

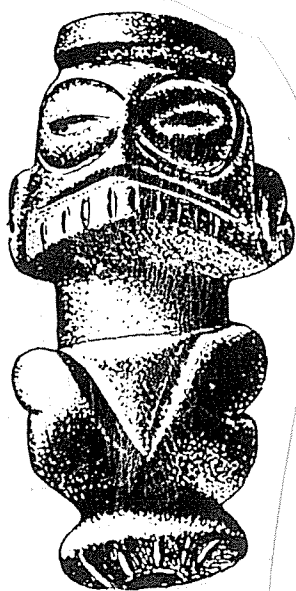
Haiti's History

Once a land in which all its inhabitants were well-fed, Haiti is now the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. One out of eight children die before the age of five. Life expectancy is 56 years. Human rights abuses against those who criticize the government are unimaginably cruel. Why are people suffering? How are the people of Haiti trying to change these conditions? How can we help? Haiti's history of colonialism, neo-colonialism and the struggles for independence can help you to explore these questions.

Haiti and its next-door neighbor, the Dominican Republic, share the second-largest island in the Caribbean. Before the arrival of the Europeans, the island was a homeland of the Taíno Arawak, a native people originally from South America. They called it Ayiti, or "mountainous land."

The Taínos

Ayiti, also called Quisqueya, was a center of Taíno Arawak culture in the Caribbean. It was divided into five main *cacicagos* or kinship nations. The Taínos lived in small villages along coastal areas and river deltas. Each village was governed by a *cacique*, or chief, who could be a man or woman.



The Taínos' food came from hunting, fishing and agriculture, and the population was well-fed. Everyone in the society worked, even the *caciques*. Cooperation and sharing were basic to the Taínos' way of life. Each village had a central plaza called a *batey*, used for festivals, ball games, and religious ceremonies.

If you had visited Ayiti

just prior to the Spanish conquest, you would have seen a lush and fertile land. The island was covered with forests teeming with plant and animal life. There were so many birds that flocks flying overhead would darken the sun.

The Conquest

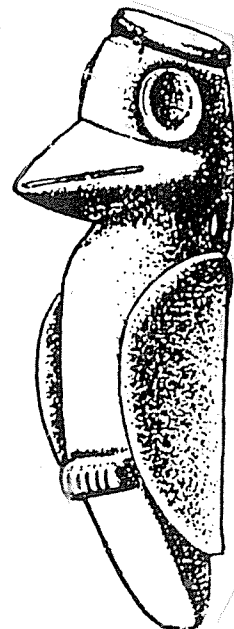
Columbus landed on Ayiti in 1492 and claimed the island for Spain. He renamed it *La Isla Española* (Hispaniola). It became the first Spanish settlement in the Americas.

Columbus and his sailors hoped to profit from their "discovery." They mistakenly believed gold could be found in abundance on the island. The settlers forced the Taínos to labor in unproductive gold mines, and massacred them when they tried to resist. The persecution of the Taínos was cruel in the extreme. A Spanish priest who accompanied Columbus, Bartolomé de las Casas, reported that "the conquistadors would test their swords and manly strength on captured Indians and place bets on the slicing off of heads or the cutting of bodies in half with one blow."

After initially welcoming the visitors, the Taíno tried bravely to defend themselves. There were many battles in which the Taíno routed the Spanish, but European cannons, steel swords, horses and dogs finally overwhelmed the Taíno resistance. Diseases like smallpox also killed many of the native people. Within 50 years of Columbus' arrival, the Taíno Arawak population of Hispaniola had been virtually destroyed.

The Africans

To replace the Taínos' labor, the Spanish began bringing in Africans to work as slaves. But Hispaniola, it turned out, had little gold, and



The Arawak carved figures in human and animal shapes from stone, shell, wood, gold and other materials. The figures, called cemis, were used to drive away evil spirits and ensure a good harvest.

most of the Spanish eventually moved on to search for riches in Mexico and Peru.

