become the official national anthem of the country until the 20th century; however, its unofficial use as a patriotic song helped shape the American national identity beginning in the 19th century. The lyrics were written by attorney Francis Scott Key in 1814 after he observed the American flag’s survival of the bombardment of Fort McHenry.⁷ The song’s origin in the War of 1812 is less revolutionary, but its narrative, reverent description of the nascent country’s flag symbolizes the shared ideals of freedom and bravery on which the United States was founded. All four verses of the anthem end with the same words: “O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave.”⁸ This line does not simply repeat the core values of the country, but rather demonstrates that the flag remains, just like the United States. The flag alone is a symbol of nationalism. Incorporating the meaning of a flag into a song of veneration further emphasizes the ideas upon which a national identity is formed. Similar to “La Marseillaise,” the US national anthem describes a historical period of war in which the nascent country is an underdog fighting to retain its fundamental values. While the anthem does not explicitly mention many ideals or values, its narrative of war and American resolve helped remind citizens of America’s fragility, but also provided a common history. In a country of diverse ethnicities and backgrounds, it was crucial to weave a uniquely American history with its values. Although “the rocket’s red glare” and “the bombs bursting in air” demonstrate no unifying characteristics without context, their inclusion into the national

⁷ Editors, “The Star-Spangled Banner,” History.com. September 28, 2017. Accessed May 8, 2019. <https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/the-star-spangled-banner>.

⁸Jessie Campisi and AJ Willingham, Behind the Lyrics of ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’,” CNN. July 2018. Accessed May 8, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2018/07/us/national-anthem-annotated/>.

anthem is paramount in creating a history that all Americans could relate to, in order to fuse the foundational values with a new American culture.⁹

National anthems must evoke an emotional response to create a new culture. Key's intense emotional response to the sight of the surviving flag bound Americans together because it inspired them to embrace the meaning behind what would otherwise be a mere piece of fabric. This embrace constructs a stronger national identity than famous American texts that communicate the same ideas and values because national anthems inject such beliefs into everyday culture and life. Key's choice of music to accompany the lyrics of the anthem assist this process through the use of syncretism. "To Anacreon in Heaven" was a popular English drinking song that had a "track record of popularity in the United States by 1814."¹⁰ Using a melody that was already prevalent allowed the national anthem to spread and inject itself into American popular culture. When this melody was coupled with its revolutionary lyrics, it more effectively constructed a national identity. Decades later, "Key's song became especially popular and a powerful expression of patriotism during the Civil War, with its emotional description of the enduring national flag, which had become the symbol of the still-new nation."¹¹ Even in times of utter turmoil and division, "The Star Spangled Banner" reminded citizens of what truly makes them a nation. After writing the national anthem, Key later became involved in the American Colonization Society, advocating for freed American slaves to return to Africa, thus linking him to another new country in the Atlantic world: Liberia.¹²

⁹ Jessie Campisi and AJ Willingham, Behind the Lyrics of 'The Star-Spangled Banner'." CNN. July 2018. Accessed May 8, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2018/07/us/national-anthem-annotated/>.

¹⁰ Editors, "The Star-Spangled Banner," History.com. September 28, 2017. Accessed May 8, 2019. <https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/the-star-spangled-banner>.

¹¹ Naomi Blumberg, "The Star-Spangled Banner," Encyclopædia Britannica. February 13, 2019. Accessed May 8, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Star-Spangled-Banner>.

¹² Marc Leepson, "Francis Scott Key," Encyclopædia Britannica. March 11, 2019. Accessed May 9, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Francis-Scott-Key>.

Liberia stands out among these four Atlantic countries in that its creation was not the result of a direct, violent revolution. Yet, the idea of repatriated and self-governed land truly embodies the spirit of nascent countries in the age of Atlantic revolutions. Written by Daniel Bashiel Warner in 1847 (the year of independence), Liberia's national anthem is titled "All Hail, Liberia, Hail."¹³ The title alone speaks volumes about its purpose and meaning. In 1847, even the conception of Liberia was not yet understood. Independent West African countries were rare. The title adds an element of reverence to "Liberia," not simply the state itself, but also all of the ideas and values that it represents. The third line, "This glorious land of liberty shall long be ours," exemplifies the lengthy push for freedom after centuries of slavery.¹⁴ Due to the diverse background of the ex-slaves that founded Liberia, a shared identity of freedom was necessary. For Liberians, the shared experience of slavery formed a new national identity around this bond. A modern Liberian citizen, James Thomas-Queh, writes in a blog post that "history is like a culture in its entirety." He also argues that "no one understood the vital role of history in the nation building process and the unity of a people better than our founding fathers. They were united around their common historical affinity—freedom from slavery—to pursue a common objective of establishing a nation of theirs despite all the numerous obstacles and odds against them."¹⁵ Thomas-Queh highlights the interconnectedness of ideals, history, and consequently identity that all manifest themselves in the national anthems of nascent countries. In particular, he highlights the underdog status of Liberia's creation, which is further demonstrated through the

