Grotowski in a Maze of Haitian Narration

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In *Lost White Tribes*, Riccardo Orizio quotes the following convoluted argument of Amon Frémon, a *houngan*, a Voodoo priest.¹ The words were recorded in August 1996 in the village of Cazale in Haiti:

But in Haiti a peasant always becomes black. [...] If I spent a year in Poland I too would turn white. Now that I’m ill I’m black. [...] You see, when I travel abroad I usually feel Polish, but here I’m Haitian. And now, at my age, with all the sun I’ve been exposed to, that is what I have become. [...] I’m Haitian even down to the color of my skin. (in Orizio 2001:145–46)

¹ Wherever available, I use English spelling of Haitian terms. However, wherever for a given term there is only a choice between French and Haitian spelling, I use the Haitian one. The only exception from the rule is when I quote Orizio and retain his chosen spelling (*grand blanc*).
To understand this line of argument, one has to step out of the white man’s discourse.

First one has to know that Cazale—quite a big village located 44 kilometers north of Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti—is the best known of the villages inhabited by the Poloné-Ayisyens, the Haitians of Polish descent. How did they end up there? It is quite an extraordinary story. When in 1802 Napoleon Bonaparte, then the First Consul of the French Republic, decided to reestablish full power over the Saint-Domingue colony and suppress the anti-French uprising of the black slaves, he sent to the island an expeditionary force under the command of his brother-in-law, general Charles Victor Emmanuel Leclerc. The corps included two Polish demi-brigades (equivalent to two infantry regiments): in September 1802 and March 1803, 5,280 Polish soldiers from the troops who had been stationed in Italy landed in Saint-Domingue. Around 4,000 legionnaires—three quarters of the expedition—died on the distant island: as prisoners, drowned, killed in battle, or—primarily—killed by the yellow fever. This was also the fate of the commander of the expeditionary force, General Leclerc, and of the Polish general Władysław Jabłonowski, who fell ill soon after arriving in Saint-Domingue, before he had even had a chance to take command of his demi-brigade.

Around 500 captured Polish soldiers were forcibly inducted into the English troops in Jamaica. After the failed campaign, 200 Polish legionnaires found their way to Cuba and to the United States of America, while no more than 330 returned to the Old World. Nearly 400 former legionnaires from Napoleon’s expedition remained in Haiti (Pachoniski and Wilson 1986). These were the only soldiers of Napoleon who survived the slaughter of the whites committed by the mutinous slaves in early 1804—right after the final victory of the uprising and the proclamation of Haiti’s independence. The leader of the uprising, General Jean-Jacques Dessalines, gave the order to spare the lives of Poles because he was touched by the fact that 120, perhaps even 150, Polish soldiers had joined the uprising. He believed that the Poles under Napoleon’s command generally took a republican and democratic stand, and was the one to dub the Poles “the white Negroes of Europe” (Chazotte 1840:56), as they were enslaved by the nations that had deprived Poland of independence. As a result, the Haitian constitution of 1805 granted Poles the right to naturalization. Around 240 former soldiers took advantage of the ruling and settled as naturalized Haitians in the villages of Port-Salut, Petite-Rivière de St-Jean du Sud, Fond-des-Blancs, and La Balène in Department Sud and in Cazale in Department Ouest. To this day in Haiti it is believed that tout moun Kazal se desandan Poloné ke yo ye—all the Cazalien people are Polish descendants (in Rypson 2008:160–61). After naturalization, this group came to be called Poloné Nwa, “black Poles.” Even today—more than 200 years later—one can come upon blue-eyed Haitians with straight blonde hair and a lighter skin shade.

