

The Trials and Tribulations of a Small but Proud Nation

Part I

By Etzer Cantave

“Ignorance is the mother of all evils”, Francois Rabelais, the French Renaissance writer, once said. This quote immediately came to my mind when Reverend Pat Robertson made his derogatory comment about Haiti on January 12, 2010 as she was under the hecatomb caused by an earthquake of a 7.0 magnitude on the Richter’s scale. Haiti was being punished—I am paraphrasing Robertson—for having entered into a pact with the Devil in order to win her Independence from France on January 1, 1804. Then, I questioned the applicability of Rabelais’s quote to the Evangelist, as he does not strike me as the ignoramus type: he has acquired a significant dose of knowledge, possesses advanced degrees, is well-travelled, well-read, and well-versed in societal and political affairs. So, if not ignorance, what then could drive someone of great intellect to insensitivity and indecency? The answer is none other than Ideology. When ideological viruses infect knowledge and science, there is no telling how pernicious either can become. Fittingly, Rabelais has another quote that strikes at the heart of this condition, “Science without conscience is the death of the soul.” Indeed, Robertson’s comment, emitted at the height of a tragedy of disastrous proportions, tells more about himself and the state of his soul than it could ever do about Haiti and the Haitians.

Robertson’s derogatory tirade was not the first or only instance of insensitivity Haiti had to endure. But the question begs to be asked: Was God so mad at the Haitians that he threw his wrath on them? Why would God frown on a people whose life in many ways mirrors that of Christ, His Son? The parallel between Jesus and Haiti is rather striking. Like Jesus, Haiti was marked by death at birth. Like Haiti, Jesus was rebuked by the powers-that-be, distrusted by the establishment, betrayed by his peers, mocked by many and respected by only a few. Like Jesus whose life travails leading to his Calvary made him question God, Haiti is being stricken by calamities to the point of wondering whether she is forsaken by God. Like Haiti—the poorest country of this hemisphere, Jesus was the poorest of his group—jobless and homeless. If we look for an epitome of Jesus’ life, look no further than Haiti.

That Pat Robertson has aligned himself with a sector of the media that has injected much vitriol in the political and social debate in this country is a well-known fact. The Southern Baptist minister has travelled for some time the path of religious self-righteousness, and used his ministry to proselytize and spread the venom of intolerance. Robertson’s comment proceeds from a mentality perhaps retrograde yet alive and well, that highlights an attitude of superiority based on culture and race—precisely the mentality that granted cover and comfort to slave owners and conferred protected status to the institution of slavery. On that count, one cannot understand Haiti’s present without referring to her past, which is inseparable from slavery—an institution blessed by the religious hierarchy and the politico-economical establishment. The former had deemed the slave a fraction of a human being, deprived of a soul, and able to accede to human status only through conversion to Christianity, while the latter treated him as a communal property, an object whose very existence was tied to the exploitation of his master’s plantations.

Needless to say that slavery was a brutal state of affairs. Nowhere was it more so than Saint-Domingue, the colonial name of Haiti. Necessite oblige! For, after all, this French colony was by far the richest in the New World, and, according to Bob Corbett (“The Haitian Revolution of 1791-1803”), probably the richest colony in the history of the world, which “by itself... generated some 75 percent of French tropical commodities.” It accounted for forty percent of France’s foreign trade (Juanguillermo Amezcua.) Sugar was the great commodity of the time. Saint-Domingue’s was of great quality and efficiently produced. To preserve this coveted crown jewel, France relied on a ruthless regime that, at its peak, used the labor of half a million slaves. The abominable working conditions on the plantations led to various forms of resistance by the slaves—from a high mortality rate mainly due to suicide to the phenomenon of *marronage* (escape), where slaves escaped and mounted raids and acts of sabotage on the