¹³ "National Anthem of Liberia," [Liberiapastandpresent.org](http://www.liberiapastandpresent.org), accessed May 8, 2019, <http://www.liberiapastandpresent.org/NationalAnthemOfLiberia.htm>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ James Thomas-Queh, "ALL HAIL, LIBERIA HAIL: This Glorious Land of Liberty Shall Long Be Ours," *The Perspective*. January 5, 2008. Accessed May 8, 2019. <http://www.liberiaitech.com/theperspective/2008/0105200801.html>.

lyrics, “We’ll shout the freedom of a race benighted.”¹⁶ This line fuses the idea of freedom, the shared history of oppression, and the unlikelihood of the country into a powerful chant, delivering more emotion than melancholy words on paper.

The emotional aspects of the Liberian national anthem arise from the personification of the country. Aside from the reverence demonstrated in the title, one stanza states, “Though new her name,/Green be her fame,/And mighty be her powers.”¹⁷ This stanza explicitly mentions that the concept of Liberia is new, and uses personification (“her”) in order to emotionally connect its new citizens to the ideational values it represents. Connecting history to emotion, Thomas-Queh writes that “we must walk with our heads up high, emulate [our founding fathers] in confronting collectively the challenges to our national destiny. And we must do so by singing aloud.”¹⁸ This act of singing elicits a stronger emotional response than other forms of expression, and physically brings people together. His claim that “cultural diversities serve as the richest national cultural heritage” also further connects this national identity to shared ideas instead of shared bloodlines.¹⁹ Thus, while Liberia was not a state formed out of violent revolution, it similarly defied the odds. Assisted by its national anthem, Liberia was able to unite thousands of ex-slaves by creating a new culture for black Africans that defied the power structures of the 19th century Atlantic world, constructing a national identity rooted in their newfound freedom, not just their former oppression.

Haiti similarly exemplifies a country of ex-slaves rooted in the idea of newfound freedom, but unlike Liberia, its inception was wholly dependent on a violent revolution that

¹⁶ “National Anthem of Liberia,” [Liberiapastandpresent.org](http://www.liberiapastandpresent.org), accessed May 8, 2019, <http://www.liberiapastandpresent.org/NationalAnthemOfLiberia.htm>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ James Thomas-Queh, “ALL HAIL, LIBERIA HAIL: This Glorious Land of Liberty Shall Long Be Ours,” *The Perspective*. January 5, 2008. Accessed May 8, 2019. <http://www.liberiaitech.com/theperspective/2008/0105200801.html>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

overthrew the white oppressors. Although Haiti declared independence from oppressive rule in 1804, its national anthem was not written until a competition for it occurred during Haiti's centennial celebration. The anthem is titled, "La Dessalinienne," which translates to "The Dessalines Song" in English.²⁰ The namesake is of revolutionary hero and first ruler of independent Haiti, Jean-Jacque Dessalines.²¹ Although the blacks in Haiti were necessarily united in their effort to defeat a more powerful enemy, diverse ethnic backgrounds did not guarantee the creation of a national identity after the expulsion of the white oppressors. The national anthem uses the word "we" in all five stanzas, which "call for unity, the need for hard work, the importance of a strong legacy, respect and protection of the ancestors, and the love of the flag as symbol of the nation."²² Many of the lyrics use imperative language and compel unified action to strengthen the new nation, such as "We must walk hand in hand" and "We must be ourselves's [sic] unique master."²³ The latter strongly references independence and freedom, which thrust Haiti into existence. Therefore, this anthem deeply demonstrates the link between ideas and history, beginning with the name itself.

Naming the anthem after a revolutionary figure highlights the importance of integrating the revolution into a national identity centered around its ideals. While the line "People are not born to serve others" exclaims a central Haitian belief, the subsequent lines "That is why all mothers and all fathers need to send children to school to learn to know what Toussaint,

²⁰ Melena Kuss, ed, *Music in Latin America and the Caribbean: An Encyclopedic History*. Vol. 2, (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2007)

²¹ Dale Olsen and Daniel Sheehy, eds, *The Garland Handbook of Latin American Music*. 2nd ed, (New York, Routledge, 2008)

²² Melena Kuss, ed, *Music in Latin America and the Caribbean: An Encyclopedic History*. Vol. 2, (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2007), 259.

