

WHY IS HAITI SO POOR?

Bob Corbett

Fall, 1986 Director, [PEOPLE TO PEOPLE](#)

1999 note: I wrote this essay some 13 years ago. I still agree with most of it, but have some changes in my own knowledge and thinking over the years. But, I've decided to leave the essay as it originally appeared in The Haiti Project Newsletter where I published this.

The question I am asked most frequently is: *WHY IS HAITI SO POOR?* This is a difficult thing for people to understand, especially for those of us living in a country as rich as the United States. There are some very obvious conditions to note in Haiti's case: the long history of political oppression, soil erosion, lack of knowledge and literacy, a large populace in a small country. But a question of *CAUSES* for such poverty is extremely complex. I have tried to respond to the question in a manner that points up this incredible complexity. Nonetheless, to stay in the confines of paper that could be read at one sitting, I have had to highlight, condense and simplify.

This issue is a difficult one for you the reader. I urge you to stick with it, to wade through. Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. The Haitian masses suffer some of the most debilitating and depressing misery of any people in the world. Yet, virtually all that misery is human caused, in most cases, by a tiny minority inside and outside Haiti who have the wealth and power to control.

HOPE AMIDST THE MISERY

The story of Haiti is- heavy and depressing. Yet I see hope too. To know the causes of Haitian poverty is to clarify the problem. It helps people like us to know where to focus our energies, our work and our wealth in attempting to lessen this misery.

Not only is this a difficult issue, but a controversial topic as well. I've tried to reflect the various thrusts of the argument as I've encountered them. But, ultimately I've had to decide where the evidence seemed strongest. I'm sure some will disagree and do so with vehemence. I urge you to reply. One of my central aims is dialogue, because it is in dialogue that we grow.

I. Root, but Less Visible Causes of Haitian Misery

The ultimate causes of Haiti's misery are human. They are rooted in greed and power. Both the international community and Haiti's rulers have continuously assured the destruction of Haiti's colonial wealth and the creation and continuance of her misery.

- A. The international community's role.
 - 1. French colonial contribution.
 - 2. The international boycott of the new nation of 1804.
 - 3. The French debt of 1838.
 - 4. The United States Occupation, [1915-1934](#).
 - 5. Post World War II United States domination.
- B. The role of Haiti's rulers.
 - 1. Slave-like labor systems in the early republic.
 - 2. The elite's protection of its wealth.
 - 3. Haitian corruption.

4. Human rights violations as a tool of oppression.

II. Secondary, but Immediate Causes of Haitian Misery

The international and national political climate of Haiti has assured her misery. But, little by little these forces have caused other factors to emerge that assure the continuance of Haitian misery even if Haiti were to secure good local government free from international intervention. (An unlikely prospect in either instance!) Some of the most noticeable secondary causes of Haiti's poverty are:

- A. Language as an oppressor.
- B. Ignorance and illiteracy.
- C. The system of education (or miseducation).
- D. Soil erosion.
- E. Export crops vs. local food crops.
- F. The lack of a social infrastructure: inadequate roads, water systems, sewerage, medical services, schools.
- G. Unemployment and underemployment.
- H. Underdevelopment in an age of international economic competition.
- I. Haitian self-image.

III. A MYTH AND TWO PUZZLES

As well as arguing why Haiti is so poor, I address two factors which are often claimed to be causes of Haitian poverty. One category I will call *MYTH*. The contention that the Voodoo religion is a serious factor in causing the misery of Haiti is a myth, and an exceptionally pernicious myth at that.

The second category I term *PUZZLES*. These are areas which are not clear to me. They may or may not be causes of misery. In this section I will try to point out the complexities of two cases: foreign investment in manufacturing and overpopulation.

HAITI: THE JEWEL OF THE ANTILLES

Haiti, once called The Jewel of the Antilles, was the richest colony in the entire world. Economists estimate that in the 1750s Haiti provided as much as 50% of the Gross National Product of France. The French imported sugar, coffee, cocoa, tobacco, cotton, the dye indigo and other exotic products. In France they were refined, packaged and sold all over Europe. Incredible fortunes were made from this tiny colony on the island of Hispaniola.