plantations). To remedy this turnover and keep their production afloat, the French relied on an annual influx of some 50,000 slaves from Africa. Early on, under the aegis of Jean-Baptiste Colbert --then King Louis XIV's minister of finance, they enacted a comprehensive set of rules to regulate colonial commerce and their slavery regime. The *Code Noir* (Black Code) encapsulated the essence of the French regime of slavery and systematized its practices. Article XLIV states, "*We declare slaves to be charges, and as such enter into community property.*" The Code prescribed stiff retribution for fugitives in its Article XXXVIII: "The fugitive slave (...) shall have his ears cut off and shall be branded with a *fleur de lys* on one shoulder. If he commits the same infraction (...), he shall have his hamstring cut and be branded with a *fleur de lys* on the other shoulder. The third time, he shall be put to death." As appalling as this treatment may sound, it was mild in comparison to the eccentricity and sadism the planters demonstrated in the treatment of their slaves. They proved to be wickedly ingenious in the improvisation of barbaric methods of abuse, such as detonating gunpowder charge inserted in the anus of slaves, or burying them up to the neck and imbibing their head with cane syrup and watching honeybees devour their face. So harsh was the French slavery regime that other colonies routinely exiled their activist and restive slaves to St-Domingue to be straightened out on the sugar plantations of Saint-Domingue. According to Bob Corbett, "In the pecking order of slavery one of the most frightening threats to recalcitrant slaves in the rest of the Americas was to threaten to sell them to Saint-Domingue." Henri Christophe, one of the heroes of our Independence, dubbed "the genial builder," was one such slave exiled from his native Grenada. The founder of the Haitian nation, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, was a plantation slave. As such, he witnessed and suffered the worst atrocities of slavery. The indelible scars that were inflicted upon him due to his rebellious nature instilled in him a deep hatred vis-a-vis the French and radicalized his views and approach toward them. This was the tableau facing the slaves in 1791 when they took on the French slavery system. Would God punish a people for rising against a brutal system that reduced certain human beings to an animalistic state? It is true that a servant of God, the priest Bartolomé de las Casas, an advocate on behalf of the Amerindians, christened the African slave trade by proposing the introduction of Africans to replace the native islanders as a labor force.

If one Catholic priest was credited with the advent of the African slave trade, another one, L'Abbe Raynald, was a fierce proponent of the abolition of slavery and predicted the rise of a black leader "who will lift up the sacred standard of liberty." Of course, France took preemptive measures to thwart the possibility of concerted action among the slaves. As a corollary to the inhumane living conditions on the plantations, the colonists engineered a system whereby the slaves were divided into heterogeneous groups bereft of tribal and linguistic commonalities. However, that proved to be of no avail. For, the French could not discern that, underneath the sensible tribal differences, there was a coalescing agent that made a cohesive unit from the seemingly heteroclit slave mass: their millennia-old religion, Vodoun (Voodoo, or Vodou.) In effect, from Dahomey (now Le Benin) to The Congo, from Guinea to Nigeria and throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, irrespective of tribal and dialectal divergences, Vodoun (or its variants) was a popular religion. And the slaves were determined to preserve it as their connection to the motherland. They used all sorts of subterfuge and an intricate system of concealment to hide their religious practices from their masters. Behind the façade of Catholicism, they created a duplicitous reference system designed, on the one hand, to fool their masters and, on the other hand, allow themselves the latitude to go about their rituals in all quietude. In Vodoun, they found the power to resist and a psychological boost to initiate and sustain their battle against oppression. In Bois Caiman, they found the locale where, after months of careful planning and surreptitious nightly meetings, it all came to fruition. In August 1791, under the auspices of Boukman, a slave exiled by the British from Jamaica and Vodou priest himself, the slaves gathered in Bois Caiman to perform a religious ceremony paving the way to an all-out war against the French. In keeping with traditions of worship as ancient as the world itself, the Bois Caiman Ceremony afforded them a platform to atone, pray to God, and appeal to celestial blessings on their enterprise. Alongside Boukman, a priestess was officiating. She sacrificed a pig and offered it to the gods. She delivered a passionate harangue to her brethren, wherein she exhorted them to unite and battle for the eradication of slavery. In return, the slaves pledged solidarity toward one another

and swore a solemn pact to remain united and fight the French to death: “Live free or die” was their credo. To seal the pact, the priestess administered them the blood of the sacrificial pig. Bois-Caiman is credited with bonding a dysfunctional mass of slaves, galvanizing them into action, and firming up their belief that, though a tall order, victory against the atrocious French regime of slavery was achievable.

