

OVERVIEW OF HAITI

History of Haiti

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.

The Early Years

Christopher Columbus landed on the tiny island he called, "La Isla Espanola" in December 1492 (The name was later shortened to Hispaniola). Local Arawak Indians who referred to their home as "Hayti", or mountainous land inhabited the island. In keeping with imperialistic ideology, the Spaniards used and abused the native Arawak to the point of near extinction. It's location and lush soil made Haiti a treasure constantly sought after by Britain, France and Spain. Finally, by the middle of the 17th century the island became a French colony. Under French rule Haiti flourished. Haitian products were in great demand in the European market and the tiny island became invaluable as a resource for cocoa, cotton, sugar cane and coffee. Unfortunately, the great demands for these products also created a demand for inexpensive labor. The French, as the Spanish before them looked to Africa as a solution to the labor problem. They imported slaves from the west coast of Africa. By 1780, Haiti was one of the wealthiest regions in the world. France relied heavily on the slave trade to maintain its economic base. This created a number of problems that would later affect the future of Haiti. First, the slaves brought with them the religious practices of voodoo, which for them was more a lifestyle than a religion. Second, the French treated the slaves with undue harshness creating hatred amid an already resentful environment. Third, a class of mulattos arose from the relations of the slave owners and the slaves. There arose a class system, still present today, with a minority of light skinned, sophisticated, Catholic, French-speaking Haitians at odds with dark-skinned, voodoo worshipping, Creole-speaking masses. In 1791, a successful slave revolt was initiated against the French. The Haitian slaves ousted Napoleon, and by 1804, the island becomes the first black independent nation, with General Dessalines declaring himself emperor. With power comes abuse and the abuses of Dessalines led to his assassination. Henri Christopher, an illiterate ex-slave who ruled in the north and Alexander Petion, a mulatto who ruled in the south, followed him. When Christopher died the north and south united. In 1844, the island split into two countries, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The tiny country of Haiti was in a state of anarchy, poverty was rampant and there was no one with the support or ability to rule and govern fairly. The class system was ever present with the wealthy at one extreme and the poor at the other.

The Occupation Years

By 1915, American marines stepped in to calm the situation. The occupation had both positive and negative effects. Thanks to the Marines, the infrastructure of the country was enhanced. Paved roads, houses, hospitals and sewage systems were built. However, once again the Haitians found themselves in an occupied state and their rulers were white. This resulted in even greater power for the lighter skinned Haitians.

Duvalier Years

When the Americans left in 1934 the country was still in shambles. There was a constant struggle for power between the Catholic Church and the followers of voodoo. The United States fruit companies that settled and developed on lands taken from Haitian peasants were a source of constant tension. Many leaders came and went but no one united or moved the nation forward. In 1957, Francois Duvalier, "Papa Doc", declared himself "President for life". Fear ruled the nation under Duvalier and his Tontons Macoutes. Terror reigned under the police repression of his government. Unfortunately, even that stable, structured government didn't help the people economically, educationally or otherwise. With the death of Duvalier, his son Jean Claude, ("Baby Doc") came into power. Life under Baby Doc was only slightly better for the Haitian people than before. His rule was tainted with crimes of repression and a plundering of the riches of the country. Finally, Baby Doc was exiled to France.

Haiti Today

After the exile, the country was ridden with mass massacres and rigged elections. Today, power goes back and forth from one leader to the next without any positive results for the people. In 1990, a priest from the slums of Port Au Prince was elected by 67% of the people. Jean Bertrand Aristide was seen as the first leader of the people since 1804. The rooster emblem of Aristide replaced the guinea faun worn by the Tontons Macoutes. In 1991, a military coup ended the Aristide presidency and he went into exile. The Organization of American States imposed a strict embargo against Haiti causing the country great economic hardship. Many Haitians tried to escape by boat only to suffer death or relocation to camps at Guantanamo, Cuba. Today, Haiti is still struggling with poverty and instability. Elections have failed to produce leadership that can deal with the many problems of this tiny country. The future of Haiti depends on the ability of its leaders to discover solutions to bring it successfully into the 21st century.

Statistics on Haiti (Source CIA World Fact Book)

Vodouists believe in a distant and unknowable [Supreme Creator](#), *Bondye* (derived from the [French](#) term Bon Dieu, meaning "good God"). According to Vodouists, Bondye does not intercede in human affairs, and thus direct their worship toward spirits subservient to Bondye, called [loa](#).^[11] Every loa is responsible for a particular aspect of life, with the dynamic and changing personalities of each loa reflecting the many possibilities inherent to the aspects of life over which they preside.^[12] In order to navigate daily life, vodouists cultivate personal relationships with the loa through the presentation of offerings, the creation of personal altars and devotional objects, and participation in elaborate ceremonies of music, dance, and [spirit possession](#).^[13]

The most historically important Vodou ceremony in Haitian history was the [Bois Caïman](#) ceremony of August 1791 that began the [Haitian Revolution](#), in which the spirit [Ezili Dantor](#) possessed a priestess and received a [black pig](#) as an offering, and all those present pledged themselves to the fight for freedom.[\[41\]](#) This ceremony ultimately resulted in the liberation of the Haitian people from French [colonial](#) rule in 1804, and the establishment of the first black people's [republic](#) in the history of the world and the second independent nation in the Americas. Haitian nationalists have frequently drawn inspiration by imagining their ancestors' gathering of unity and courage. Since the 1990s, some neo-evangelicals have interpreted the politico-religious ceremony at Bois Caïman to have been a pact with demons. This extremist view is not considered credible by mainstream Protestants, however conservatives such as Pat Robertson repeat the

The presence, role, and importance of Vodou in Haitian history, society, and culture are unarguable, and recognizably a part of the national ethos. The impact of the religion qua spiritual and intellectual disciplines on popular national institutions, human and gender relations, the family, that plastic arts, philosophy and ethics, oral and written literature, language, popular and sacred music, science and technology and the healing arts, is indisputable. It is the belief of the Congress that Vodou plays, and shall continue to play, a major role in the grand scheme of Haitian development and in the socio-economic, political, and cultural arenas. Development, when real and successful, always comes from the modernization of ancestral traditions, anchored in the rich cultural expressions of a people."[\[55\]](#)
In the fall of 2012, KOSANBA successfully petitioned the Library of Congress to change the terms "voodoo" and "voodooism" to the correct spelling "Vodou".[\[56\]](#)

Because of the religious syncretism between Catholicism and Vodou, it is difficult to estimate the number of Vodouists in Haiti. The CIA currently estimates that approximately 50% of Haiti's population practices Vodou, with nearly all Vodouists participating in one of Haiti's Christian denominations.[\[47\]](#)