Spanish neglect of Hispaniola opened the way for French and British pirates who used the western

Seeking Salvation

“The slaves destroyed [the plantations] tirelessly. Like the peasants in the Jacquirie or the Ludite wreckers, they were seeking their salvation in the most obvious way, the destruction of what they knew was the cause of their suffering; and they had suffered much. They knew that as long as these plantations stood, their lot would be to labour on them until they dropped. From their masters they had known rape, torture, degradation, and, at the slightest provocation, death. They returned in kind... Now that they held power, they did as they had been taught.

And yet they were surprisingly moderate... They did not maintain this revengeful spirit for long. The cruelties of property and privilege are always more ferocious than the revenges of poverty and oppression. For the one aims at perpetuating resented injustice, the other is merely a momentary passion soon appeased... in all the records of that time there is no single instance of such fiendish torture as burying white men up to the neck and smearing the holes in their face to attract insects, or blowing them up with gun powder, or any of the thousand and one bestialities to which they had been subjected...”

• C.L.R. James, in the *The Black Jacobins*

part of the island as a base. Eventually, permanent French settlements were established. Spain ceded the western third of Hispaniola to France in 1697. France called its new colony St. Domingue.

The French imported at least half a million Africans to work on sugar, coffee, cotton and indigo plantations. Under French rule, St. Domingue became the most valuable colony in the Caribbean, producing more sugar than all the British Caribbean islands put together. This wealth was based on brutal slavery, administered by corrupt French military officials. Many Africans died after only a few years in St. Domingue; they were quickly replaced by new arrivals.

The Haitian Revolution

After nearly a century of suffering, in 1791, the slaves on St. Domingue rose up in rebellion. Unlike slave revolts elsewhere, the St. Domingue slaves successfully overthrew their masters and the entire slave system. They won the colony’s independence from France and established the world’s first inde-

Did you know that about nine hundred Haitians fought for the independence of the United States in the Battle of Savannah in 1779?

pendent Black republic, Haiti.

Several factors contributed to the slaves’ success. Most important were the unity and rebellious spirit of the St. Domingue slaves themselves. This was linked in part to Vodou, based on African religious beliefs, which



Drawing from *Goute Sel*, Literacy Manual. The sounding of the conch shell is a symbol of the call for liberation.

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Toussaint Louverture, 1743-1803

bonded slaves of different ethnic backgrounds together (See *Vodou: A Haitian Way of Life*). Second, the French Revolution of 1789 upset the balance of power in France's colonies and triggered slave rebellions all over the Caribbean.

The leadership of Toussaint Louverture was a third critical factor. A former slave, Toussaint was a brilliant military and political strategist. Under his leadership, the slaves defeated Spanish and British invasions and forced France to abolish slavery.

Napoleon Bonaparte's French troops finally captured Toussaint and exiled him to France, where he died. But the army of former slaves, led by the Black general Jean-Jacques Dessalines, went on to defeat the French forces. On January 1, 1804, Dessalines declared independence. The new state was baptized Haiti, from the Arawak name for the island.

The Two Worlds of Haiti

The Western, slave-holding powers viewed the Haitian Revolution as a dangerous example of slave revolt. They isolated the new Black republic, cutting off trade and refusing diplomatic recognition. France recognized Haiti in 1838 in exchange for a large payment which placed Haiti heavily in debt. The United States did not recognize Haiti until 1862, after the slave-holding states seceded from the Union.

This isolation had some positive effects: it allowed a vibrant and original Haitian culture to

"The Haitian revolution was the beginning of the end for slavery in the western hemisphere. The Haitian revolution... proved that freedom could be won."

• Dr. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Caribbean Connections*

develop and flourish. During this period, Haitian Creole (or *Kreyol*) emerged as a language in its own right, drawing elements from French and from African languages.

On the other hand, Haiti's ten years of war, followed by its political isolation, concentrated power in the hands of the Haitian military. Many of the Haitian presidents who followed Dessalines were generals of the slave army. Their rule was dictatorial and often corrupt.