However, this is exactly why—and this is the second point—all of the approximately 4,000 inhabitants of Cazale are called moun wouj in Haiti, which means “redskin” (Rypson 2008:76–
2. As a popular Haitian proverb says: Nèg rich se milat, milat pòv se nèg: “The rich black is a mulatto, the poor mulatto is a black” (Trouillot 1994:155).
My grandfather was Polish; his name was Faon Frémon Beké. My father was Polish. I am Polish. And I went to Poland because I was invited to go by Jerzy Detopski. Who was he? Un blanc who had come to Casales [Cazale] to look for any surviving relatives and to take them back to Poland to meet his family. Jerzy was an important man, un grand blanc. [...] I'm still fond of Jerzy, because he did a lot of nice things for me and always saw that everything was just so. I still love him [...] When I was in Poland I didn’t have to spend any money at all. The blanc paid for everything. (2001:143)

So what was the name of this gran blan after all — the personage from abroad? Was it Blokowski or Detopski? Or perhaps something yet different? Apparently, to Amon Frémon it is an unstable, fluid matter — but it is no different with the name of his own grandfather. This is how it seems to be — and probably has to be — with everything to do with laba laPolòy: the mythologized Poland.

As it happens, I met Amon Frémon in person when in 1980 he came to Poland in a group of 13 Haitians. I showed him and the entire group around Warsaw and I had him visit my house. I believe I know the name of the gran blan who invited them back then. I knew this man under the name Jerzy Grotowski.

This Polish theatre director — the creator of Akropolis (1962), Doctor Faustus (1963), The Constant Prince (1965), and Apocalypsis cum figuris (1969), the author of Towards a Poor Theatre (1968), and later a professor, granted a chair in theatre anthropology at Collège de France in Paris — set out for Haiti for the first time in December 1977, convinced by Jean-Marie Drot, a French writer and documentary filmmaker, who at a dinner told him about Voodoo and gave him contact details to people in Haiti. Grotowski immediately became truly fascinated, and was inspired to move toward yet another artistic reorientation, soon after he announced a new project: the Theatre of Sources. During his third stay in Haiti, in late November and early December 1978, he met with the group Saint-Soleil (Sen Soley) — the one to which Drot devoted an episode of his documentary series produced at that time, Journal of a Journey with André Malraux ([1974–1975] 2009). This is when Grotowski began his association with Maud Gerdes Robart, which he continued when working on Objective Drama at the University of...
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California, Irvine, and later — in the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski in Pontedera, Italy — when he was working on the so-called Ritual Arts (Art as vehicle) and up to 1993: 15 years altogether.

Grotowski went to Cazale for no special reason, probably because of his interest in the Poloné-Ayisyens living there. And he included Amon Frémon in the group of 12 artists from Sen Solé [Saint Soleil], whom he invited to Poland.

Those who have researched Jerzy Grotowski know the importance of Afro-Haitian culture to his work. The artist first discussed it during the Theatre of Sources Project, which he had been working on while still in Poland, starting from around 1977, or even from as early as 1976, and up until 1982 when he emigrated. It suffices to look into his text Theatre of Sources, included in the anthology The Grotowski Sourcebook, edited by Lisa Wolford and Richard Schechner. Among other things Grotowski mentions in it an expedition “conducted with the narrow nucleus of the [intercultural] group in the frame of Theatre of Sources” (1997:266) in Haiti. The expedition, which lasted almost three weeks, took place in late July and early August 1979. The nucleus of the group consisted of seven people, including Grotowski and Teó Spychalński, who played the role of project leader. Years later Grotowski denied that they had been concentrating on the phenomena of Voodoo trance of possession then, and he confessed they had rather been interested in “the possibilities for entering into direct contact with the strong human examples of the holders of ancient tradition” (1997:267). Most likely he was referring to Eliézer Cadet who had lived in Port-de-Paix at that time, the capital of the department of Nord-Ouest.

A photograph of the 88-years-old Eliézer Cadet was included by Swedish writer Marianne Ahrne in her book Äventyr, vingslag (Adventures, Flap of Wings). She visited him a few times in the 1980s and gave an evocative portrayal of him in a chapter of her book entitled “A Certain Houngan” — Eliazer Cadet was one of the most famous houngans (Voodoo priest) in Haiti (1992:47–67). Grotowski took Cadet on the journey to Ife and Oshogbo in the Yoruba territory in southwestern Nigeria, and later to Poland. Note that, unlike the Afro-Cuban religion Santería, the Afro-Trinidadian religion Shango, and the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé Nagô, all of which derive from the religion of the Yoruba people, the Afro-Haitian Voodoo was largely shaped by the religion of the Fon people called Vodû — the traditional faith of the inhabitants of Benin (Dahomey) and Togo, as well as the neighboring states of Nigeria and Ghana.1 In the summer of 1979, apart from Eliézer Cadet, Grotowski invited two leaders of the Sen Soléy group to Poland.