How could Haiti have once been the source of such wealth and today be the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere? How could this land that was once so productive today be semi-barren? How did "The Jewel of the Antilles" become the Caribbean's hell-hole?

ROOT CAUSES: A. INTERNATIONAL FORCES

1. THE FRENCH COLONIAL CONTRIBUTION.

One of the primary reasons that Haiti was such a productively rich land was because of slave labor. When people are willing to put productivity above all other values, then productivity is likely to soar. Not only did the slaves work long days under tremendously unsafe conditions, with little or no technology beyond hand labor, but Haiti's slave system was the most brutal in the Caribbean. Many documents of Western slavery explain that the ultimate threat to a recalcitrant

slave was that he or she would be sold to Haiti.

Unfortunately for the masses of Haitians, slavery did not die with French rule. Rather, the basic concept of forced cheap labor was passed on to the emerging native Haitian elite. The French system allowed for some slaves to earn their freedom by exceptional work. This system worked well to get more productivity from the slaves, and the system was tough enough that very few slaves were able to earn their freedom. Thus slave owners got increased productivity with little loss of slaves through freedom.

A second group of slaves who became free were the mulattos, the children of white masters and slave women. These children were in a middle ground, uncomfortable to both slaves and whites. The slaves never knew how the white man would respond to his child, but often the slave owner didn't want to be reminded of his paternity. Thus mulattos were not welcomed in either community. Many mulattos received their freedom and formed a special middle class in the colonial period.

A special class of freed slaves emerged. About 1/2 of them were freed black slaves and about 1/2 of them were mulattos. They could receive some education, operate businesses, own property and in general imitate the French.

This imitation of the French became the hallmark of these freedmen. They wanted a clear separation from their slave backgrounds. Thus they imitated the whites. They adopted their religion, language, dress, culture, education and ways. But, most importantly for this story, they learned the value of slave labor. The colonial French heritage carried on in the Haitian elite's imitation of the French labor system. This is an important factor in Haiti's later misery.

2. INTERNATIONAL BOYCOTT OF THE NEW HAITI.

After the [revolution which concluded in January, 1804](#), Haiti became the second free country in the Western World (after the United States), and the first black republic. However, the United States was still a slave nation, as was England. While France had freed the Haitian slaves during the revolution, France and other European nations had slaves in Africa and Asia. The international community decided that Haiti's model of a nation of freed slaves was a dangerous precedent. An international boycott of Haitian goods and commerce plunged the Haitian economy into chaos.

It is difficult to measure the exact impact of this international conspiracy. Here was a nation of ex-slaves trying to rise to democratic self-rule, rising to run an economy in which the masses had only served as slaves before. The international boycott of Haitian products at this time was devastating for Haiti's long-term economic development.

3. THE FRENCH DEBT OF 1838.

The Haitian governments were extremely anxious to be recognized by France and the Europeans. But France would not recognize Haiti unless indemnities were paid for lands of former slave owners taken over after the revolution. Finally, in 1838 [President Boyer](#) of Haiti accepted a 150 million franc debt to pay this indemnity. This debt plagued the economy of Haiti for over 80 years and was not finally paid until 1922. In the meantime Haiti paid many times over 150 million francs in interest on this debt. It is difficult to measure the incredible harm which this did to the Haitian economy, but by the most conservative measures it was extremely significant.

4. [THE UNITED STATES OCCUPATION OF 1915-1938.](#)

Perhaps the most serious blow Haiti ever had to her independence and self-image was the occupation of the United States Marines in 1915. The marines took over control of the collection of revenues, the banks, and forced through a new "Haitian" constitution which repealed the 1804 provision that foreigners could never own land in Haiti. The U.S. decided who would and would not be government servants. The only factor of Haitian life which seemed to escape U.S. domination was education. The elite's identification with French culture was too strong for even the marines to overcome and the schools remained French in language and structure.

