



“There were Protestants handing out rice and Bibles and telling people to renounce *vodou*, saying that the earthquake was a punishment from God”

while attending Catholic school during the day. I never converted. Now I help to dispel the myths.”

He also reminds Haitians – and listeners – of the nation’s heritage. ‘Je Suis Grand Nèg’ (I Am a Great Man/Negro) is re-modelled from a traditional paean to the resilience of Haiti. ‘Kwi a’, with its rousing percussion and chorus by the all-female Nègès Fla Vodoun choir (“my bodyguards in Port-au-Prince”), says that as descendants of freedom fighters, as sons and daughters of Africa, Haitians should not use the *kwi*, a hollowed calabash, to beg. On ‘Sigbo Lisa’, a Creole-sung, langaj-dotted song acknowledging the power of West Africa’s *griot* oral tradition, Josué vows never to betray his *lwa*, his ancestors, or his Haitian culture.

Still, in the early 2000s, returning to Haiti wasn’t on Josué’s mind. He had a new passport and a new family of friends. A graduate of Haiti’s National School of Arts, he’d become a key cultural figure in Europe and New York after variously establishing his own dance troupe in Paris, performing alongside Afro-Brazilian artists on the 2004 album *Orixás* by Jorge Amorim & Hank – a work celebrating Candomblé, a syncretic religion that, like Cuban Santería, shares similarities with vodou – and creating the ‘electro-vodou’ genre with Haitian-born club DJ and academic, Val Jeanty.

The 2007 album *Regleman* (a term for the set of rules for conducting a vodou ceremony) had proved him an artist to be reckoned with. His reputation as a sort of spiritual sage, an expert on Haitian history and culture, spread. In 2009 Josué was criss-crossing the US, introducing Haitian culture to schools and universities (he remains a go-to for academics and researchers), when a documentary-maker asked him to take part in some of the time-worn vodou pilgrimages in Haiti. “I knew it would be traumatising. I’d left for Paris [where he lived for 13 years] to find my own identity. But I wanted to see my family and my neighbourhood. I wanted to thank my *lwa*.”

Josué joined thousands of his fellow Haitians on their sojourns to sites including the Saut-d’Eau waterfall in the mountains of central Haiti; the mud pools of Plaine-du-Nord, the site of a bloody slave insurrection; and to the cleansing waters of the sea surrounding Cap-Haïtien. Wherever he went, people knelt and prayed to leave Haiti, their desperation palpable. “It was emotional,” he says. “It helped me understand.” (The film ran out of budget and was never completed.)

Then came January 2010. Josué was back home in New York when the catastrophic earthquake struck Haiti, killing an estimated 160,000 people – many of who he’d trekked alongside – and leaving more than one million homeless. “I turned on CNN, waiting for my time to go and help. There were Protestants handing out rice and Bibles and telling people to renounce vodou, saying that the earthquake was a punishment from God. It was neo-colonialism. I was upset and angry, and went on several radio shows to try and educate and explain.”

He also called his friend, NYC-based producer Charles Czarnecki, and told him that he needed to sing. “Charles invited me to his apartment and put a microphone in front of me. The album began from there.” He birthed the aforementioned ‘Sigbo Lisa’ and ‘Avelekete’, calling on Ayizan, the first manbo priestess, the *lwa* of the marketplace, to ease the suffering of male victims who were yet to allow themselves to grieve.

Two years later, officially invited by the office of Haitian president (and musician) Michel Martelly to head up the ▶