

How Haiti's History has Contributed to Some of Its Current Problems

by Sami Milano

"A tiny tropical island sits in the Caribbean, decorated with palm trees and colorful hibiscus flowers. Its mountains stand majestically looking down upon sandy beaches and green valleys. From afar it appears as any other island one might encounter sailing the turquoise waters of the Caribbean. Yet, as we draw closer we notice a difference. There are no tourist resorts dotting the coasts, no high rise hotels with sand volleyball courts and marimba bands. This is Haiti, this is different. If the land could speak it would tell of tragedy and violence, of abuse and bloodshed, of power and greed. Why does the country stand apart from its neighbors? The answer lies in the turbulent history of this tiny nation." (History of Haiti article).

Haiti's history has been plagued by governmental instability marked by changing rulers who irresponsibly abused power, plundered the natural resources, and left the majority of Haitians living in poverty. Haiti is a study of contrasts. At one time, Haiti was a thriving French colony relying heavily upon the African slave trade to maintain its economic structure. This changed when it became the first independent black nation following a slave revolt which began a long history of unstable leadership. What began as one of the wealthiest regions in the world, with rich natural resource, developed into an environmentally devastated region and the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

Haiti's history is tragic. Christopher Columbus discovered and claimed the island for Spain in 1492, naming it Hispanola. Over time, the native groups on the island were eliminated through warfare and European disease. France saw the rich potential of the island and wanted to settle the land themselves. To resolve this situation, Spain gave France the western 1/3 of the island. In order to harvest cocoa, cotton, sugar cane, lumber, and coffee, Spain and France kidnapped and enslaved hundreds of thousands of Africans. The slaves worked long, hard hours and were treated harshly which fueled their hatred toward the French. Before long, Haiti became one of the wealthiest regions in the world due to the plentitude of natural resources and enslaved workers. By the mid-eighteenth century, the social structure was rigidly divided along lines of skin color, class, and wealth. The highest ranking were the white plantation owners and wealthy merchants, while the lowest ranking were the African plantation slaves and Creole slaves from America. The mixed race mulatto slaves and freedman were in the middle. Tensions between the races and between those free and enslaved escalated into rebellion and civil unrest. After many years of rebelling and fighting the French government, the French withdrew and the new country of Haiti was formed creating the first independent black nation.

Since Haiti's creation in 1804, the country has struggled with a series of self-proclaimed leaders who placed their self-interest above the significant needs of the people. General Dessalines was the first leader and declaring himself the emperor, he

led with brutal force and fear. He was known for ordering the 1804 massacre of the white, French people. As a leader, his violent approach and misuse of power ultimately led to his assassination. Over the next one hundred years, no one demonstrated the skill set to lead the people in peace. For example, due to the country's internal conflicts and harsh governmental practices, from 1911 to 1915, the presidency changed six times as leaders were assassinated and exiled. By 1915, the leaders had failed to develop stability in the country, so the United States marines stepped in to calm the political volatility. In addition to helping the Haitian government recover, Americans were there because of their interest in commercial control. They helped build Haitian infrastructure, such as paved roads, houses, hospitals, and sewage systems, yet once again, the whites ruled the blacks. The resentment of the lower classes and non-white population built during the time of American occupation of Haiti. When the Americans left in 1934, Haiti remained in a state of significant poverty and unrest.

After the Americans left, there were many leaders, but the most well known were Francois Duvalier (Papa Doc) and his son Jean-Claude Duvalier (Baby Doc). Francois Duvalier announced himself President for life and ruled the nation with fear. After the death of his father, Jean-Claude Duvalier took office, and continued to plunder the riches of the land and commit crimes against the people. As a result of poor leadership, Jean-Claude Duvalier was exiled to France. Massacres and rigged elections occurred up until 1990, when a priest was elected by 67% of the people to run the country. Due to the democratic vote, he was considered the first leader of the people, but his leadership was short lived after being ousted by a military coup and sent into exile. Currently, the President of Haiti is Michel Martelly who has worked on post-earthquake clean up and forming a strong military to keep the country safe. Although his efforts to rebuild the country were strong, he was recently accused of accepting 2.6 million dollars in bribes to ensure that a Dominican Republic company would continue to receive contracts under his Presidency.