The Bois-Caiman Ceremony has been decried and equated to a satanic rite by Christian zealots. In reality, Bois-Caiman followed a tradition deeply embedded in peoples’ consciousness and bears extraordinary significance in a ritualistic and a military context. Ritualistically, it was commonplace in ancient times to accompany worshipping with animal sacrifice. The solemnity of this act was enhanced by the sacrifice of a favorite animal. The Holy Bible, itself, is replete with animal sacrifices as a means to appease God and secure his blessings. The Book of Genesis (15:9-17) revealed the earliest of such sacrifices when God demanded, as a token to seal his covenant with Abraham, the sacrifice of a “heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove, and a pigeon.” For its part, the Book of Leviticus, the repository of Biblical rules and laws, contains graphic instructions on animal sacrifices, the type of animal (“unblemished”), the recipes for the burnt meat to yield “a sweet savor unto the Lord”. Furthermore, when the Israelites were held in bondage in Egypt and Moses was tasked to lead them out of captivity, he received a daily dose of recipes from God as to the type of animals to sacrifice and their preparation. This was a *sine qua non* condition for them to atone and secure their exodus from servitude. In keeping with that tradition, Judaism practiced animal sacrifices until the Romans destroyed the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in 70 AD. It is not unlikely that some form of animal sacrificing continued amongst Orthodox Jews. Have such practices ever been equated with Satanism? It would be an aberration to go that route. Blood had a particular significance in that tradition. According to the Scriptures, offering the blood of a favorite animal is a sure way of appeasing God, getting sins expiated, and, furthermore, of sealing covenants and pacts with God (Exodus 24:1-8.) In the New Testament, this sacrifice is still alive, but rather symbolic, as Jesus is, metaphorically, the Lamb of God, whose body was sacrificed on the cross and blood spilled for the remission of sins. The Holy Eucharist symbolizes the new covenant, whereby humankind’s sins are expiated and eternal life is promised through the sacrifice of Christ’s body and the sharing of his blood. Dr. Claude Mariottini, an eminent exegete and professor of Old Testament opines, “it is possible that the Israelites developed their sacrificial system by using some of the same practices found among other Semitic peoples.” There is plenty of evidence that Vodoun, this 10,000+ year-old African religion, permeated the practices of countries from the Middle East to the Far East or Asia Minor (present Turkey), and the Mediterranean. Its priestesses are credited with shaping the religious world of Ancient Greece, as artifacts in the Palace of Knossos from the Archaeological Museum of Herakelion in Greece testify. So animal sacrifice is anchored in the religious traditions to which current religious thought, trends, and practices are tributary.

From a military perspective, traditionally, religious ceremonies preceded, or were held concurrently with, military campaigns. Bois Caiman finds itself in that lineage. The Greeks would not wage war without invoking the spirit of their gods—Hermes in particular, god of war-- and offering libations in their honor. According to Claudia Beresford (“Religious Influence in Ancient Greece”), King Agamemnon before the Trojan War, and Agesilaus before his Asia Minor (now Turkey) campaigns, performed sacrificial rituals. She went on to say, “Leaders would sacrifice almost continuously to whichever god whose specialty was needed most until the outcome was suitable.” Alexander the Great brought the full impact of religiosity into his military campaigns, as he felt imbued of the divine attributes of Heracles, Achilles and Dionysus—the gods that assured the success of the Greeks over the Trojans during the Trojan War. The Persians, other military power of ancient times, associated religious ceremonies to their campaigns. Xerxes, the “Great King” who set out to avenge his father’s defeat by the Greeks, engaged in profuse libations before crossing the newly refurbished bridge connecting Asia Minor to Greece to wage war on the redoubtable Spartans at the Pass of Thermopylae. As for the Romans, it is well known that they paid special tribute to Mars, their god of war. At the beginning of their annual military campaigns, they held lavish ceremonies in honor of Mars. The Equirria, as those ceremonies or