5. POST WORLD WAR II UNITED STATES DOMINATION.

The occupation ended in 1934. However, the U.S. presence in both the economy and internal government affairs was well established. Ever since the occupation and increasingly since 1946, the United States, through the power of its aid packages, has played a central role in Haitian politics. In this way the U.S. has contributed to the misery of Haiti since it has given oppressive governments comfortable aid packages which kept these rulers in power. The United States was not interested in furthering Haitian misery itself, rather this is the price the U.S. has had to pay to keep friendly governments in power so that American military, propaganda and economic interests could be served. The result may well have served the interests of U.S. control in the region, but the issue here is the cause of Haitian misery. U.S. backed governments have certainly been a major factor in this suffering.

ROOT CAUSES: B. HAITIAN ELITE

The international community has done and continues to do its share in causing Haitian misery. But the contribution of the Haitian elite and Haitian governments has been and continues to be a root cause of suffering.

1. SLAVE-LIKE LABOR SYSTEMS IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC.

After the French left there was a scramble for power and control in Haiti. The elite emerged as the dominant power. Given their superior educations, and experience in running businesses and other affairs, their control was not at all surprising. But, a pattern arose because the only model they knew for successful agriculture was the slave system. It was impossible to return the masses to slavery, but Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the first president, tried to enforce a system of labor on the peasants which resembled medieval serfdom, i.e., tying the peasants to particular plantations owned by the elite. This system failed miserably and in the process created a labor system which has been instrumental in the developing misery of Haiti.

What happened in the 1804-1820 period set the tone for Haiti's future and is directly responsible for much of her misery. The former slaves ran away from the lowlands, the plantations, away from the cruel rulers who would have effectively enslaved them again. They ran to the mountains where they would be safe from the soldiers and police of the realm. And here they have in large measure remained. This pattern of relocation has defined several aspects of Haitian life which undermine the development of a healthy economy.

- A. The price the Haitian masses have paid for their freedom has been to live at or below subsistence, remaining in their tiny huts and non-fertile mountain regions in order to have peace and freedom from oppression.
- B. For nearly two centuries they have sub-divided their small plots among their generations of

descendants until the plots of land are very tiny and relatively unproductive.

- C. A widespread attitude has developed holding that no government could ever be good government. Folk wisdom seems to demand that one retreat ever further from government and eke out an existence outside the mainstream of society.

All of these factors contribute greatly to the misery the Haitian people suffer, and they are a direct legacy of Haitian politics and government. These evils are brought to the Haitian people by the greed of the elite.

D. THE ELITE'S PROTECTION OF ITS WEALTH.

For the most part the 3% of the people who constitute the Haitian elite are descendants of those same families who were free prior to the independence of 1804. There is an elite which is mainly black and an elite which is mainly mulatto. These two groups have their own fights and battles, but in the few cases when the masses have attempted to rise up and assert the rights and needs of the people as a whole, the elite has rallied together using its wealth and power to crush the masses.

The [Duvalier](#) family's rise to power was just another in a series of such moves. The present government of General Namphy continues the pattern even today. There has been no revolution in Haiti, just a change of government.

E. HAITIAN CORRUPTION.

Corruption is common in all governments, especially prominent in highly authoritarian regimes, and practiced beyond measure in Haiti. The elite have used their positions in government ever since 1804 to gather the wealth and power of Haiti for themselves. What little wealth the country had has been manipulated into the hands of this elite. Foreign governments and humanitarian and religious organizations have often attempted to aid the suffering people of Haiti. Time and again, over and over in the 182 years of so-called freedom, the Haitian elite and government officials have sidetracked much of this wealth for their own purposes. Haiti faces the incredibly difficult task of dealing with corruption that is so established, so all-persuasive as to be an accepted social practice.

F. HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AS A TOOL OF OPPRESSION.

One would never expect that the Haitian masses would have sat placidly by and allowed such a tiny elite to inflict the conditions of misery on them. Indeed, the people did not sit willingly by. The history of Haiti from early colonial days until the present is one of constant resistance, constant rebellion. But the elite have been equal to the challenge. For 182 years the Haitian rulers have used terror, killings, beatings, illegal arrests and detentions, forced exile and other such measures to keep the masses in line.

Even recently when it seemed that the overthrow of the Duvalier dynasty would end the dreaded Tonton Macoute and ease the pressure against resisters, we are reading of the activities of the Leopards. This is a crack military organization which has been implicated by Amnesty International in recent attacks on literacy workers and others aiding the masses in attempting to non-violently break out of two centuries of oppression of the Haitian elite.

SUMMARY OF THE ROOTS CAUSES

The poverty and misery in Haiti are human created. The root causes are the political and economic systems which have dominated Haiti for the whole of her 182 years. These oppressive factors have come from the international community, especially France and the United States. However, the Haitian elite, comprising only 3% of the Haitian people has also been a major factor in creating and continuing these oppressive conditions.

The causal roots are generally not very visible. Rather, they are the basis of the more visible and immediate factors which I will explain in the next section. Even the overt human rights abuses are not mainly visible on a daily basis. However, the Duvalier years were especially bad. Tens of thousands of people died or disappeared. Hundreds of thousands more felt forced to flee their homeland and seek a safer life elsewhere. Nearly everyone in the country felt the terror of the Duvaliers and their Tonton Macoute.

SECONDARY, BUT MORE IMMEDIATE CAUSES OF HAITI'S POVERTY

A. LANGUAGE AS AN OPPRESSOR

Perhaps the oddest cause of poverty anywhere in the world is the fact of language in Haiti. In a word, the imposition of French on the country is an immediate cause of Haiti's misery.

French is the official language of the country. All state business is carried on in French, the schools educate mainly in French. Social prestige is related to the ability to speak French. Yet only about 10% of the people can even get along in French, with less than 5% knowing the language fluently. Creole is the language of the masses. 100% of the Haitians speak and understand Creole as their mother tongue.

The road to social, economic and intellectual development is reserved to the speakers of French, while the masses are kept in their misery because their language is not recognized nor allowed as an official language.

Creole is not a patois or dialect of French. It is a recognized language in its own right, with its own syntax which is significantly different from French. The Creole grammar is rooted in Central African languages, though most of its vocabulary is influenced by French.

B. IGNORANCE AND ILLITERACY.

One of the results of this oppression of language is a national illiteracy rate which is very close to 90% in the cities, and higher in rural areas. It is hard to calculate the suffering tied to illiteracy and the ignorance of alternatives which comes with illiteracy and lack of education. When a whole people cannot read, they are cut off from advances in knowledge.

Thus they are condemned to repeat the forms of life they have developed whether or not those practices have negative aspects. Haitian life has many disastrous practices and these account for much of her misery. These will be detailed below. The point here is to note that the immediate cause of many negative practices is rooted in ignorance of the alternatives. It is ignorance that allows traditional practices in agriculture or education, health care or house-hold hygiene. Some of these practices are killing Haitians unnecessarily and destroying the agricultural base of this agricultural land. This harmful ignorance is the direct result of the illiteracy which defines the nation.

C. THE SYSTEM OF EDUCATION (OR, MORE PROPERLY, MISEDUCATION.)

Legally, education is free and open to all. Actually, state-sponsored education is limited and most secondary or university education goes to the children of the elite. Only about 30% of Haitian children ever begin school, and of the 30%, only 2% stay in school beyond the 5th grade.

