

## HAITI, WERE SORRY

By: Deniece Alleyne LL.B

Not that long ago I had the opportunity of speaking with some Haitian migrants who had been dropped off at various points around the island. I am fairly fluent in the French language and I wanted to interview them about their experiences as migrants generally and about their treatment in St. Kitts in particular.

Their story was painful in its ordinariness. None had intended to come to St. Kitts but had been deceived by unscrupulous human traffickers to whom they had paid substantial sums. They were seeking relief; from hunger, homelessness and lack of opportunity. They were seeking a better life. Theirs was a story common to us here in St. Kitts and throughout the Caribbean. All of us either know persons or are persons who have migrated to other Caribbean countries, the USA, Canada or the UK to better ourselves and our children. In fact it is ironic to me as a naturalized Kittitian born in Guyana that I have so often been told "you na from yah" by people who go to great lengths to have their children born in the US Virgin Islands or Puerto Rico if they cant make it to the US mainland.

Despite our history as a migrant people, from being kidnapped and enslaved and transported between continents, to traveling for work whether in Trinidad, immediately after emancipation in the 1840s to the Dominican Republic, Panama and Curacao in the early twentieth century we have been inflicted with a strange xenophobia. Strange because when taken to its natural conclusion it means that we are biting the hand that has fed us, and strange because this xenophobia is only directed towards black people like ourselves. On several occasions I have been abused for being born in Guyana by persons who practically worship what they call "coolie hair" and have gone to great lengths to have children with men of Indian descent from the same Guyana or Trinidad. I have always found it a tragic symptom of an internalized inferiority complex and felt sorry for such persons.

This brings me back to the story of the Haitians. I could not help



Dessalines

wondering why they had to be held in prison when I spoke with them. The men complained of the over - crowding and the women, though relatively comfortable, did ask me; "Why the prison?"

During my time in England I was asked on several occasions by white students whether we live in houses where I come from. I was constantly amazed rather than offended by the question because the query came from abject ignorance. What has been astounding is the fact that I have heard similar nonsense asked about Haitians by persons here, whether about their religion or cultural practices or rate of infection with AIDS. I was horrified recently when I heard on the BBC Caribbean that coast guard officials in the Turks and Caicos Islands had deliberately collided with a boat carrying Haitian migrants causing it to capsize in shark infested waters. To add insult to injury the survivors were locked in a detention center and prevented from speaking to journalists in the immediate aftermath of this incident.



Toussaint L'Ouverture-Haitian liberator

This shocking story immediately brought to my mind the haunting lyrics of poet and composer David Rudder from his melancholic requiem called "Haiti I'm sorry." He asked *"they say the middle passage is gone, so how come overcrowded boats still haunt our lives?"* This brutally compelling question brings in sharp relief the scandalous state of affairs that is CARICOM policy with regard to the Haitian Republic.

Haiti is a special case in the Caribbean. It represents the prevailing international opinion of independence, sovereignty and freedom for people of African descent whether on the continent itself or anywhere in the Diaspora. *Haiti dared to violently throw off the yoke of bondage, colonialism, imperialism and all notions of racial inferiority in a relentless 10 year war of attrition that in the words of Prof. George Lamming proved that black men were men.* For this daring audacity the Haitians have been made to suffer. Their country has been turned into a terrible cautionary tale to the rest of us that if we don't drink the swill from the swine trough of white supremacy we too will be imprisoned in a barren wasteland desperately seeking the means of escape.

Haiti is the oldest Black republic in the world and among the oldest republics in the world. Only the American and French republics are older. How awe inspiring it is to have as a fact of history that during that period in history known as the enlightenment while white men were patting themselves on the back for coming up with dissertations on the rights of man as proof of their supposed superiority, black men were asserting that freedom was inherent to humanity not an indulgence to be granted by a benevolent master. In virtually every other colonial territory black, brown and yellow men asked and pleaded and genuflected before the altars of the mother country, imbibing her language, institutions, culture but most importantly denying that we had any of those things to prove us worthy of being granted independence. Only in Haiti did black men take their freedom. Haiti disproved all the arguments and theories about the nature of man in general and the black man in particular. Haiti disproved *Darwin* and his theory that us Africans were savages requiring slavery for our own well being. Haiti disproved *Hegel* that Africans had no voice in history by indelibly infusing history with the most brutally eloquent free man's creed. Haiti disproved *Paine* that Africans were simpletons incapable of comprehending the nature and meaning of liberty expounding its true meaning. Haiti defied the largest and most sophisticated armies and navies of the time. *On that glorious New Year's Day in 1804 Haiti declared for oppressed people everywhere that bondage was not the natural state of any man. Haiti became the threat of a good example. For this Haiti had to pay.*

The retribution exacted from the only successful rebellion of enslaved people has been catastrophic. *The US enforced a century long absolute embargo from 1806 and no other country traded with Haiti*