However, Amon Frémon came to Poland a year later — he joined the group of 12 artists from Sen Soléy, led by Jean-Claude Garoute, known as Tiga, and the already mentioned Maud Robart. He probably did not integrate with this team up to the end of their stay — or perhaps he felt special, as he was the only one among them with Polish roots? When they all visited my home in Warsaw, Amon stuck out: even though he did not have blue eyes or straight, dark blonde hair, he would clutch his sides and stump from one foot to another like a real highlander from the Tatra, and he drank pure vodka neat, in one gulp, one shot after another — just like a Pole. He only spoke Creole, but despite that he would listen attentively to conversations in Polish, nodding his head, as if he understood everything. When years later Ian Thompson asked him: “What did you make of Warsaw?” his answer was short: “Not bad. Wonderful vodka” (1992:55).

I regret a little that he did not remember the name of Adam Mickiewicz, whose monument I showed to the group when we were sightseeing in Warsaw. I explained that this greatest of all Polish poets was a bard and a soothsayer, someone similar to a Voodoo priest, who guards the spirits and rules people’s hearts and minds. But then, Amon Frémon did not remember.

3. However, Afro-Haitian Voodoo does contain elements of the Yoruba religion, which first came to Haiti at the beginning of the 18th century from the territory of the African Kingdom of Dahomey.
the name of Jerzy Grotowski either, the person who invited him to Poland, paid for him, and took care of everything. Nor did he remember the name of the Theatre of Sources Project, even though he participated in it in the summer of 1980 and despite the fact that he must have read its French title—Le Théâtre des Sources—multiple times then, as it was written at the entrance to the seat of the Laboratory Theatre in Wrocław.

What did Frémon remember then? “Jerzy chose me because he liked the way I lived. I’m a magic-man, I have special powers, everyone here [in Cazale] loves me. And the gran blan liked the idea of a Pole who knew about magic,” he explained 16 years later to Orizio.

Jerzy knew that I was the one man who could bring peace to Poland. The country was up in arms and needed someone with magic powers. Jerzy took me all over the place, to one city after another, and organized great festivals of magic. Every city we went to, we would take at least twenty-five white men with us into the forest and perform the rites together. (2001:144)

Grotowski spoke differently about his intentions behind what Frémon called “a great festival of magic,” and what he himself had named the Theatre of Sources Project:

The Project is oriented toward the kind of actions which “precede the differences,” and for this reason englobe persons from traditions and techniques far from one another. This work can be explored and developed together even without special explanations or common language among the people, because its basis is formed by something ultimately, almost unimaginably, simple. The actions initiated by a Hindu are accepted as correct only if they work when done by non-Hindus, initiated by a Haitian only if they work when done by non-Haitians, initiated by a Japanese person only if they work when done by non-Japanese people. (1997:263)

And this is how he described the organization of work:

In Poland, we are conducting the Project in an isolated place outside the city, with big simple buildings and indoor work spaces, and with a large natural environment around that has for us some kind of exceptional presence, where every path in the forest has for us a meaning and its own nature. In some actions the routes are directed toward the spots which for us seem to be charged as accumulators, striking, out of the ordinary. During the summer of 1980, when we conducted, day and night over three months, a practical seminar for 220 people from outside, the participants arrived in waves, as for some unusual “hunting,” some kinds of fullness—non-habitual in daily life. Our whole space, both indoor and outdoor, became the “theatre of events,” in the same way it is said about a “theatre of war.” In this sense, we can speak about Theatre of Sources. (1997:264)

These two narratives—Frémon’s and Grotowski’s—do not coincide on one point—the direction of the movement. Frémon says they would go from one city to another, gathering groups of people to take them to a forest—whereas Grotowski says they used to retreat to an isolated place, outside the city, in a forest, while little groups of people from outside, the participants, arrived in waves. The rest seems similar though, even if expressed in a different language. Grotowski talks about “a kind of exceptional presence” and “the spots which for us seem to be charged as accumulators, striking, out of the ordinary,” while Frémon simply calls it magic. Grotowski speaks of “some unusual hunting, some kind of fullness” and “the theatre of events,” putting these terms in quotes, whereas Frémon terms them as “a great festival of magic” or shortly “the rites.”