There are many factors which contribute to the lack of education, among them are:

1. Education is mainly in French, a foreign tongue to the masses of Haitians. In the past 6 years Creole has begun to creep into the school as part of a reform movement. However, books are still primarily in French, and after the 5th year in school, even classroom instruction reverts to French. More importantly is the indoctrination that only French is the language of intelligent and well educated people. Thus peasants, who speak only Creole, despise their own real language and demand that their children be educated in French, thereby assuring that their children will not succeed in school.
2. After the fifth year students must pass a difficult examination, the "sertifica" in order to continue. This examination is in French. Few children of the peasant masses pass this examination.
3. Teachers are very poorly prepared. Materials are totally inadequate. In the rural schools it is common that only the teachers have books. Rote learning is the most common form of instruction, even in schools in the capital. Students are taught to parrot the teacher. They learn little beyond the immediate textbook.
4. Schools are terribly overcrowded. Teachers have many too many children in each class and discipline is a problem. Of course, the fact that class centers around a language the children do not know does not help discipline either. The response to serious discipline problems is a harsh punishment system which relies on beating and serious physical assaults on misbehaving children.

In a word, the school system is in shambles. It does very little to help Haiti out of her massive ignorance and illiteracy. If anything, it helps to continue the reliance on French, a primary controlling tool of the Haitian state.

D. SOIL EROSION.

Nearly everyone has heard about Haiti's disastrous soil erosion. Haiti is a mountainous country. For the past 200 years people have been cutting the trees on their mountains without replanting. Now, when the rainy season comes with its four or five months of daily pounding rains, one can see the brown rivers torrent down the mountain sides and watch, helplessly, as Haiti's little remaining soil flows out into the Caribbean Sea. How has this terrible situation come about?

There are four primary reasons for the soil erosion:

1. The need for fuel.
 2. The need to earn a living.
 3. Ignorance.
 4. Lack of motivation to reform.
1. Haiti has no fuel except wood. People cook with charcoal. This requires massive amounts of wood to provide fuel for 6 million people. Thus the demand on wood as a crop is the immediate cause of the denuding of the mountains of Haiti.
 2. The immediate motivation of much of the cutting is economic. Peasants are hungry. They have little available work. But wood is in constant demand as charcoal, or to sell to others to make charcoal. Peasant wood-cutters who do understand the soil erosion problem will argue that they have no alternative. They either cut and sell wood or they starve. Mainly they are

right. Haiti suffers massive unemployment and most peasants have inadequate access to farm lands.

3. Because of the problems of illiteracy and lack of education detailed above, Haitian wood cutters do not really understand the extent of damage their cutting does. These uneducated peasants have little sense of history. In their generation Haiti has always looked denuded like it does today. Thus to convince them that they are contributing to Haiti's misery by cutting the few trees which any one of them cuts, is not a very convincing argument. When compared with the alternatives of hunger or even starvation facing the wood sellers, the argument fundamentally makes no sense.
4. There is little motivation for wood cutters to replant more trees. Mainly they do not own the land. They cut here or there as sharecroppers or renters, then move on to other lands. The land owners are often city people or more wealthy village folks and they do not keep a close watch on their lands. Were they to replant, it is likely that the neighbors' animals would eat the seedling trees since there is little forage left in Haiti. The land tenure system--the way land is owned and used in Haiti--provides little motivation to anyone to replant the trees. Of course, it is in the interest of the nation as a whole to replant trees. But, no individuals who own, share-crop or rent lands are personally motivated to do this costly and troublesome, and non-economic work.

E. EXPORT CROPS VS. LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION.

The largest portions of Haiti's best lands produce crops for export. Sugar cane is the dominant export crop, but tropical fruit and other crops are grown as well. With most of the very best land out of production for local food crops (beans, rice and corn), the masses of people do not have access to land to grow food for eating or selling on the local market. Ironically, Haiti, a primarily agricultural land, is a net importer of food. At first one might think that this is not such a bad thing. After all, by selling crops on the international market income is generated for Haiti, jobs are produced and money circulates. Unfortunately none of this happens in any positive way for the great masses of people. First, these lands which produce the export crops are controlled by the elite of Haiti. Most of the imported cash goes to these owner/controllers of the land and most of it is not spent in Haiti, but in the more interesting markets of the United States and Europe. Not even a trickle down effect is felt from this flow of cash. Further, the farm wages are among the lowest in Haiti. Cane cutters spend an entire day in back-breaking work to cut a ton of sugar cane. For this long day one can expect \$1.00 a day OR LESS! When one compares this with the high prices of imported food, one can see the contribution to Haiti's difficulties from this concentration on export crops.

