

Building a Sustainable Future on the Grounds of a Rediscovered Identity

A man stripped of his culture is a slave.

—Swahili proverb

For several weeks in January 2010, the world witnessed one of the most extraordinary demonstrations of courage, dignity, and unity by a people ranked as the poorest and most politically unstable in the Western Hemisphere. The Haitian people showed the world how far it could go in its determination to survive against all odds—a resilience that seems embedded in the Haitian culture and way of thinking.

So why hasn't that resilience, that common front the Haitian people present in the face of adversity, played its part in helping Haiti grow as a nation? How could a people who, in the midst of disaster, changed the world's perception of its own humanity, apparently be unable to take charge of its own destiny, to build on its accomplishments, and secure its collective well-being? Having learned to manage unlikely alliances in order to secure their own collective freedom, how could Haitians be so devoid of a national conscience, the very motor of nation-building? The answer to this riddle seems to lie in Haiti's past, and in the way the selective acceptance or rejection of its history has, over the years, shaped the mentality of its people.

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NATION, CULTURAL IDENTITY, AND HERITAGE

In *The Truth about the West African Land Question*, J. E. Casely Hayford wrote:

It is a grand thing when a people recognize that it has a heritage of ancestral rights; when it feels that the past is not a nameless, shameful shadow, and can realize that its forefathers have in the long, long years evolved a system of customs and usages which are trustworthy, practicable and expedient in the economy and polity of the present . . . [and] seeks to preserve the old, not because of its antiquity but because of its intrinsic value.¹

Many criteria are used in defining national identity. It is generally thought that members of a nation are distinguished by their common identity, a shared origin, and a sense of common ancestry. Some people, despite displaying diverging personalities or beliefs, living in different places, or speaking different languages, still manage to see each other as members of the same nation, emphasizing their common history rather than their ethnic and linguistic differences. Others, however, define themselves not on the basis of the features they share but on those they lack or dislike. To quote Manuel Roxas, "A nation is something more than the people who inhabit a geographic area. It is a spirit, a tradition, and a way of life." Ernest Gellner adds that "it is nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way around."

Along the same line, Eric Hobsbawm argues that nations are "invented traditions" and are defined by them. But traditions and culture are not developed individually. They emerge through the social processes in which individuals participate together throughout changing historical conditions, thereby creating traditions that promote national thought, philosophy, and spirituality, providing strength for the present and a direction for the future. They are a reflection of values and heritage that determine self-worth, dignity, and identity. They also embody history, perhaps the most important tool in shaping the consciousness of a people. A country that loses control of its history loses control of the future, for without history there can be no vision.²

Cultural identity is thus defined as "the identity of a group or culture, or of an individual as far as one is influenced by one's belonging to a group or culture." Culture, as a "historical reservoir," is thus an important factor in shaping a national identity, which is authenticated through the presentation of a nation's cultural heritage and often reflected in the way differences are voiced or even silenced.³ History in turn helps people see that they have a common past, with common achievements and common problems, thus helping forge a single national identity.⁴

The culture of a nation comprises many aspects. It is

shaped and molded by the background of its people, their language and beliefs. It includes the many ways that people express themselves in words, movement, music and images. It reveals itself in the ways people choose to spend their time, the music they listen to, the books they read

and the films they watch, the sports they encourage, and the historical sites and natural environment they protect. These factors shape how a nation sees itself and how it establishes its identity.⁵

Erik Erikson, one of the earliest psychologists to be interested in identity, showed how the development of a strong ego identity, along with proper integration into a stable society and culture, generally leads to a stronger sense of identity. In turn, a deficiency in either of these factors can lead to an identity crisis or confusion.⁶ Can that sense of confusion become a national phenomenon? Could that be the case for Haiti and its people?

THE HAITIAN PATHOLOGY

In his book *Haiti Metamorphoses*, Patrick Woog suggests that “the Haitians tend to consider each problem they must face as an independent entity or a more or less logical consequence of historical avatars.”⁷ He goes on to say that the problems that have constantly hindered or even blocked development efforts in Haiti have a common origin and are merely symptoms of a deeper ill: the Haitian people’s very way of thinking. This utterly inappropriate thinking, Woog argues, instead of serving as a nation-building tool for a newly independent Haiti only created a parody of what should have been a great republic. The *marronage*, the slaves’ perennial flight from bondage on the plantations, an act of resistance during colonial times, has mutated during the last decades into a form of flight from the Haitian people’s own history, its own culture, even from its own country, as its ever younger and increasingly disillusioned and desperate population struggles with its sense of identity. Some even think that the rapid increase of the Haitian diaspora is merely a manifestation of a trait now deeply rooted in the Haitian psyche: choosing to flee from its history, from its culture, and from itself, rather than confronting and resolving the seemingly insurmountable problems it faces, as if the gains from past battles are no longer worth protecting.

In Haiti’s post-colonial society, as in all societies born of slavery, the legacy of the past is only partly embraced and, in certain aspects, is traumatically rejected. This is particularly the case in Haiti, given its tumultuous history of wars, massacres, natural disasters, etc., which have been largely responsible for the loss of valuable patrimonial elements. That factor is further strengthened by formal interpretations of its history by its ruling classes, and often nurtured by conservative and retrograde ideologies.