To these two narratives there is a third one added in Orizio’s book—the authorial one. The author, a reporter and safari guide, did not guess the identity of Jerzy Detopski from the story told by Frémon. This is what he wrote about “the mysterious Polish benefactor”:
This brings to mind the story told by Gurdjieff on the night of 8 April 1924 in the apartment of Mrs. R. on 49th Street in New York City, after the celebration of the opening of a branch of his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. The story referred to the sources of funding for the operation of this Institute. Gurdjieff confessed then: “the business I preferred above all others, which never required my specially devoting to it any definite time or needed any fixed place of residence, and which moreover was very profitable, was the trade in carpets and antiques” (Gurdjieff 1985:268). As to Grotowski, he did not need to resort to any such methods — the Theatre of Sources Project was subsidized by the Polish Ministry of Culture and Art, the Rockefeller Foundation via the Manhattan Project of New York City, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City, and by Centro di Ricerca per il Teatro in Milan.

I tried to imagine this Polish man, this grand blanc, as Amon had called him, who could travel and do business abroad despite the pro-Soviet regime and was therefore one of the nomenklatura, the Communist élite, yet who was also a secret supporter of Solidarity in the very year that saw the first of the strikes (the “war,” as Amon called it). The powerful Pole, obsessed by accounts he had heard of his forgotten “brothers” in Haiti, must have imagined that with a bit of Voodoo magic even the mighty USSR could be made to yield some part of its invincibility. Who Jerzy might have been, and why he ever came to Haiti, remained unclear. Amon vaguely mentioned shops, leading one to suppose that he was some kind of dealer. In what? There was no way of knowing.

It is possible that the Pole was simply a businessman who led Amon around the country exhibiting him for payment in the villages and organizing quasi-Voodoo ceremonies in the woods, carefully avoiding discovery by the police who could have arrested him for subversion. (2001:143–44)

By the way, neither in Frémon’s story nor in Grotowski’s account is there any mention of payment for the forest rites; and indeed the participants did not pay to take part in a practical seminar of the Theatre of Sources Project. Apart from that, however, this portrayal of Grotowski given by Orizio happens to be one of the most compelling we have. Richard Schechner could add it to his collection consisting of “many aspects, many faces, many presences, many characters,” which together made up the character of “a shape-shifter, shaman, trickster, artist, adept, director, leader, Grotowski” (1997:458)—even if one could not really recognize there the man whom the world knew in the 1990s as the laureate of the American MacArthur Foundation Genius Award and the holder of honorary doctorates from the University of Wrocław, the New School for Social Research, and The University of Bologna.

In his essay Schechner discusses why Grotowski—who, as we know from elsewhere, remained a member of the Communist Party up until the end of his stay in Poland and in Spring 1983 requested asylum in the United States—had never before taken part “in Solidarity or other political movements.” And he answered: “In truth, Grotowski is no more a political person in the Solidarity sense than he is a theatre person in the Broadway sense” (1997:461). This sentence was accepted by Grotowski as an explication of his basic stand (Grotowski 1998:2).

And yet Orizio might have actually been right when he wrote that “the quasi-Voodoo ceremonies in the woods” organized by Grotowski could be treated as acts of “subversion.” It was true in a sense that Orizio probably had not predicted. If Grotowski ever indulged in any kind of “subversion,” if he was a rebel, then presumably it was in the sense in which outsiders, changelings, people cursed by the society are rebels, such as—these are his examples from the period of the Theatre of Sources—the Zen lunatics, St. Francis of Assisi, or the Hasidim (in Rosiek 2009:74).