F. THE LACK OF SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE.

Haiti does not have the basic social infrastructure to allow a viable economy. There are inadequate roads in the rural areas. Thus shipping goods to the market in Port-au-Prince is expensive and risky. Travel by workers is difficult and extremely time consuming because of bad roads. During the rainy season many areas cannot be reached at all by motor vehicles.

Water presents difficulties for the people as well. Only the houses of the wealthy in Port-au-Prince and the major regional towns have running water. The masses do not have access to potable water and the death and disease related to water is critical. It is said that 80% of all disease in Haiti is water borne. Sewerage systems are limited to the homes of Port-au-Prince's elite. The rest of the people make do with outhouses or worse, just use the outdoors. This presents a terrible medical problem in the crowded slums of the capital.

Electricity is not available except for a tiny percent of the populace. I've already written about the

deplorable conditions of schools and the inadequate health care facilities. Haiti simply doesn't provide the basic infrastructure which allows a healthy people in a healthy economy.

Haitian governments plead that the country is too poor to provide such services. There is some truth to this claim. However, millions and millions of dollars donated by foreign governments and charitable groups for infrastructure projects have been stolen by government officials. Cheating and corruption in dealing with these funds are widespread. Lastly, the economy is run for the benefit of the rich elite. There are too few just taxes to provide the needed income for the basic infrastructure which makes a decent life possible.

G. UNEMPLOYMENT AND UNDEREMPLOYMENT.

Masses of people have no work, or work for pay which cannot come close to providing a living wage a one's family. Because of the soil erosion and structure of agriculture, thousands pour into Port-au-Prince looking for work.

Most of them have heard of a friend's friend or an uncle's cousin said to have found work in the tourist industry, or manufacturing sector. But there are few jobs to be had, and the slums grow. These unemployed masses put increasing pressure on the already inadequate city infrastructure.

The problems of unemployment and underemployment are caused in large measure by the lack of an adequate infrastructure and the domination of all wealth by the few. The political instability of the present moment does not help. Members of the Haitian elite and foreign investors are leery of investing in Haiti since no one knows where the government will move.

H. UNDERDEVELOPMENT IN AN AGE OF INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC COMPETITION.

Today's world economy is international. Competition is bitter and severe. We are all familiar with this competition between the United States, Western Europe and Japan. But this is a competition of the strong fighting the strong for a piece of the market. Haiti is in a terribly disadvantageous position. Haiti is an undeveloped country. It is not even a developing nation. The economic structure of Haiti has in large measure deteriorated in the 29 years of Duvalier rule. Haiti cannot compete. It's a case of being hopelessly behind in a long distance race of superstars. Instead of catching up, Haiti falls farther and farther behind each day.

I. HAITIAN SELF-IMAGE

My own experience has been that large masses of Haitian people suffer from a self-defeating image of themselves. They know they are poor in a rich world. They have heard that they are ignorant and illiterate. They speak Creole and are told that this is not a "real" language, but a bastard tongue. They experience their own powerlessness and are told it is their own fault. Such a self-image creates its own cycle of misery. The victim, the masses of Haitian people, blame themselves for their own suffering.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

I have painted a grim picture. Haiti is a devastatingly poor country. The causes of this misery are many and varied. Most of them are stubbornly resistant to change or amelioration. Many of the woes of Haiti are beyond Haiti's capacity to cure even if a just government and economic order were to appear, which, of course, is highly unlikely.

THE MYTH THAT THE VODOO RELIGION CAUSES HAITI'S MISERY

Haiti suffers many many ills which I've tried to catalogue above. Ironically, one often hears that Voodoo is the major cause of Haiti's misery. I want to address this claim because I believe it is a complete myth. That is, I hold that Voodoo in no serious way causes Haiti's misery. But, the concentration on this non-cause dissipates much energy from more useful tasks.

