

## UNDERSTANDING HAITIAN CULTURE

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*The following is excerpted from an article that was written by Br. Francklin Armand, founder of the Little Brothers of the Incarnation, based in Pandiassou, Haiti and translated by Br. John Mahoney, CFX. It deals with the Haitian culture from the perspective of one who lives daily in it. As a young man he was influenced by the teachings and writings of Brother Charles de Foucauld, a former French army officer who became a Trappist monk and Sahara Desert hermit. The Little Brothers of the Incarnation now helps manage over eight dioceses and numerous schools, feeding over 6,000 children daily. In 1998 he was named a Knight of the National Order and Merit by the French Republic for empowering the peasants of Haiti*

To understand an individual is difficult enough; a family more so; and a culture even more. There is a mysterious, untranslatable side to a culture that escapes the understanding of even the most intelligent, perspicacious native. The passage from one culture to another is not only a change in geography, language, mentality, and way of living; but, also, and especially, it involves the passage from life to death.

It isn't easy to grasp a people like the Haitians people who have experienced deportation, three centuries of slavery, nineteen years of foreign occupation, and more than thirty years of inhuman, barbarous dictatorship. To really understand the materially poorest people of the Americas, the third poorest in the world, is a challenge.

### The country and the people

Still close to the African reality as far as customs, traditions, certain points in the culture and mentality are concerned; the peasants represent 80% of the present population. While providing food for everyone, it is this population, from the beginning, that has borne the country on its back; built itself; has profited little from social services; hardly ever participates in politics; and lives on the edges of the country's economic activity. This peasant is called *moun andeyò* (that is, people from the back country).

It is modern slavery. A mass of more than 80% illiterates which works for the well-being of 20% of the "literate" in revolting, sub-human conditions, and the upper class leads a Westernized existence in the manner of pirates. For this group, Haiti is a large field which it has been cultivating for years without fertilizing, without crop rotation or culture rotation, with the resulting fallout: a country in complete bankruptcy and on the road to extinction. But the majority wants to rise to the challenge; it doesn't want to die; it wants to live, to build a country with its own hands, its courage, its dynamism, and its determination.

### Haitian men and women

Haiti, a reserve of intelligence, is a county formed by a gathering of men and women snatched from diverse horizons, notably from Black Africa; and transplanted like some herd on one of the most beautiful of the Antilles, situated only 90 km. from Cuba. The French colonists, at the time, called this country the "Pearl of the Antilles".

Having arrived in the colony, our forbearers, having come from Africa, could have chosen an attitude of assimilation, of rejection, or of integration. They opted for the third choice, creating an original language spoken by the majority of the Haitians, *Creole* (French vocabulary and African grammar); also creating *vodou* (traditional religion of Haiti, different from Catholicism and the African religions); as well as *placage* (a man having more than one family).

The Haitian loves to share. He is hospitable, happy, accepting, loveable, sensitive, family and community oriented; he is open, kind, tolerant, patient, obliging, untiring in physical effort, etc. He loves life. He is an extrovert; has a sense of confidence; of the joy of living; is aware of his dignity and freedom. He accepts and respects the poor; has a capacity for contemplative prayer. He has a sense of religious law

and mercy; he accepts heroically the will of God, loves the Virgin Mary, the Way of the Cross, pilgrimages, and feast days. He is easy to meet. He is tender and affectionate. He loves song, dance, and music while he can drown his problems, his sufferings, and his heartaches in laughter.

A victim of his past and his educational system, poorly adapted to his needs, the Haitian has developed a system of personal self-defense. He shows himself as jealous, demagogic, a megalomaniac, and ambitious, sentimental, talkative, lacking perseverance, negligent. He is afraid of responsibility and lacks confidence in his own possibilities; the source of his lack of initiative and the short duration of many of his development projects. He loves great discourses (an inheritance from French politicians) all the while knowing that they will hardly ever become reality. He is not very logical in his actions and comes up short in his ideas. Nature, long dictatorships, and lack of means haven't taught him foresight or serious planning. He prefers to trust in *Bondye bon* (the Good God) or the *loas* (spirits of vodou). As in all tradition-oriented societies he looks for the causes of his problems outside of himself, his family, his Church. He constantly looks for scapegoats: God and others.

The Haitian considers intellectual activity as being nobler than manual labor; believes he can get ahead without any preparation or effort; it is the source of the abundance of beautiful in a speech and that at all levels. He is even capable of pedantry, dropping a Latin phrase or two from ancient writers or from the Bible, etc. He can be upset, get excited and break everything in his path when he gets angry; yet, he has a tendency to bring everything to the same level and returns constantly to mythical heroes to resolves problems.

In the face of a situation which is beyond him, the Haitian takes an attitude of correct or hyper-religious faith. Changing religion, or indeed, reverting to *vodou*, he takes his chances to have more protection. After having changed religion several times, without ever finding his good luck, he may even return to his original religion. In all, he expresses his desire to change, to improve his material position, and to find greater security and protection.

### Attempts at independence and oligarchy

The Papal States were the first to recognize the independence of Haiti after the country had been banished, ignored, and put under embargo for some decades by the great slave-owning powers of the time. Haiti was a magnet for the other Black States of the world, still under tutelage and it represented a symbol of freedom and resistance. It is the first independent Black republic in the world. It gave assistance in arms and munitions to Miranda and Bolivar, Latin American heroes, in their struggles for liberation which ended in the independence of several Latin American countries, among others Venezuela.