Comparing Grotowski to Hasidim might well be the best part of a well-known essay by Schechner. Schechner is right in stating that what is really responsible for the resemblance between Grotowski and the Hasidim is not so much the philosophy, but rather the type of leadership:

4. This brings to mind the story told by Gurdjieff on the night of 8 April 1924 in the apartment of Mrs. R. on 49th Street in New York City, after the celebration of the opening of a branch of his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. The story referred to the sources of funding for the operation of this Institute. Gurdjieff confessed then: “the business I preferred above all others, which never required my specially devoting to it any definite time or needed any fixed place of residence, and which moreover was very profitable, was the trade in carpets and antiques” (Gurdjieff 1985:268). As to Grotowski, he did not need to resort to any such methods—the Theatre of Sources Project was subsidized by the Polish Ministry of Culture and Art, the Rockefeller Foundation via the Manhattan Project of New York City, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City, and by Centro di Ricerca per il Teatro in Milan.
To see those who serve Grotowski accomplish their work, is to witness a Hasidic community and its rebbe. Grotowski answers his disciples’ love not sanctimoniously or sentimentally, but in typical Hasidic fashion: paradoxically, with wit, demanding unremitting hard work, radiating light and energy. This is, as Buber points out, like Zen. (1997:483)

It is worth emphasizing here though, that in Hasidism itself the system was inherently connected with the relationship described above—it was derived from it and fulfilled in it. It was the relationship between the Hasidim, the pious, and the Tzaddik, the righteous one, who was the living incarnation of knowledge, the example to follow, and a living legend. In accordance with the great expression used by Martin Buber, Hasidism transformed the Kaballah—the system laid out in The Zohar—into an ethos, a way of life (Buber 1988:10). This is one of the reasons why Hasidism was so important to Grotowski, for whom only “the theatre of events” ever counted.

During the work on the Theatre of Sources Project, Grotowski’s favorite reading was Buber’s book Gog and Magog (1999). Afterwards too—when he was involved in the Objective Drama Project in Irvine, he was still reading Buber’s books. Jan Kott says Grotowski visited him then in his house in Santa Monica:

As he was leaving, he gave me a book that he said he never parted with. It was a French translation of Martin Buber's Tales of the Hasidim. [...] It was strange, but that evening I had the impression that the former guru Grotowski [...] was one of the Hasidim. (1997:306)

Earlier, in March 1981, Grotowski had gone to Gdańsk, the city where Lech Wałeśa worked in the shipyard and where the Solidarity movement had been born half a year before that. The political situation in Poland was particularly tense at that point—the pacifications of strikes and protests could well have turned into war. Grotowski took part in a seminar at the University of Gdańsk. This seminar, however, was different than usual: Grotowski read and commented on Buber’s text False Prophets (1982:166–71). And he said:

Hasidim believe that the future need not be manipulated. But the Jews wanted to control the arrival of the Messiah. When Napoleon set out to Egypt, there was a Jew in Lublin who urged people to support him [Napoleon]. He was convinced everything was falling into pieces, the whole world was falling apart. Thus the catastrophe should be sped up, to induce God to send the Messiah. Such attempts at manipulating the future—it is a trap.

(in Rosiek 2009:41)

This Jew from Lublin that Grotowski talked about was Rabbi Mendel of Rimanov, who saw Napoleon as Gog, after whose wars the awaited Messiah would come. However, Rabbi Israel of Kozienice, known as Maggid, the Preacher, doubted whether even the wisest Tzaddik could understand how triumphs or failures of an individual man could be linked with salvation. When in 1805 he was visited by prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski, then the foreign minister of Russia, Maggid told him that none of the earthly rulers has power over the soul of a nation, and only the power over the soul is real power.

Thus it probably could not be so that in 1980 Grotowski—“the powerful Pole” from Orizio’s exegesis and “one of the Hasidim” from Kott’s story—imagined that “with a bit of Voodoo magic even the mighty USSR could be made to yield some part of its invincibility.” Jan Kott compares the stories put together by Buber to tales collected by Stanisław Vincenz by the Cheremosh River in the Western Ukraine (Vincenz 1955). It was Vincenz who beautifully wrote that the prayers said by the Hasidim every year, even though they were foreign, guarded the Polish soil. In this sense Amon Frémon could have been deeply right when he claimed that the rites performed in the forest “could bring peace to Poland.”