French colonial rule had divided the population by race, and these divisions persisted. Few whites were left in the country after the revolution. But rivalry continued between Black Haitians and those of mixed race, known as mulattoes. Many mulattoes had owned property before the revolution, and they remained a privileged class. But now, Black officers from Toussaint's army competed for power and wealth.

The most important division, however, was not between Blacks and mulattoes. It was between a tiny, privileged minority (which included Haitians of both races) and the majority of the population, the former slaves. The elite group lived in the towns, especially the capital, Port-au-Prince. It controlled the government, the military, and commerce. The majority of Haitians lived in the countryside, farming small plots of land. They grew coffee for export, and crops such as corn, beans and yams to eat. These farmers paid taxes which went into the pockets of government officials. But the government did almost nothing to help the rural areas, which lacked roads, schools, electricity or running water.

These two worlds of Haiti—the towns and the countryside—were culturally separate as well. Town-dwellers used the French language for the affairs of government and commerce. But most rural people spoke Haitian Creole. They were shut out of the political process, which was carried out in a language they did not speak.

Town people often tried to imitate a European lifestyle. In the countryside, by contrast, life was shaped by Vodou and other African-based tradi-



Papa and Baby Doc

tions. These included a rich folklore of stories, legends, proverbs and songs (see *Folktales*). Customs of sharing and self-help, such as the konbit, helped peasant communities survive in the face of government indifference (see *The Konbit*).

U.S. Occupation

In the late 1800s, U.S. business interests such as sugar and fruit growers were expanding south, into the Caribbean. U.S. trade with Haiti was growing, and U.S. officials and business leaders wanted to make sure that European commercial interests did not compete. They especially feared the extensive German commercial involvement in Haiti. Using Haitian political instability as a justification, U.S. Marines invaded Haiti in 1915. They stayed for 19 years.

The U.S. imposed martial law and took control of Haiti's finances. It rewrote the Haitian constitu-

“You know, I had something to do with the running of a couple of little republics. The facts are that I wrote Haiti’s Constitution myself, and if I do say it, I think it’s a pretty good Constitution.” • Franklin Delano Roosevelt

tion to permit foreigners to own land. U.S. investment in Haiti tripled between 1915 and 1930. Under U.S. military rule, roads, telephones and electricity were extended to some parts of Haiti. But many of the roads actually were built by Haitians who were forced to work without pay. This forced labor, along with the racist attitudes of many U.S. soldiers and administrators, caused wide-

spread resentment.

Uruguayan historian Eduardo Galeano writes in *Open Veins of Latin America*, “the U.S. occupied Haiti and, in that Black country that had been the scene of the first victorious slave revolt, introduced racial segregation and forced labor, killed fifteen hundred workers in one of its repressive operations (documented in a 1922 US Senate investigation), and when the local government refused to turn the Banco Nacional into a branch of New York’s National City Bank, suspended the salaries of the president and his ministers so that they might

think again.”

A Haitian resistance leader, Charlemagne Peralte, led an army of peasant rebels who fought against the occupation. But the U.S. military put down the revolt, killing thousands of Haitians. Charlemagne Peralte was assassinated and his body put on gruesome display.

The United States finally pulled out of Haiti in 1934, leaving behind a legacy of anti-American feeling. It also left a U.S.-trained military force, the Haitian National Guard, which replaced the remnants of Toussaint’s army. The Guard became the foundation of a new Haitian army, which involved itself in politics and held virtual veto power over election results. In 1957, François Duvalier, a doctor, was elected president with the support of the Haitian army and the U.S. government.

The Duvalier Regimes

Instead of keeping his promise to help the Black majority, “Papa Doc” Duvalier built a family dictatorship. He killed, imprisoned or exiled thousands of people who he thought might threaten his rule. To eliminate possible organized opposition, he destroyed or took over political parties, student organizations, trade unions, and the press.

Duvalier created an armed militia loyal to himself, the Tontons Macoutes. In 1964 he declared himself President-for-Life. Haiti would have no more elections.