festivals were known, were religious celebrations designed to ensure Mars' protection and boost morale. In addition, during the Punic Wars that opposed Rome to Carthage and the great strategist Hannibal, the Romans sacrificed animals to ensure their deities' protection against Hannibal. Had all this ever been equated with Satanism? Closer to us, we know what part religion played in the Crusades and Charlemagne, the French emperor of the Renaissance era, received Papal blessing and received communion prior to battle. While these events in other cultures have been perfectly acceptable, many in the Christian community, by ignorance, hypocrisy or bigotry, are poised to paint the Haitian event in derogatory strokes. Whether innocent or malicious, this depiction of the Bois Caiman ceremony results in the vilification of a Nation, a religion and a people. In the eyes of the Pat Robertsons of the world, it is the omen that stamped the fate of the nation and explains its predicaments. Unfortunately, such parsing of the facts discounts the historical root causes of the problem.

On January 1, 1804, Haiti won her independence on the battlefield against the mightiest army of the time, the Grand Army of Napoleon Bonaparte--the culmination of a twelve-year process epitomized by battles of epic proportions, and worthy of the world's historical and military annals. The Haitian Revolution, the world's only successful slave revolt, was altogether anti-slavery, anti-racial, anti-colonialist. Every trick has been tried to minimize this achievement. Haiti's "sublime bare-footed", who only recently had been tied down in chains to the sugar and coffee plantations of Saint-Domingue, acceded to a formidable structured military force and took on a superpower freshly victorious of the Campaign of Egypt. Everything has been tried to deny the Haitian heroes a place in the pantheon of world military leaders. Chief among those deserving of such distinction is a Toussaint-Louverture who, in the Battle of Ravines-a-Couleuvres, distinguished himself as a premier military strategist. Also deserving is Jean-Jacques Dessalines who, under siege in the fortress of the Crete-a-Pierrot with 1800 troops, held the fort for a week against 18,000 of the French forces, and in the end managed to slip through the enemy lines unscathed. Dessalines went on, as General of the insurgent army, to hand Napoleon his first defeat. Dessalines poked a hole in Napoleon's myth of invincibility and disturbed his hegemonic ambitions—most notably, he forced Napoleon to scrap his North American plans and sell the Louisiana territories to the United States (now 13% of the U.S.) The epic battles that led to Haiti's independence have but been stricken out world history books or, at best, reduced to a paragraph or a footnote. The Haitian victory was a hymn for the emancipation of the black race and a slap in the face of the proponents of the eugenics theory, which held the white race as superior and was getting traction across Europe. This sentiment reached its apex when the philosopher David Hume reversed his stance on the matter and declared in 1753 in his essay *Of National Character*, "*I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites.*" Coming from Hume, the very influential empiricist whose "wrecking ball" smashed the rationalism of Plato and Descartes, this statement was significant. The Haitians' victory dismantled the white supremacist theory and proved that they could top the best and the brightest of the white race. This humiliating defeat at the hand of barely literate former black slaves did not sit well with the superpowers of the time. They set out to denigrate and demonize the Haitians' grandiose achievement. Robertson's words are the latest and most strident echo of those retrograde views portraying the Haitian victory as unnatural, as a manifestation of Evil triumphant over Good. For those holding these views, the earthquake was payback time.

But the destiny of a nation has little to do with faith and devotion. It is fashioned by geopolitical considerations, historical circumstances, and economic interests—by what philosophers like Karl Marx call dialectical or historical materialism. In other words, we must look at it in the context of economic interests, types of relations of production and their influence on the course of history. When Haiti became independent in 1804, she had no model, no blueprint to follow to rebuild a devastated place, a burnt land. Haiti could not rely on international partners with whom to conduct normal trade. In fact, the powers at the time viewed her with suspicion. The British who, during the Independence war, blockaded the route to the Caribbean Sea, thus hampering French reinforcement efforts, joined forces with France and the