According to Woog and many highly regarded Haitian scholars the construction of a real *nation* was never realizable and the country, throughout its history, has only succeeded in prolonging a feudal society crippled with countless archaisms. Perhaps Lyonel Trouillot, a writer, poet, and educator, has found the answer: “It is indispensable that the Haitian elites accept the country’s elements of traditional culture as structural principles of nationality. How can we build without memory?” In other words, Haiti’s culture should be the “ravaged base” on which it is high time to build hope for the future.

PERCEPTION OF NATIONAL HERITAGE IN HAITI

According to Albert Mangonès, founder of the Institut de Sauvegarde du Patrimoine National:

The majority of Haitians do not perceive the elements of their national heritage as collective treasures to preserve but rather as private properties somewhat related to those who govern the country. When those are ousted or disappear, the population strives to destroy all that was associated with them. And since most of those who govern did behave like tyrannical Caesars, their departure or overthrow is viewed as a liberation marked by the sacrifice of all their so-called properties. This is the reason why the historical monuments have often been the target of “dechoukaj” so dramatic for the country.

Commenting on the tendency of most Haitians to see history through particular prisms and thereby deny some of its key aspects, Daniel Elie, executive director of the Institute for the Preservation of National Heritage, added that

in Haitian traditional or official historiography, everything happens as if history had started on the night of August 13 to 14, 1791. The preceding historical periods seem to be considered as only subordinate and are mentioned simply as “previous” periods aiming at explaining the general uprising of the slaves and the revolution of Saint-Domingue. All [is] based on an eminently racial problematic.⁸

Apart from the massacre of the Taínos, the native inhabitants of the island of Hispaniola at the time Columbus arrived, Spain’s role in Haiti’s history is essentially ignored. Spain’s decision around 1520 to abandon the western part of the island—the current Haitian republic—has certainly facilitated this historical excision. Even the sites that date back to that period are simply ignored—the parish church of Hinche, which dates back to 1520; the town of Jacmel, an important *encomienda* (Villanueva de Yáquimo) founded in 1504 by governor Nicolas de Ovando; and the ruins of Puerto Real, one of 13 original Spanish settlements that dates back to 1503. Moreover, French colonization is treated as if it began with the “sugarcane revolution” in 1720—which is precisely when there was a significant increase in the brutal importation of black slaves into the colony—rather than from the time of Spain’s departure. Haiti’s historical account is shaped into a one-dimensional script of the 1791 slave uprising, thereby minimizing both the complexity and range of that historical milestone.

Haiti’s perception of its historical legacy is often seen, not surprisingly, through the same distorted prism. Accounts of the revolutionary period in Saint-Domingue often celebrate the revolution’s heroes, forgiving their weaknesses and forgetting their unholy political alliances. Moreover, Haiti’s history is told as if it were totally isolated from the rest of the Caribbean, or worse, as if the Spanish part of the island did not even exist. What seems a complete silencing of history renders even more difficult an understanding of the motives behind the two military

campaigns against the eastern part of the island and a solid grasp of the reasons for the failure of both attempts to unify the island.⁹

The fact that Saint-Domingue was the reference point for French technology in America—with the extraordinary scientific work of the Cercle des Philadelphes; the experiments conducted in the Artibonite Valley with the *machine à feu*, ancestor of the steam engine; the dramatic progress in the science of fortification; and the development of numerous complex mechanical tools that enabled France to turn Saint-Domingue into the first sugar producer in the world—is rarely mentioned. As a result, only constructions dating from 1791 and built by Haitians are considered part of the national heritage. For example, the fort of Saint-Louis du Sud, the second most important fortification in the country (after the great Citadelle Henri), whose plans were corrected by Vauban himself,¹⁰ is completely absent from the history books, even though the fort was the site of a significant battle between the English fleet and the French army in 1748, a milestone in the French-English rivalry for the supremacy in the Antilles.

The same distortion of the Haitian heritage is reflected in other aspects of the Haitian legacy. Creole, the only language of a large majority of the population, until a few decades ago was deemed too primitive to be taught in schools, and its use was officially discouraged. In contrast, all that originated from Europe was praised, while any attempt to bring Haitians closer to their African roots was scorned. That attitude was also reflected in the way members of different social classes dressed, the food they ate, and even in the way they recreated, perpetuating the gap inherited from an abhorred colonial system.

Not surprisingly, Voodoo, the one force that served to bind the slave population through its rites, dances, and songs—and which therefore was forbidden and demonized by the French colonists—was banned by some of the very leaders it helped set free. Until a few decades ago its practice was vigorously repressed by the Christian churches, even though it is the principal mode of spiritual expression for a large part of the peasantry, mostly through its dances and songs that have helped kindle hope in the hearts of a silent and long-repressed population.