Papa Doc died in 1971 after handing the presidency to his 19-year-old son Jean-Claude. The younger Duvalier, sometimes called “Baby Doc,” executed fewer political opponents than his father.

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But he continued to use arbitrary arrest, torture and imprisonment.

Haiti under the Duvaliers was marked by extremes of poverty and wealth, as it still is today. Per capita income was only \$377 in 1985; most Haitians earned even less. The Duvalier family's fortune was estimated to be \$500 million or more, most of it obtained through corruption. Government officials, army officers, coffee exporters and landowners lived in luxurious hillside villas with fountains and swimming pools. In the slums below, poor people crowded into wretched shacks crisscrossed by open sewers.

The unequal distribution of wealth in Haiti contributed to environmental destruction. Rich landowners, the state, and foreign companies controlled the best farm lands. As a result, poor farmers had to clear land on steep mountain slopes to plant their crops. As trees were uprooted, erosion stripped the soil away. Trees were also cut to make charcoal, the only fuel poor families could afford. The hills became barren and dusty.

Poverty forced hundreds of thousands of rural Haitians to migrate to Port-au-Prince in search of work. Others were recruited to cut sugar cane in the neighboring Dominican Republic, under conditions resembling slavery. Thousands more fled to foreign countries—the United States, Canada and France, among others. An estimated one million Haitians now live outside Haiti.

Aid from foreign governments and international lending agencies provided much of the revenue for Duvalier's government. Much of it disappeared into the pockets of corrupt officials. Foreign churches and charities provided most public services like clinics and schools.

The Haitian government's corruption prompted some donors to reduce their aid. But the United States continued its support. U.S. officials knew that Duvalier was brutal; but his anti-communism made him appear a useful ally. This policy protected the profits of U.S. businesses with investments in Haiti, but it did not benefit the majority of U.S. citizens. And by helping to keep a cruel dictator in power, Washington increased the suffering of the Haitian people.

Duvalier Overthrown

From the late 1970s onward, various factors

weakened Jean-Claude Duvalier's hold on power. Foreign governments, including the U.S. under President Carter, urged Duvalier to ease repression. In response, Duvalier allowed some political parties, trade unions, human rights groups and independent journalists to function.

With the election of President Reagan in 1980, however, anti-communism became once again the focus of U.S. policy. Twenty-four days after Reagan's election, the Duvalier government arrested more than 200 human rights workers, lawyers, trade unionists and journalists. The crackdown temporarily smashed the democracy movement, but Haitians' hopes for freedom had been raised.

Economic conditions became steadily worse for most Haitians. In 1978 a disease called African swine fever killed some Haitian pigs. To stop the spread of the disease, U.S. agencies supervised the slaughter of the entire Haitian pig population, including healthy hogs. For many rural families, the pigs had represented their only cash savings. Their loss left rural Haitians worse off than ever before.

Some wealthy Haitians were also becoming dissatisfied with Baby Doc. Quarrels among the powerful weakened Jean-Claude Duvalier's control.

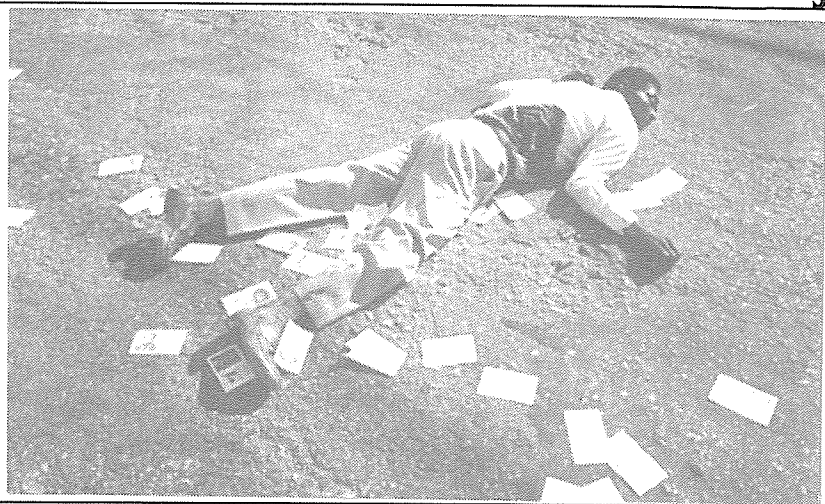
The opposition movement that finally toppled Duvalier was not an armed insurgency. Nor was it led by politicians. Rather, the driving energy came from young Haitians—students, young working adults, schoolchildren—angered by the suffering under Duvalier.