Christian missionaries claim that the Voodoo religion is some sort of satanic worship and thus Haiti's suffering is caused by a combination of divine punishment and the ineptness of the satanic powers.

I will not comment on the supernatural part of it. But, the factual claim that Voodoo is a satanic worship is flatly mistaken. Voodoo is an African family-spirit religion. The spirits (not gods, but spirits--sort of like angels in Christianity) are invoked for moral advice and help with daily affairs. Additionally, Voodoo is a healing religion. Much of this healing is effective for local health problems. In general my strong impression is that people are very pragmatic about their healing. If a houngon or mambo (priest or priestess) heals, then people will use them again, otherwise not.

I don't want to paint a romanticized picture. There is widespread use of healing practices which go beyond the houngon and mambo's abilities. Wherever this occurs it should be combated as poor healing practice. Similarly, the Haitians have added a new rite to African Voodoo. This is the petro rite, a black magic rite which includes such exotic and socially damaging practices as death curses and the creation of zombis. There is no question that these practices are harmful. But, the observers of the Haitian scene whose evidence I find most plausible, maintain that these petro services probably account for no more than 5% of Voodoo practice.

I have no personal stake in defending Voodoo. But, it is factually wrong to blame Voodoo's excesses for seriously contributing to Haiti's misery. The reason that this is such an important issue is tied to the question of Haitian self-image and the rights of the Haitian people to their own culture. The problem is not Voodoo, but some excesses and superstitions in an otherwise legitimate religion. More importantly, it is the religion of Haiti's people.

My suspicion is that the criticism of Voodoo is not really because of its alleged harmful practices, but simply because it is not the religion that Western missionaries would prefer the Haitian people to follow.

A second version of the myth is to claim that Voodoo is filled with harmful medical practices and superstitions and must be eradicated. Again, I believe the extent of this harm is greatly exaggerated, but I do agree that there are indeed harmful medical practices and superstitions in Voodoo's present form.

However, when I balance these factors against the importance of Haitians having their own culture, their own ways; when I balance these negative factors against the poor self-image that Haitians already have of their culture, it seems more important that critics of Voodoo concentrate their criticisms not on the religion as a whole, but on the harmful practices themselves.

If we look back in Western culture to the Middle Ages we find a Christianity riddled with superstition. The process that won the day in that struggle is precisely what I advocate for Voodoo. Medieval Christianity was purged of its worst superstitions and the religion survived. This is the need in Voodoo.

TWO PUZZLES

PUZZLE #1: FOREIGN INVESTMENT IN MANUFACTURING

Haiti needs jobs. Hundred of thousands of people are unemployed in Port-au-Prince, or can only find part-time work. Thus, at first glance it would seem that the arrival of American manufacturing operations in the 1970s would be a boon to Haiti. Well, are they really? The case is not so clear.

On the positive side, some 350,000 jobs now exist in the manufacturing sector which did not exist 15 years ago. 350,000 people have full-time employment; people who were unemployed before.

However, the national minimum wage is \$2.60 daily. Most companies evade even this pittance by shifting their pay system to piece work and then making it so that the typical wage is closer to \$2.00 than the minimum wage.

Until the fall of Duvalier, labor unions and labor activity were illegal. Even now few people know what a labor union is and the government continues to harass any labor activity. Additionally, the press of the hundreds of thousands who have no work, and who would very much like even these \$2.00 a day jobs, keeps workers disciplined not to rock the boat.

The \$2.00 a day actual wage is nearly double the \$1.00 typically earned in the agricultural sector. However, the American firms who own and run these plants earn fantastic rates of return on capital, profits entirely generated by the labor of the Haitians. Any sense of justice one can muster calls for a fairer distribution of the wealth created in these plants.

Are these plants a way out of Haitian poverty? Yes and no. Immediately, they do employ the unemployed and that is a positive factor. But, the non-living wage which is paid insures that people will not rise out of their squalor and misery, but will remain at subsistence level.

