

HAITI: INCOMPARABLE SPIRIT, UNIQUE HISTORY



Elizabeth Scott

TFSOs POSTED TO HAITI EITHER SPEND THEIR TOUR IN TOTAL BEWILDERMENT OR APPROACH KNOWLEDGE OF A MANY-LAYERED AND INTRIGUING CULTURE.

By DAN WHITMAN

urmoil, necklacings, gorgeous tropical landscapes, Tonton Macoutes, unique art, environmental disaster in the making, immense generosity and unspeakable cruelty: Haiti may make extravagant claims on the senses, but can never be accused of being bland. A nation 200 years behind the rest of the hemisphere in economic development and plagued with illiteracy and hunger, Haiti draws its visitors with an incomparable spirit and unique history.

The descendants of African slaves brought by French and Spanish plantation owners in the 16th and 17th

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centuries to replace a decimated indigenous population, Haitians retain West African religious and cultural practices — notably voodoo, whose “Vatican” is sometimes cited as Ouidah, Benin. Though situated in close proximity to the 21st-century sophistication of the United States, and shaped by three centuries of education and economic links to France, Haiti is a place where secret societies and unexplainable powers still exist. Only in this tiny island nation would the easternmost province be called “The West,” or could there be a Prince of Limonade and a Duke of Marmelade.

Indeed, no country replicates Haiti in terms of a picturesque history, a vivid sensory overload or in the subtlety of its people’s self-deprecating humor. A local proverb: “If work were as good as they say, the rich would have taken it from us long ago.”

A Successful Slave Revolt

Haiti was created in 1804, the product of Toussaint Louverture’s and Jean-Jacques Dessalines’ successful slave revolt against the French. Illiterate Haitian peasants defeated Europe’s most advanced army through discipline and communal sacrifice. They repelled 50,000 French troops sent by Napoleon to preserve for France the “Pearl of the Antilles,” whose annual production of coffee and sugar had supplied all of Europe throughout the 18th century. Denied this lucrative supply post, Napoleon sold off Louisiana to U.S. President Jefferson: and thus, the territory of the United States was doubled thanks to the impertinent slaves of one-third of a smallish Caribbean island!

Dan Whitman is an FSO in the Office of Press and Public Diplomacy in the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs in Washington. He joined USIA in 1985, serving in Copenhagen, Madrid and Pretoria. He was public affairs officer in Port-au-Prince from 1999 to 2001.

Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Dubois and William Faulkner all had links with and a fascination for the dark courage of this determined people — Douglass was Abraham Lincoln’s ambassador to Haiti and Dubois had family roots on the island, and Haiti and its people figured in William Faulkner’s novel, *Absalom, Absalom*. Even the Haitians’ opponents were charmed. A contingent of Polish conscripts under Napoleon’s ill-fated General Leclerc defected, and fought side by side with slaves who knew they faced either slavery, freedom, or death, yet chose freedom and the risk of death rather than submission. Much, much later, even under the opportunistic and cruel regime of Francois Duvalier (Papa Doc) at the height of the Cold War, the Haitian government welcomed Polish citizens without visas as an expression of undying gratitude. Blue-eyed Haitians can still be found in the southwestern region of the country.

After Columbus’ first voyage to the present site of Cape Haitian, Queen Isabela of Spain asked him to describe the land he called “Hispaniola.” According to legend he took a sheet of paper, crumpled it in his hand and placed it on a table before the Queen, to describe its rugged and mountainous landscape. The land has been Haiti’s blessing and its curse ever since: it was the most fertile and productive land in the world in the 18th century, yet is now a partial wasteland of deforested hills. Today hunger and poverty prevail. In the marketplaces shopkeepers peddle a hamburger-shaped comestible made of clay and sugar, made to “deceive hunger” for citizens in one of the world’s hungriest and most densely populated countries.

The mountainous terrain — “Deye mon, gen mon” (beyond the mountains, more mountains) — has isolated the different parts of the country from each other, retarding true nation-building. The geographical barriers are compounded by the local Creole language, which, while expressive and colorful, cuts off the citizenry from world markets and culture. Curse and

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blessing, mixed: Haiti developed its own crafts, folklore and graphic arts unparalleled in the Caribbean or other regions. Wrought-iron sculptures carved by welding experts squatting in the streets near the traffic in Port-au-Prince's inner city areas mold stirring scenes of local folklore and legend, the beast and the spirit of a complex nation.

Kaleidoscopic Images

To the reflective eye, Haiti presents a series of indelible images. Watch a platoon of teenage girls in pressed white dresses run along the side of a country road singing Easter songs with deafening enthusiasm. Or visit Jacmel during the Lenten season, and be spooked by disguised youngsters, swooping around the visitor with wordless tauntings, silent in their playful getups depicting monsters and goblins adorned with beaks and ribbed satin batwings from traditions now so intertwined as to be inseparable.

Turn around, and a crowd, unable to find sticks or

stones, kicks a suspected thief to death in front of the U.S. embassy, later to learn they were mistaken over the identity of the victim. Turn again, and a community radio station the size of a phone booth intrepidly emits objective information through a spindly transmission tower that seems more like a straightened paper clip than an instrument of mass communication. Pivot once more, and a leper without feet ambulates on leather stumps along La Martiniere asking alms of the passers-by.