They were encouraged by new forces within the Catholic Church. The Catholic bishops had long supported the Duvalier government, but many priests, nuns and lay Catholics did not. They lived and worked with the poor, and saw Haiti's problems through their eyes. These religious workers helped to organize the *ti legliz*, or little church. In these base Christian communities, Haitians came together to pray and discuss the country's problems. Church workers who spoke out against the government were jailed and even tortured. As a result, members of the Catholic hierarchy gradually turned against the regime.

Anti-government protests swept through Haiti in 1985. Encouraged by the Church, tens of thousands of people marched in processions, singing

“We would rather die standing up than live on our knees!” During protests in the town of Gonaives, soldiers shot four schoolchildren dead. This was the turning point. Rebellion against the government spread throughout the country.

Faced with widespread revolt, U.S. officials decided that Duvalier had to go. Two months after the Gonaives shootings, the U.S. government finally cut off economic aid to the Haitian government. Without U.S. support Duvalier could not stay in power. On



A victim of attack at a polling station.

Photo: Mike Kamber.

Union Organizing After Duvalier

“I cannot find words to adequately explain to you the true conditions under which we are working. Let me just give you a few examples. Workers at Fabnac are in temperatures of 35-45° C [95-113° F]. We breathe plastic and chemical materials without any protection. The noise surpasses all normal decibels. We receive 15 gourdes [\$3] for each day’s work...”

On March 11th, 1986, we wrote a letter which we sent to management, the Ministry of Social Affairs and all the press in the country. We told them that we workers at Fabnac had formed a union to ask for better working conditions and to claim our rights, as one is supposed to do in a democratic society...

...To our great astonishment, they fired all those who had joined the union. The management formed its own union with three members, all heads of departments in the factory... Under the pretext that those who had been fired the previous day would return to create trouble, three truckloads of Leopards and Cassernes Dessalines military arrived at Mews with automatic arms—machine guns, Uzis, M16s, and galliles.

We realize that we have not become free since the 7th of February...”

- a worker in Port-au-Prince at Fabnac, a company that made tennis shoes and Fab detergent. The worker would not reveal his name for fear of reprisal. March 23, 1986.

February 7, 1986, a U.S. Air Force jet flew Duvalier and his family to exile in France.

Thousands of Haitians took to the streets in joyous celebrations. Afterwards, “Operation Up-root” sought to wipe out all traces of the Duvalierist past. Throughout Haiti, people organized to force Duvalier supporters from public office. Some Tontons Macoutes were lynched by angry mobs; most escaped into hiding.

Duvalierism Without Duvalier

For the first time in decades, people could discuss politics openly. They could form organizations not controlled by the government. Hundreds of groups sprang up, including farmers’ associations, human rights groups, youth clubs and neighborhood committees. (See *Roots of Democracy*, p. 23)

Through these organizations, Haiti’s poor sought major changes in their country. All Haitians, they argued, should have access to food, jobs, housing, land and education. The elected leaders should serve the people in a constitutional democracy.

These expectations were soon disappointed. After Duvalier left, U.S. officials helped organize a hasty transfer of power to a governing council composed of men who had been closely associated with Duvalier. The council did not enact any economic or land reform benefiting the poor. The minimum wage remained at \$3.00 per day. When workers tried to form unions they were fired, just as in the old days under Duvalier. The council allowed notorious Duvalier officials to leave the country rather than face trials for killings and