THE NATIONAL HERITAGE: LEGACY FROM THE PAST TO BUILD THE FUTURE

The most recent Haitian Constitution, adopted in 1987, defined for the very first time the concept of “national heritage” as comprising “the archeological, historical, cultural, folkloric riches of the country, as well as its architectural riches, witnesses of the greatness of our past.” It also underlines the state’s responsibility: “The monuments, the ruins, the sites of our ancestors’ great military deeds, the known centers of our African beliefs and all the legacies of the past are placed under the protection of the state.” Given the profound mutations undergone by its people and the fact that Haiti is standing at the crossroads of a medieval past and a modern future, its national heritage has become a valued reference over the last few years and a force for cohesion and reconciliation.

Since the creation of ISPAN, and following the superb restoration of the Citadelle Henri by UNESCO experts and a team of young Haitian architects, the Haitian people's perception of their architectural heritage has evolved positively. It is a first step, sometimes misused by "cultural entrepreneurs," who see cultural sites merely as means to make financial gains, thereby failing to grasp and promote their essential value and risking their destruction. It is hoped that not only those in charge but the Haitian people itself will rise to the defense of these sites and safeguard them. Haiti's nation-building has just begun and much more is at stake than financial gains.

Indeed, the question of national heritage is of utmost importance in that its knowledge, recognition, and integration in the present becomes a necessity and a factor of balance for both the collective conscience and individual psychology. Values from the past are indispensable in the accumulation of experiences, and without this knowledge and know-how, the Haitian community will be condemned to imitate external models, a potentially hazardous means of advancement. As James Baldwin so aptly warned, "To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it, it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought."¹¹

The elements of the Haitian national heritage thus constitute a reference in time and space that is indispensable to the country's adaptation and evolution. There is an urgent need for the Haitian people to consult their heritage and traditions if it is to reverse course and finally become a nation. Why should the Haitian youths, who are thirsting for role models and eager to participate in the building of a nation they can call their own, be constantly forced to look to other countries for models?

Let Haitians learn anew the symbolic expressions of shared values, beliefs, aesthetics, and creativity. Authentic development is culturally based, and Haiti's youth therefore must be educated or Haiti will remain a stillborn nation. Real education, as opposed to mere schooling, must provide for the intergenerational transmission of values, beliefs, customs, rituals, and sensibilities, along with the knowledge of why those traditions must be sustained.¹² By protecting and valorizing its cultural heritage and gaining a true understanding of its history, Haiti will begin to build on its past and on the achievements of its founders. A real nation shall then emerge.

At this tipping point in the history of Haiti, when so much is needed and so many are lending a hand in its reconstruction, both physical and institutional, I conclude by paraphrasing Adil E. Shamo, who said that nation-building must be conducted by the people of the nation concerned. This process will take decades, but that is no different than the current manner of military-led-nation-building. The education of future generations will provide the nourishment for a prosperous and democratic system of government in Haiti. There are no shortcuts to modernity. To help Haiti, "friends" must paradoxically engage over the long term

and yet also engage from a distance so that the Haitian people become the creators of their own nation.¹³

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1. J. E. Casely Hayford, *The Truth About The West African Land Question*. London: Cass, 1971, p. 158 (reprint; original work, 1898, first reprint, 1913).
 2. John Henrik Clarke, *Africans at the Crossroads: Notes for an African World Revolution*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1991, p. 398.
 3. Fiona McLean, "Museums and the Construction of National Identity: A Review," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 3, no. 4 (1998): 244-252.
 4. Trish Scott, in a virtual forum.
 5. Statistics Canada, 1995, p. 11; Harsha Munasinghe, "The Politics of the Past: Constructing a National Identity through Heritage Conservation," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 11, no. 3 (2005): 251-260.
 6. James E. Cote, Charles Levine, *Identity Formation, Agency, and Culture*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002, p. 22.
 7. Patrick Woog, *Haïti Métamorphoses*, 2004.
 8. Daniel Elie, "Schéma directeur de la Culture, secteur patrimoine, biens immobiliers à valeur culturelle et historique, monuments, sites et ensembles historiques," preliminary document prepared for the Ministère de la Culture, September-October 1996.
 9. During the first week of January 1801, General Toussaint Louverture left Mirebalais and led his army of 25,000 men to a campaign to reunify the island of Saint Domingue/Hispaniola. On January 28, 1801, General Toussaint and his army triumphantly entered Santo Domingo, where he was received by the Spanish Governor, Don Garcia. One of Toussaint's greatest deeds during the reunification was the abolition of slavery on the eastern side of the island. Around 1814, the eastern side of the island, Santo Domingo, again became a Spanish colony. It later proclaimed its independence and became what is known today as the Dominican Republic.
 10. Sébastien Le Prestre, Seigneur de Vauban, and later Marquis de Vauban (May 15, 1633-March 30, 1707), commonly referred to as Vauban, was a Marshal of France and the foremost military engineer of his age, famed for his skill in both designing fortifications and breaking through them. A famous strategist, he revolutionized the art of fortification at the beginning of the 18th century.
 11. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Dial Press, 1963.
 12. Mualimu J. Shujaa, "Education and Schooling: You Can Have One without the Other," in *Ama Mazama*, p. 246
 13. Adil E. Shamoo is a Senior Analyst at Foreign Policy In Focus and a Professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. He writes on ethics and public policy. The paraphrased text initially referred to Afghanistan.