5. It seems worthwhile to quote this fragment here verbatim: “How safe a child must feel growing up in a land protected year after year by such fervent prayers, even if they are prayers of another religion. For centuries the rustle of those prayers has risen to the heavens, and now it is no more. Will it someday resound again?” (Vincenz 1990:53).
During the seminar in Gdańsk, Grotowski presented quite a convoluted argument:

I encountered Hasidism through the blacks from Haiti. While being in Haiti in a moment (the election of John Paul II for the Holy See) which was very important both for the Haitians and for us, I met an old man, resembling the tzaddik from Lublin known from Gog and Magog [the Rabbi Mendel of Rimanov, the supporter of Napoleon as the herald of the Messiah.] The old man from Haiti, with his messianic urge to manipulate the future to speed up the end of the world, was like the old Jew from Lublin. (in Rosiek 2009:75, 74)

In the 1970s the situation in Haiti was continuously tragic: after the death of the bloody dictator François Duvalier in 1971, power was executed equally ruthlessly by his son Jean-Claude, mainly with the help of the secret police, the infamous Tonton Macoutes; he would only resign after violent demonstrations and riots in 1986. In the middle of the rule of Bébé Doc, Haitian society was permeated by a sense of awaiting some change for the better, so it cannot be surprising that in Voodooists’ circles, so deeply marked by magical thinking, messianic moods spread.

However, the Hasidic and the Haitian examples were analogies to the social unrest experienced by the Poles in 1980 and 1981. In our situation the whole mass movement of Solidarity could be the counterpart of Rabbi Mendel of Rimanov with his messianic hopes centered on Napoleon, and the temptation to manipulate history. But then who would be our modern Napoleon, the Gog of our times from Grotowski’s parallel? Would it be the Polish Pope, who had just been elected to the Holy See?

Grotowski would envisage himself on the peripheries of this history. He was following the example of Rabbi Israel of Kozienice, who “told [Prince Joseph] Poniatowski that a person who cannot grasp the distance between himself and the historical moment is lost” (in Rosiek 2009:40). He was striving to grasp such distance, doing things similar to what the Hasidim would do.

Schechner states:

Hasids seek the Shekhinah, whom the Greeks called Sophia, the light of wisdom, in order to break through the “shells” and gather her “sparks.” In Grotowski’s terms, this search for the Shekhinah is his Theatre of Sources, his Objective Drama, his Art as vehicle. (1997:482)

This opinion is utterly true. Especially as when writing it, Schechner did not know what Grotowski had said about the Shekhinah during the seminar at the University of Gdańsk:

The Hasidim and Buber use the term Shekhinah. The Shekhinah is a part of God, a fractured part of God, which walks in the fields and forests, under the form of an old, weary woman. [...] This is the Mother. Helping something feeble, but living, I enter into a bond with her. This is the Mother in misery. [...] When one walks in a forest, in the night, one feels there are spots that are denser, particularly intensively alive; this is where the Mother is, but she is extremely lost. (Grotowski in Rosiek 2009:48, 86)

It is not difficult to notice that in this description of seeking the Shekhinah in the “spots that are denser, particularly intensively alive,” Grotowski used terms analogous to the ones he used when he was describing the Theatre of Sources Project: “In some actions the routes are directed toward the spots which for us seem to be charged as accumulators, striking, out of the ordinary.”

Grotowski was not a Hasid, he was not even a Jew. And yet Jan Kott saw in him one of the Hasidim. Grotowski became a Hasid on Polish soil, which had been deprived of Jews and their prayers. Through the Theatre of Sources Project he made us, the other participants of the project, even though not Jewish, seek the Shekhinah just like the Hasidim did. And we were joined in it by Amon Frémon, the Voodoo priest, who was a black Pole from Haiti, knowing nothing about the history of the Polish land in the 19th and the 20th centuries. Is this proof that after all there are some actions that precede differences?
References