other powers to quarantine Haiti. They orchestrated a de facto embargo against the first Black nation, despite her assurances that her gripe was solely directed against France and that she had no intention of exporting her revolution. Regardless, Haiti had dared put herself in the crosshairs of European colonialist countries as well as the slaveholders of this hemisphere, who were all resolute in their will to turn her into a failed state, so that her example would not spread. The Americans, whom Haitian fighters helped secure Savannah against the British in 1776, never developed kinship with the small nation and steadfastly refused to recognize her independence, despite the fact that the Haitian victory, as afore mentioned, helped reconfigure America's landscape. The American South particularly blocked every effort toward normalizing relations with Haiti. As it relied heavily on slave labor and race discrimination for its economic survival, the South viewed Haiti as a bad precedent. That the Haitian revolution inspired the activism of a Nat Turner or Prosper... in the U.S. did not help Haiti in the eyes of the Americans. Moreover, Dessalines' covert policy to grant safe haven to American runaway slaves whom ship captains would smuggle into Haiti in exchange of crops—a policy that benefited 13000 blacks through the 1850's—did not help matters. The Americans opposed Haiti's invitation to the Congress of Panama in 1826. Organized under the auspices of Simon Bolivar, *El Libertador* of Latin America, this gathering was convened to initiate a collaborative framework among the newly independent nations of this hemisphere. Ironically, Haiti bankrolled Bolivar's war effort against Spanish colonial rule and provided him with much military assistance. The only demand Alexandre Petion, then Haiti's president, made of Bolivar in return was that he abolish slavery in all the countries he would have liberated. Bowing to U.S. pressure, Bolivar kept Haiti out of the conference.

A pariah--this was the epithet that described Haiti after her independence. That epithet translated into unfavorable trade terms, causing a hemorrhage of foreign exchange and putting a stranglehold around the new country's neck. The steadfast refusal by the nations of the world to deal with the small Black Republic on equal footing and the trade blockade they imposed on her were designed to strangle the new nation. This panorama prompted President Jean-Pierre Boyer to agree to the 1825 French royal edict in exchange for the recognition by France of Haiti's independence. This edict enjoined Haiti to pay France a whopping 150 million gold francs as indemnity for the 800 sugar plantations and the 3,000 coffee estates lost or burnt to the ground during the revolutionary war. Comparatively, the Louisiana territories, which Napoleon sold to the U.S. for 60 million francs, were 74 times the size of Haiti. Yet we had to pay two and a half times more than the U.S. No country intervened in favor of Haiti or offered to broker a deal between her and France. This was all part of the international conspiracy that made the first Black Nation a pariah in the international community. The aim was to dissuade would-be followers of Haiti's example and expose the perils involved with antagonizing the interests of the western economic powers. Boyer was ill-equipped to deal with the sophistication of international trade and finance. Although highly educated—a rare commodity within Haiti's High Command at the time, at the exception of Petion, Boyer was above all an army man. A habile general who led a successful unification campaign of the island of Hispaniola under Haitian Flag—something that had vexed both Toussaint and Dessalines, he did not have the administrative wherewithal of a Toussaint or the progressive genius of a Henri Christophe. (The latter's reign in the North can be termed as the golden age of post-colonial Haiti, thanks his construction programs, his educational standards, the work ethics he instilled in his region, and his industrial endeavors.) Boyer was no genius when it came to administrative affairs. The state of the economy was stagnant. The agrarian question, which doomed Dessalines, was not resolved. As a matter of fact, he continued Petion's populist policy of granting small parcels of land to the populace—the result of which was the making of the Haitian economy into an economy of subsistence, geared toward internal consumption, a marked difference from the plantation system established by the French during their colonial rule. The low level of exports exacerbated a situation already precarious and caused a severe shortage of reserves. Boyer resorted to printing money, lots of money, which created hyperinflation... Lack of internal resources to satisfy the contractual obligations vis-à-vis France forced Boyer to contemplate other alternatives. He found none other than borrowing on the world financial market. The risks associated with a small emerging country with no history of international borrowing, no reserves to