*effectively crippling the nascent nation.* American, Spanish and British naval vessels blockaded Haitian ports for several years to ensure that no rogue trader could defy the siege. ***Worst of all however was the unconscionable demand for reparations from the French Republic for the loss of its colony!*** Imagine that! In 1825, on behalf of former slaveholders the French government imposed an indemnity on Haiti as payment for recognizing it as a free nation. It threatened to wage war to re - colonize and re - enslave Haiti if the country did not pay 90 million francs. In today's dollars it amounts to more than **\$21 billion**. Think about it carefully. The country continually derided as the a failed state, the poorest and most backward country in this hemisphere and chief among this benighted group worldwide has paid to France, one of the richest, more than \$21 billion during the 165 years up to 1990. What would this money have done if spent to develop Haiti?

The ignorant and self despising among us like to ask the eminently silly question, how can we know that slavery and colonialism caused any tangible benefit to accrue to the imperialist nations? Haiti answers that question in dollars and cents. The US did not recognize Haitian independence until 1863 in the midst of its own civil war which was primarily about slavery. In addition to this indignity, Haiti was constantly harassed and several times invaded and occupied by the US as part of its *Monroe Doctrine* always under that useful fiction that we black people cannot rule ourselves. The longest occupation persisted for 19 years from 1915 to 1934. The US installed and maintained the barbaric reign of terror of the Duvalier family and its fearsome *ton ton macoutes*. It ensured that the only industries that were allowed to flourish unhindered were prostitution and drug and gun trafficking.

Perhaps however, the worst retribution exacted from the Haitian people has been the hate of their brothers. By this I mean that instead of honoring and venerating those great men like L'Ouverture and Dessalines as the heroes they are and reciting their deeds to our children and naming our sons after them like we would and have after great white men we have either despised their sacrifice or worse ignored it completely. Most of us have been so convinced that black skin is ugly and our natural hair is defective that we support a multi - billion dollar industry in skin bleaches and hair straighteners and weaves.

When we curse someone the first thing we can think of saying is how black the person is even when we are no different. It has been scientifically shown that we are far more likely to consider a person beautiful if his/her skin is light rather than dark and that we correlate dark skin with negative characteristics. In other words most of us have chosen not to be heirs of the Haitian revolution but rather to be what Walter Rodney called "white men in black skins". This is perverse and tragic, even sacrilegious. It denies the testimony that most of my readers claim to believe that we are made in the image of God.

Haiti is poor today because it was deliberately made so and kept so just like much of sub - Saharan Africa by wars either military or economic and cultural. To acknowledge this is not to have a slave mindset or to be stuck in the past or to have a "hand - out" mentality nor any of the tired pejoratives that are constantly bandied about. It is simply to state a fact that is very important to note because so many people think that the reason is that black people are somehow incapable of properly running a country. When black people can throw other black people to sharks for simply wanting a better life, when specifically Caribbean black people can do this to Haitians it shows how desperately we still need the Haitian Revolution. It shows how much we need to heed to the words of a son of this revolution and emancipate ourselves from mental slavery?

There are now several investigations underway in the Turks and Caicos Islands into this atrocity but whatever they find it is important that such action is denounced in the strongest terms. Migration defines Caribbean people and it simply beggars belief that movement within this region should attract such hostility on the part of the teapot tyrants that run these countries. With an almost comical regularity Caribbean politicians pontificate on sovereignty and protecting the jobs of locals from foreigners as an election gimmick mainly when their administration is bad to generate hostility towards Caribbean people.

They certainly are not referring to the whites who they bend over backwards and race to the bottom against each other to see how low they can go to accommodate.

The competition between Antigua and St. Kitts for the Caribbean Star HQ is a recent example; remember the billionaire owner who bought prime airport real estate for 69c per square foot. I can only imagine how Antigua sweetened that deal. You see, teachers from other islands are not investing in our country. How tragic - comic it is to see how precious we hold these various ports on the routes of the slave ships when we are not desperately trying to get away and sneak into the US or Canada that is.

This state of affairs is not permanent, despite how bleak it seems. The modern age presents the opportunity to forge for ourselves a new identity founded on the principle defended with blood in the Haitian revolution. A first step would be for CARICOM leaders to end discriminatory policies against Haiti and instead concentrate on finding ways to be of assistance to our brothers across this Caribbean Sea. They can start by vocally supporting the Haitian demand for France to repay the unconscionable indemnity began by former President Aristide. They can continue by enacting immigration policies that recognize the contribution made by our own people migrating among these islands. When Toussaint LOuverture was kidnapped by the French, his last words to them were "*in overthrowing me you have cut down only the trunk of the tree of liberty, it will spring up again from the roots for they are many and they are deep.*" We, as Caribbean people, need to draw our strength from those roots.