But I must recognize that in place of independence we have known a transfer of classes and people. The emancipated, the native officers, and some foreigners who survived the war quite simply took the place of the colonizers, continuing in their own way the slavery system. The mass of barefoot peasant began again their struggle for a place in the sun, for land to cultivate in order to live. The struggle has lasted many, many years and the oligarchy, seeing their interests being threatened, have ended up repressing and subduing the insistent majority. They also decided to establish diplomatic relations with the Vatican with the aim of civilizing and evangelizing. The oligarchy has always considered the Church as a means it can use to manipulate as it wishes, and, as a result, the Church enters into politics in Haiti when what it denounces isn't heard or when others attack its petty interests. The preferential option for the poor, adopted by the Church at Medellin, Puebla, and Santo Domingo, is followed by one part of the People of God that option bothers and annoys the oligarchy. At one time the oligarchy frequented certain churches rather than others; yet, when the poor burst in, they chose another place, and so on. Now, many would like their own home Masses or they quite simply leave the Church that they accuse of all of the sins of Israel.

We must recognize that despite certain negative effects of international aid received by the Church of Haiti, the Church has been able to maintain autonomy vis-s-vis the oligarchy. This should not be underestimated; because of its great poverty, the Haitian Church needs foreign funding to function.

### The Haitians and foreigners

Very often foreigners think that we do not know their language and say disparaging things about Haitians thinking that we don't understand them. Disparaging things that are verified soon after in behavior, to wit: Black people are lazy, emotional, superstitious, thieving liars, pretentious, sensual, crude; they lack hygiene; they aren't serious; they are deceitful, lying, dishonest, murderers, backward, disorganized, etc.

Some foreigners wear themselves out working to free us from our poverty and hunger that they no longer have time for prayer. Now, as you know, it is precisely prayer and union with God which have kept us alive in the midst of all our poverty.

We also admire the dedication of the missionaries, their love and the risks they take for Haiti; we admire, likewise, their spirit of service and availability; their love of God, for the Gospel, and God's reign; their knowledge, sense of the serious; of responsibility and generosity. They willingly accept going to the most backward and inaccessible corners of the country. The first missionaries deserve a lot of credit especially because of malaria and yellow fever, but also for other reasons. Most of them died within two years after their arrival in the country. However, that did not discourage the young missionaries. The most respected among them haven't necessarily done great deeds, rather they have left the memory of true men and women of God.

### *Vodou*

Another example is that throughout the country on public transportation like the "tap-taps" (jitneys), you can read *Map tann Bondye* (I am waiting for God) or even Biblical quotes or the names of saints. But, at the same time, the Haitian practices *vodou*, which yokes religion and syncretism, magic and superstition. God is unique, distant, seen as outside the system, easy going; God can be calmed or cajoled by gifts. This God delegates His power to intermediaries which are the *loa* who, up to a point, replace Christ. It is for that reason that Christ is completely unknown in *vodou*. The image of the Sacred Heart is seen as *leglen sou basen san* (vampires around a basin of blood) and the Cross as *ayizan veleketé* (palm branch having the power to ward off evil, borne by the initiates of the god Veleketé).

In the very evolution of *vodou* the "black magic" dimension has always been exaggerated because the State doesn't render justice; the privileged class is always right. The Catholic Church doesn't make available the means for justice to reign either. So in *vodou* one constantly reverts to magic to resolve problems, frustrations, concerns, and receive reparations, etc.

However, among Haitians there are distinctions between those adept in *vodou* from the occasional *vodou* worshippers and Christians engaged in following Jesus Christ. There is great ambiguity in all this but that doesn't prevent the Church of Haiti from being dynamic, committed, full of hope in God and life.

### A Church committed and divided

Colonial Catholicism is the twin of the *conquista* (conquest). I weep as I tell of all the misdeeds that our ancestors from Africa suffered, those who were baptized, according to the Black Code, a week after their arrival in the colony. Certainly, it must be recognized that many missionaries took up their cause while others, like the defrocked priests, simply chose the side of the colonists, keeping slaves totally ignorant, they themselves owning "black persons", about whom they didn't know whether they had a soul or if grace would be efficacious in them. Let's not be snivelers; let's go on.

Thanks to the dedication of many committed lay persons, notably the directors of the chapels; thanks, too, to movements of lay persons, priest, and religious for the past twenty-five the Roman Catholic Church has burst upon the social and political scene through an authentic evangelization of the poor but also through the Catholic base communities, the hope of the Church of tomorrow. It is that, moreover, which make it (the Church) more sympathetic and now more than ever closer to the masses of the poor. However, it is now shaken and frightened by internal divisions. Rightly or wrongly, it is equally strongly criticized in its hierarchy. Many people forget that the problems of the Church are settled according to tradition and the Gospels, in charity, truth, and dialog. Many Church people want to make use of means employed by the Haitian civil society to resolve conflicts in such a way that the strongest argument wins, that machismo and overthrows prevail along with a lack of respect for others and dialog, lack of tolerance and pardon. Without knowing it, we are playing the enemy's game.

## **Conclusion**

Every culture has its values. It is always necessary to relativize one's own in relation to others at the risk of a cultural shock. If Haiti is materially poor, each Haitian is a millionaire in human values. It must be said that Christian values are human values Christianized. The Haitian, male and female, is already almost Christian. It is an honor to be Haitian.