collateralize the debt, no guarantor on the high finance scene, with a stagnant mono-cultural economy centered on coffee, called for borrowing at exorbitant rates. Boyer would soon find out that the debt service (interest on borrowed funds) was a colossal undertaking. The country's economic apparatus could not adequately respond to this additional challenge. The history of Haiti's international debt originated from this point in time. That put a damper on her economic prospects for generations. Let us fast forward, a century later, to the time of the U.S. occupation of Haiti. One of its ideas to reform Haiti's finances was to accelerate the payments to France and, in fact, pay off that debt. In today's terms, the payments we made to France are the equivalent of \$20 billion

Haiti's economy was in a shambles after the independence. The international hostility the new nation faced, forced her to shift her priorities. The defense of the independence against the incessant threats of invasion was paramount. The generals who knew no other training ground than the battlefield found themselves at the helm of a barren country beset by challenges of all sorts. For them, the choice was clear: the defense of the country's territorial integrity and their forever sacred liberty preempted all other considerations. Financial administration and economic planning took a backseat to the erection of fortresses designed to withstand any attempts by a foreign power to invade the new nation. Except for Christophe who balanced the security concerns with the economic needs of the country, no leaders could marshal the existing resources and put the country on the path of normalcy and stability.

Inasmuch as foreign tampering and interference are to blame for Haiti's woes, we need to acknowledge the part our politics played in this equation. As aforesaid, Henri Christophe was probably the only leader with sufficient vision to implement a coherent economic policy, despite his extravagances. There was a marked difference between his prosperous northern kingdom and the poverty-stricken western and southern region of the country governed by Petion, then by Boyer; between his Draconian rule and Petion's/Boyer's *laissez-faire*; between his tough law enforcement policies and the lax and paternalistic style of the latter. In Haitian politics no one picked Christophe's progressive legacy. He stands out as an oddity. A former slave, barely literate, he made education along with defense his priority. He instilled in his subjects a heightened sense of ethic and responsibility—punishing harshly the slightest infraction, imprisoning parents whose children were guilty of truancy during school hours, among other things. His reign signified the golden age of post-colonial Haiti. His lavish courts, the monuments he erected (The Citadelle, Sans-Souci Palace), his economic achievements, his sense of order are testament to a society able to thrive even under adverse circumstances. His success was due to the standards he imposed around him, and that were so manifest in all his undertakings. For instance, the Citadelle, for long dubbed the Eighth Wonder of the World, defies imagination and shows how far ahead he was of his epoch. His Draconian regimen of work made laziness punishable of imprisonment. It could only come from someone of former slave credentials to institute such a labor system. Christophe understood that only hard labor on large-scale plantation-like land domains would take the young nation to the pathways of economic growth and stability. Neither Petion nor Boyer could have established this system; as sons of French colonists, they would be viewed with suspicion; this system was too reminiscent of slavery time. At the dawn of the new nation, the choice was between two systems of governance: an enlightened autocracy in the form of the one promoted by Louis XIV in France or a democratic republic. In that battle of ideas, Christophe prevailed. However, after he killed himself in 1820 and Boyer unified the country under his rule, all the gains and advances the North had experienced were reversed, the kingdom's wealth dilapidated. The exuberance caused by the newly found freedom led to excesses and even dereliction of duty. This spelled the demise of the golden age of post-colonial Haiti.

No subsequent government picked up Christophe's legacy. Boyer, the longest reigning head of government in Haiti's history (22 years), did not possess the builder's genius of Christophe. His tenure proved disastrous on many counts. Also the agrarian question remained unresolved. The land settlement issue was what doomed Dessalines. The large land domains his generals had expected as reward for their

successful campaign for the independence did not materialize. Furthermore, Dessalines' attempt to distribute land to the "poor folk whose roots were in Africa" caused his assassination by his generals.

Haiti's retarded development has more to do with geopolitical factors and internal politics than religious practices. The decades that followed Boyer's death were marked by the institution of uneducated, despotic, and obscurantist governments, mostly military rulers.

TO BE CONTINUED