Poverty is one of the most important issues that has negatively impacted Haiti as a developing country. Analysis by World Bank and other resources showed the connection between low income and the inequalities experienced by the lower classes, poor education, and lack of resources to recover from the impact of natural crises and political instability. Faced with rapid population growth, environmental devastation and periods of economic decline, Haiti does not produce enough livestock or food crops to feed the country. Haiti imports 60% of the food it needs to support the region which raises the cost of food in a county where hunger is an ongoing problem. Many farmers have to depend on more than one job to earn a living, and the poorest people in Haiti rely mainly on self-employment and wage earning jobs. There is an extraordinarily big gap between the classes and rich versus poor is often represented by light skinned Haitians versus dark skinned Haitians. "The poorest 40% of the population have access to less than 6% of the countries income, and the richest 2% of Haiti's people control 26% of the national wealth." (Rural poverty article). As the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, 78% of people in Haiti live below the poverty line which is currently rated at income of \$1.25 per day. The majority of Haitians, especially in the overpopulated city of Port-au-Prince, experience substandard living conditions. Such

extreme poverty makes it difficult to meet their basic needs and affects all areas of life, such as housing, nutrition, education, healthcare, and environment.

Haiti is also vulnerable to the destructive impact of natural disasters, such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and flooding. For over two hundred years, Haiti has dealt with the terror of disasters causing losses and damage to cities throughout the country. An earthquake dating back to 1770 was the first big natural disaster, destroying the capital and surrounding cities. Four massive hurricanes took place between 1954 to 1998 killing more than 8,000 people. These torrential rainstorms destroyed 80% of Haiti's crops and recovery took a long time creating food shortages and higher food prices on this impoverished island. Most recently, in 2010, Haiti suffered from a magnitude 7.0, earthquake which resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths and devastated the country's infrastructure. Urban and rural poverty rates increased as the earthquake caused the loss of homes, schools, hospitals, and businesses which left people without jobs or the potential to earn money to meet their basic needs. Many children were orphaned when their parents died in the earthquake or were abandoned when their parents couldn't provide for them.

Oppression and the disregard for human life is woven through Haiti's disturbed history. Human rights violations were the frequent result of leaders' abuse of power, including killing natives, enslaving Africans, murdering citizens, and arbitrary imprisonment of Haitians. Vulnerable populations, especially poor women, are victims of sexual violence and face hard challenges in accessing post-rape medical services to prevent unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. After the earthquake, women were more vulnerable to such abuse and the justice system continually fails to respond adequately to such crimes. Children are also at risk for violations of human rights when they are sent off to wealthier families as "restaveks" or child domestic workers. As restaveks, children are supposedly guaranteed schooling and a safe environment in exchange for light chores. In reality, the kids are often unpaid, denied an education, forced to work hard laboring jobs, and at times, sexually abused. However, many poor children or orphans take this risk in order to be fed and obtain an education.

Due to the poverty level, children encounter significant challenges in accessing education. The quality of education in Haiti is very basic and the country has shortages of qualified teachers and educational supplies. The Haitian literacy rate is only 53% as opposed to the average 90% literacy rate for Latin American and Caribbean countries. Unlike America, Haiti did not have a public school system, so parents were required to pay tuition. 90% of their private schools were managed by non-governmental organizations (Canadian, French, and US NGOs) or churches. Many parents could not afford tuition and only 67% of students enrolled in primary school. Less than 30% of those students reached 6th grade and only 20% of eligible children attended secondary schools. After the earthquake, President Martelly introduced a temporary plan for free education. By the beginning of 2012, 772,000 additional children attend public school.

The seemingly unbearable current day challenges of Haiti are the result of hundreds of years of failed leadership and the oppression of the people. A corrupt

governmental system, people divided by skin color, class, and wealth, and the loss of natural resources has created an unsustainable and unsafe environment for the vulnerable citizens, especially the poor, women, and children. Due to the most recent earthquake, the infrastructure remains in disrepair and recovery efforts are weak. Extreme poverty, substandard education, and limited employment opportunities further complicate the potential to develop a higher standard of living. Despite all of this, the Haitian people are proud, have a strong spirit, and have shown great perseverance. Their future depends upon the emergence of leaders who are wise, honest, and will fairly represent the needs of all Haitians.

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