Just ahead, a man draws a two-wheeled cart through dense traffic, trying to deliver his freight, a large block of ice, before it melts in the tropical heat. Another spin, and a woman driven by the need for order sweeps the public area of a street in the middle of a rainstorm. Turn again, and a smiling embassy guard expresses his ultimate fantasy and fondest aspiration: work and work; work at night, work in the day; then visit Miami.

Another twist, and a hotel of faded splendor, once



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the hideaway of Liz Taylor and Richard Burton, languishes in decadence in Petit-Goave, its brass bathtub bereft of water in the shadowy 19th-century walls decorated with framed erotica from the 1950s. A leopard skin adorns the wall of the bar, crowded with the ghosts of a bygone era. Outside, a silent procession passes in the street, wordlessly displaying the black armbands of mourning for the postponed elections of March 26, 2000.

Through it all, Haitians love the joke. Provisional Electoral Council President Leon Manus, forced into exile at the age of 78 during the political boilings of June 2000, believed he would be murdered for not rendering electoral findings agreeable to certain factions. On the eve of his departure, a friend asked how he found the fortitude to carry on. "Because I am not Minus," he answered. "I am Manus."

Wild Horses

Marronnage is the revealing socio-historical term for a unique characteristic of Haitian society. Prior to Haiti's successful slave revolt beginning at the Bois Cayman in 1792, slaves took to the hills to escape their taskmasters. Known as "marrons," from a Spanish word referring to wild horses, the mountain people lived on deceit and escape-artistry. Their survival depended on it. The notion exists still, as something akin to "double-facedness" or "hypocrisy." The subtlety of Haitian negotiators today, while causing premature aging among foreign diplomats and well-intentioned peace makers, outdoes the plainspeak of literalist North Americans. Codes imbedded in Haitian public communications evade and challenge the outside observer. "Why can't they just sit down and agree?" one asks. Haitians know better.

Wary Haitians avoid their given names, exchanging the last with the first, or making up nicknames that stick, so as to avoid possible encounters with neighbors or authorities. Legality and reality are never one and the same. Cheerful despite the betrayals suffered by every family, they have become a nation of philosophers. A Washington visitor seeks the "meaning" of a corpse seen on the street on the way to the airport. He earnestly asks the laconic embassy driver. "This, sir, appears to be a person who undertook a venture but did not have time to finish," is the driver's wry reply.

Rugged, determined, musical, perhaps on the obstinate side at times, Haitians are a nation of principle and principles betrayed. "We are ugly," says one proverb, "but we are here." A speaker at a conference tells of turning in his green card to the Immigration and Naturalization Service after seven years in the U.S. so as to return to his native Haiti, which needs him. Without prompting, the audience of 600 rises as one to sing the "Desalinienne," the national anthem.

Surprising Rewards

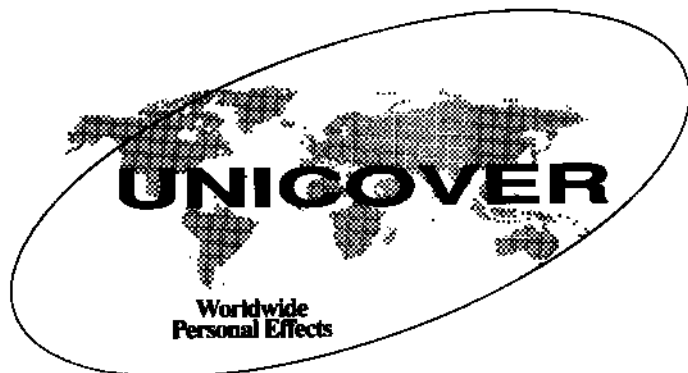
The Foreign Service officer either sits through a two- or three-year posting in total bewilderment, or, alternately, approaches knowledge of a many-layered and intriguing culture. A disproportionate number of State officers choose multiple postings in Haiti, opting to go back a second time to find what they missed earlier in their careers. The negatives are evident and striking: poverty, filth, disease and the frustrations of paralyzing political stalemate. The positives are intangible and difficult to articulate, yet they captivate and hold the visitor. As the bumper sticker states: "No phone, no water, no electricity. I still love Haiti."

Few postings provide the challenge, frustrations, or gratification of Port-au-Prince, where politicians play cat-and-mouse with consummate and maddening skill, opportunists weave baroque plots, and where the citizenry take care of their own and show an unparalleled hospitality to the stranger. In no other country do the seeds of developmental and exchange projects take root so quickly, their beneficiaries ignited with inspiration after a minimalist voyage to Miami just to see how things are done "lot bo dlo" (on the other side of the water).

Haiti's dynamic and indefatigable professionals take notions and ideas from abroad and send them for local adaptation and ready absorption. Private school principals visit a school bridge program in Worcester, Mass., and return invigorated to immediately apply the principles learned. They filter, they gauge and invent. Give them an example of another way to approach things, and they will make it into their own, rendering the examples usable in the reefs and shoals of Haiti's uncharted culture. No nation seems to have risen so many times from its own ashes, lifting itself up by dint of necessity from the cruel tumbles which would break the spirit of a lesser people. ■

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