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# Flon, Catherine

(fl. 18th century), seamstress,

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was born in the French colony of St. Domingue, probably during the second half of the eighteenth century. The details of Flon's genealogy are unknown due to the lack of personal information about people who experienced the transatlantic slave trade and slavery. She was the goddaughter and principal assistant to JEAN-JACQUES DESSALINES, the first ruler of the independent republic of Haiti, which suggests she was the daughter of enslaved Africans.

Flon was an enthusiastic supporter of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), during which time she served as a nurse, in a non-combatant but supportive capacity. Her unique place in the history of the revolution during the colonial war of independence (1802–1803), precipitated by the revocation of the *decret du 16 pluviôse an II*, an attempt to reestablish chattel slavery that resulted in the abduction of Toussaint Louverture.

The design of the Haitian national flag occurred during a three-day meeting of the diverse revolutionary groups in May 1803, which was held at Archaye, Catherine's—and probably Dessalines's—birthplace, a region over which Dessalines presided. It was during this conference that Dessalines symbolically excised the white vertical band from the French tricolor, leaving the red and blue bands. Flon then stitched together the remaining bands.

The resulting flag was the French tricolor reinterpreted from a Vodou perspective. In French culture, the white represents the ancient color of France, while the red and blue were the traditional colors of the City of Paris.

However, in Vodou culture, white means, among other things, peace, security, cleanliness, honesty, and security. Red symbolizes, among others, power, energy, love, health, and passion, and blue symbolizes, among other things, love.

To cut out the white band in the immediate wake of the revocation of the *decret du 16 pluviôse an II* symbolized the black rebels' rejection of French belligerence, dishonesty, insincerity, and the withdrawal of France's protection of their hard-won freedom. Laurent Dubois states that since 1793, the French tricolor had represented the unity of whites, blacks, and mixed-race people in defense of the Republic of France. The message of the new bicolor flag was, according to Dubois, clear: the brutality of the French whites meant that they had forfeited their right to be included in the new society being forged in the colony. The sewing together of the blue and red symbolized the unity of the blacks and mixed-race people in opposition to the whites.

Flags are objects of tremendous ritualistic significance in Haitian Vodou. The flag first sewn together by Flon drew upon this tradition and therefore makes an authoritative statement regarding the establishment of the Haitian nation.

Revered and immortalized as one of the three most prominent women in the establishment of the nation-state of Haiti, Flon was integral to the mythology of the Haitian nation. She has been interpreted by many of Haiti's nationalist artists, all of whom paint her with the red and blue tricolor. A

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version of her likeness adorns Haiti's ten-gourde banknote. A secondary school for girls was established in her honor. One of Haiti's national holidays, Flag Day, celebrated on 18 May, places her at the center of national history.

In 2004 historian Laurent Dubois published *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*. Its paperback edition presents an image of the painting, *Dessalines Ripping the White from the Flag*, by the artist Madsen Mompremier. The oil on canvas painting places Catherine in the right corner, dressed in white, head wrapped, barefoot, and seated on a golden chair, stitching the red and blue bands of the new flag together. Apart from the ethereal figures, she is the only female mortal pictured. She seems to have turned her face away from her godfather. On the back cover of the book, Flon is presented as a detail from the painting.

During the two centuries since the Haitian nation declared independence, the design of the national flag has undergone change. However, all artistic renditions of Catherine Flon have portrayed her stitching the blue and red bands of the French tricolor after the white was cut out by her godfather.

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