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Haiti has received billions of dollars in foreign aid over the last 50 years, and yet it remains the least developed country in the Western Hemisphere. Its indicators of progress are closer to Africa's than to those of Latin America. It has defied all development prescriptions.

Why? Because Haiti's culture is powerfully influenced by its religion, voodoo. Voodoo is one of numerous spirit-based religions common to Africa. It is without ethical content. Its followers believe that their destinies are controlled by hundreds of capricious spirits who must be propitiated through voodoo ceremonies. It is a species of the sorcery religions that Cameroonian development expert Daniel Etounga-Manguelle identifies as one of the principal obstacles to progress in Africa.

Voodoo is practiced mostly by poor Haitians, who make up the vast majority of the country's population. But all Haitians feel its influence, as one of my sons-in-law, who is Haitian and holds a graduate degree from Harvard, assures me. Wallace Hodges, an American missionary who lived in Haiti for 20 years, observed: "A Haitian child is made to understand that everything that happens is due to the spirits. He is raised to externalize evil and to understand he is in continuous danger. Haitians are afraid of each other. You will find a high degree of paranoia in Haiti."

But voodoo is not the only progress-resistant force at work in Haiti. The treatment of the slaves in French St. Domingue—the colony that would become independent Haiti in 1804— was particularly brutal. The Haitian slaves won their freedom through an uprising that left them in charge of their destiny, but they were left with a value system largely shaped by African culture and by the experience of slavery. The Nobel Prize-winning economist Sir Arthur Lewis, himself a descendent of African slaves, wrote that those who had experienced it "have inherited the idea that work is only fit for slaves."

What other factors contribute to Haiti's endless nightmare? Bad leadership is one obvious candidate. With the exception of Alexandre Pétiou (1806-1818), Haiti has never had a president fully committed to modernizing the country. (Once again, we are reminded of the parallels between Haiti and Africa.)

Some stress policies and institutions when they try to explain the country's tortured history. But bad policies inevitably reflect the agendas of poor leaders—and thus the culture that nurtured them. Those of us who have worked at institution-building in countries like Haiti are well aware of the frustrations that attend such efforts, confirming the truth of Mr. Etounga-Manguelle's observation: "Culture is the mother. Institutions are the children."

Others cite the heavy indemnity that the French extracted from Haiti in 1825 for re-establishment of relations (originally 150 million francs over five years, later reduced to 60 million francs over 30 years) as a major cause of Haiti's poverty. It is also true that for several decades after its independence, Haiti was ostracized by other Western Hemisphere nations, the United States among them, out of fear that Haiti's successful slave rebellion would spread to their own slaves. U.S. policy was changed by Abraham Lincoln; official recognition was extended in 1862.

Still others argue that Haiti's problems are largely the result of a mulatto upper class that identifies itself with the former French masters and treats black Haitians as inferior beings. But for a good part of Haiti's history, black chiefs of state, Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier among them, ran the country.

While these and other factors may be relevant, none of them, even collectively, adequately explains the unending dysfunction of Haitian society. Haiti's predicament is caused by a set of values, beliefs and attitudes, rooted in African culture and the slavery experience that resist progress.

The Dominican Republic, which Haiti ruled between 1822 and 1843, has evolved as a more or less typical Latin American country with political instability and slow development. But even that slow development has clearly outpaced Haiti. The Dominican Republic is No. 79 on the U.N. Development Program's Human Development Index, while Haiti is No. 146 (out of 177 countries).

Haiti has received far more development assistance than Benin, the country in the Dahomey region of West Africa whence came the slaves the French imported into St. Domingue. And yet today Haiti's and Benin's level of development are strikingly similar. The British imported slaves into Barbados from the same Dahomey region, but Barbados remained a British colony until 1966, by which time the descendents of the slaves had become black Englishmen. Today, Barbados is a stable democracy on the verge of First World status.

Culture matters. Race doesn't.

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