This situation is quite like the early Industrial Revolution in the United States and England. Most of us are familiar with the hard and long battles which labor had to fight to get a fairer portion of the wealth their own labor created. The Haitian fight is hampered by many factors which were not as limiting in the United States--the high level of illiteracy, more severe levels of government oppression than existed here, more competition for jobs, etc.

So, I find this new development in Haiti to be a puzzle. Does it help or hinder Haitians? I just don't know. With just reforms this manufacturing sector could profit both Haiti and foreign investors. At present some Haitians do survive because of these jobs, and fortunes are made by the investors.

PUZZLE #2: OVERPOPULATION

Haiti is a small country, about the size of Maryland. It has between 6 and 6.5 million people. The soil erosion, inability to compete in the international economy, backward agricultural technology and many other factors combine to make this population of 6 to 6.5 million one which Haiti cannot easily support.

The overwhelming portions of the best Haitian lands are used to grow export crops for North America and Europe. This production benefits only a handful of the Haitian elite. Thus, if only the land were returned to the Haitian people and used for local food crops, Haiti would have no difficulty in providing a sound diet for all her people.

Even minimal improvements in agricultural technology (wider use of oxen and plow, for example), or improved understanding of agricultural problems (stronger national help in fighting soil erosion) and the land that is in production of local food crops could be much more productive.

Since hunger is caused by the present social system, it would seem that it is not overpopulation which

causes the crisis in Haiti. But this view is shortsighted. A reformed use and understanding of agriculture (both highly unlikely) would make it possible for Haiti to feed its present population and even the expected population into the next century. But, eventually, Haiti will face a population crisis. Certainly by 2025, only 38 years from now, Haiti's present 2.2% growth rate will make Haiti incapable of feeding her people in the best of circumstances.

There are population control programs throughout Haiti. But they simply don't work. Much research shows that moral preaching, sex education, available contraceptive measures and even force do little to reduce populations in very poor nations. This is because people *NEED* lots of children. They need them for 4 reasons:

1. As workers in the farm fields.
2. As old age insurance for parents who have no other security.
3. Because in a life of low material gratification, raising children is among the few joys and delights one can have.
4. Because they suffer high children mortality rates, people must have many children so that enough will survive to accomplish 1-2-3.

Sociologists know that only economic development can effectively lower the birthrate, and that economic development--providing old age security, and some level of material comfort, almost invariably lead people to voluntarily limit birth rates. Such a rise in material standard is also accompanied by higher levels of education, which further contributes to voluntary birthrate limits.

Is it really overpopulation which causes Haiti's misery, or is the overpopulation another result of Haiti's misery? It's not a clear case at all. With more humane social planning, Haiti could provide for its people NOW. But what about in a few years? Population is a puzzle.

SUMMARY AND SOME HOPE

This paper has tried to explain Haiti's terrible situation. Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere because of her history, her present social structures which grew out of her history and because she is caught in the impossible competition of modern economics.

Haiti needs the help of goodwilled people everywhere. She needs you. The HAITI PROJECT can provide the avenue for you to make worthwhile contribution to the work of your choice. We offer you options for donating money, goods, or work.

THE HAITI PROJECT works from your donations. 100% of your donations are used to further our work in Haiti. Please subscribe to our quarterly newsletter on Haiti and our work there. Without the donors, there is no HAITI PROJECT.

([PEOPLE TO PEOPLE](#) --The parent organization for THE HAITI PROJECT--is a 501 C 3 charitable organization and all donations are tax deductible.)

[LEFTOVERS](#)

[MAIN HAITI PAGE](#)

[Art, Music, & Dance](#)

[Book Reviews](#)

[Film](#)

[History](#)

[Library](#)

[Literature](#)

[Mailing List](#)

[Miscellaneous Topics](#)

[Notes on Books](#)

[People to People](#)

[Voodoo](#)

[HOME](#)

Bob Corbett corbetre@webster.edu