²³ "Haitian National Anthem (English Translation)," National Anthems & Patriotic Songs - Haitian National Anthem Lyrics English Translation. May 9, 2016. Accessed May 8, 2019.
<https://lyricstranslate.com/en/haitian-national-anthem-song-dessalines-haitian-national-anthem.html>.

Dessalines, Christophe, Petion did to take Haitians from under the white's rope" directly underscores the role of a shared and unifying historical memory.²⁴ And, although these Haitians possessed different ethnic and previous cultural backgrounds due to the forced movement of blacks across the Atlantic, the emotional reminder of common values and history was made possible through the national anthem. The efficacy of "La Dessalinienne" is demonstrated through the statement that "the country's moral [sic] level at the time was greatly damaged and, this new National Anthem truly repaired Haiti's spirit, [and] restored patriotism."²⁵

Even more strongly than "The Star Spangled Banner," the Haitian national anthem employs interconnected, syncretic elements to better spread and ingrain its message into the culture. In an alternative English translation, the beginning of the anthem reads "For our country, for our forebears, united let us march."²⁶ Vodou followers view this line "as a veneration of their belief as well as a veneration of their country and its founder."²⁷ In a journal article about recombinant mythology, Michael Largey explains that "Haitian intellectuals use Vodou as a cultural resource to enliven their own writing and saturate their prose with culturally resonant ideas."²⁸ The lyrical composer of "La Dessalinienne," Justin Lhérisson, was a writer, lawyer, journalist, and teacher—an intellectual in a country that still contained many illiterate citizens.²⁹ Lhérisson's incorporation of Dessalines into Vodou religious practice allowed the spirit of Dessalines "to inhabit the bodies of contemporary Vodou initiates to show Haitians both the

²⁴ "Haitian National Anthem (English Translation)," National Anthems & Patriotic Songs - Haitian National Anthem Lyrics English Translation. May 9, 2016. Accessed May 8, 2019. <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/haitian-national-anthem-song-dessalines-haitian-national-anthem.html>.

²⁵ "La Dessalinienne," Hougansydney.com. 2013. Accessed May 8, 2019. <http://hougansydney.com/haiti-national-anthem.php>.

²⁶ Dale Olsen and Daniel Sheehy, eds, *The Garland Handbook of Latin American Music*. 2nd ed, (New York, Routledge, 2008) 139-140

²⁷ *Ibid*, 140.

²⁸ Michael Largey, "Recombinant Mythology and the Alchemy of Memory: Occide Jeanty, Ogou, and Jean-Jacques Dessalines in Haiti." *Journal of American Folklore*, (Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2005), 329.

²⁹ Patricia Schutt-Ainé, *Haiti, a Basic Reference Book: General Information on Haiti*, (Miami, Librairie Au Service De La Culture, 1994)

desirability and the risks of maintaining their national sovereignty.”³⁰ By syncretically combining the ideas and figures of Haitian identity into an already established religious culture, Lhérisson effectively made “historical events more culturally saturated and, hence more resonant to culturally competent audiences.”³¹ These established beliefs helped the national anthem reach and speak to more Haitians, uniting a heterogeneous nation not simply on an ideational level, but on an emotional level that propelled national identity from the mind to the heart.

While national anthems as isolated pieces of music speak greater emotional volumes than simple prose about similar topics, it is the collective action of singing a national anthem that can fully develop and demonstrate a strong national identity. Although for most people music is meant to be heard, national anthems encourage every citizen to sing. The emotional connection that results is thus not contained to the individual, but collectively experienced in the moment by the group chanting love and pride for their nation. As time progressed, national anthems became more commonplace in non-war settings such as sporting events. Whether these anthems unite compatriots of opposing fan bases or supporters of a national team, the playing and unified *singing* of such music creates a patriotic, national bond in those everyday moments that causes citizens to tremble, weep, and take fervent pride in their nation that was once only an idea.

³⁰ Michael Largey, "Recombinant Mythology and the Alchemy of Memory: Occide Jeanty, Ogou, and Jean-Jacques Dessalines in Haiti." *Journal of American Folklore*, (Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2005), 333.

³¹ *Ibid*, 335

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