

Upholding Haitian Dignity: On Briefly Contextualizing Haiti’s Ongoing Crisis, Part One

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Abstract

During the summer of 2021, Jovenel Moïse, Haiti’s 58th president, succumbed to an internationally-coordinated assassination attempt carried out by Columbian mercenaries, and others. The head of state sustained a broken femur, fractured skull, and gunshot wounds, among other signs of trauma. Furthermore, his wife of 25 years, Martine, clung to life nearby, gravely-injured and pretending to have expired. This piece, at first, highlights the effects of foreign intervention on Haitian history. It then pinpoints the compounded obstacles that Haitian leadership must surmount in placing Haiti on a path toward prosperity. Some of the points made pertain to the way(s) in which Haiti’s crisis began in the late 1400’s, when Spain’s Catholic Monarchs funded Columbus’s search for new trade routes to lands east of Europe. Conclusively, this work details how, in 1804, amidst a sea of hostility, Haiti proclaimed its independence as the world’s first Black-led republic, inspiring slave revolts throughout the world and majorly contributing toward U.S. expansion, through compelling France’s sale of the Louisiana Territory.

Keywords: Jovenel Moïse; Africans; Europeans; Americas; Haitian history; Haitian Revolution; Louisiana Purchase; Political assassination

Preface

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Introduction

During the wee hours of June 7, 2021, Haiti’s 58th president, Jovenel Moïse, a 53-year-old father of three (Tampa, 2021, July 11), two sons and a daughter, suffered a painful death. And Moïse’s killing transpired as his wife of 25 years (Kilander, 2021, July 15), Martine,

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clung to life, gravely-injured (Stanwood, 2021), some distance away.

Per the details reported, and validated, by *Le Nouvelliste*, a French-language newspaper (Digital Library of the Caribbean, n.d.) located in Haiti, Moïse sustained a multiplicity of injuries. The newspaper’s anatomical summary (Publiéle, 2021) of the late President’s remains enumerates a broken femur and fractured skull. It also details a gouged left eye and thoracic gunshot wounds, with possible stippling, searing, or muzzle stamping, among other signs of trauma.

Though Haitian authorities are still determining Moïse’s manner of death, and how he came to sustain the above injuries, news networks and law enforcement authorities (The New York Times, 2021), in Haiti and beyond, have reported that a hit squad, composed of highly-armed, and partly U.S.-trained (Lemaire & Seldin, 2021), Colombian nationals had descended upon the Moïse residence, moments before the death of the Haitian head of state.

Objectives

Below, and beyond, through a three-part history, this piece will, at first, highlight the effects of foreign intervention on Haitian history. Thereafter, it will pinpoint the compounded obstacles that Haitian leadership must surmount in placing Haiti on a path toward prosperity.

Before tackling the influence of foreign powers, some additional facts, and an admission, are worth raising.

First, other significant actors (KurmanaeV et al., 2021) involved in Moïse’s assassination, at his suburban home near Haiti’s capital, allegedly included various Haitians and Haitian-Americans. Figuring among these presumed co-conspirators, and alleged murderers, are a sexagenarian and medically-trained pastor; anti-corruption ex-official and engineer (Reuters, 2021, July 16); ex-senator and business leader (Beaumont, 2021, July 14); ex-U.S. informant and convicted smug-

gler (McLaughlin & Cranley, 2021, July 14); security detail staff (Rivers et al., 2021, July 14); and private contractors.

Second, and of relevance to what follows, a two-pronged, and even-handed, analytical approach is needed in not only gainsaying any notion that Haiti’s current problems are derivative of inherent, and peculiar, societal defects, but also in acknowledging improvement areas for Haitian governance.

Haiti’s Founding

Spanish Conquering

In providing a much-abbreviated outline of the overarching context for Haiti’s ongoing crisis, a helpful starting point for dissection entails the late 1400’s.

That period, and subsequent decades, were defined by Haiti’s reception of two major groups of Africans, racialized by Europeans as “ladinos” and “bozales” (Dominican Studies Institute, n.d.). Route restrictions brought about by (Lima, 2016) the Fall of Constantinople had motivated Spain’s Catholic Monarchs to fund (National Humanities Center, 1492) Genoese merchant Christopher Columbus’s two-pronged search (Markham, 2017) for new trade routes (Mark, 2020), to lands east of Europe (Helps, 1856), and new souls for Spanish priests (Bartosik-Vélez, 2016) to convert, out of a belief in evangelism (Delaney, 2006) (the spreading of the belief in Jesus Christ’s resurrection).

Even before the European voyages of discovery (Rodney, 1973) that were part of this era, however, Spanish society, had come to rely on African slaves, incentivized in part by religious doctrine (Wise & Wheat, n.d.-c).

In other words, by the time Columbus had unexpectedly (History Resource, n.d.) arrived to the Americas, African slaves (Sweet, 2003) had been brought (National Park Service, n.d.) to Spain’s several kingdoms (Bouza et al., 2019) on the Iberian Peninsula (Sweet, 1997). And the Spanish Empire (Absolute Monarchs in

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Europe, 2021) had procured these slaves through (New Africans, 2018) the Arab slave trade (Hopper, 2008), or via slave-trading efforts that had been carried out by Castilian, or proto-Spanish, and Portuguese slave traders (Jameson, n.d.).

After months, or years, on Spanish soil, this group of Africans — referred to as “negros ladinos” (Vigil, 1971) (Spanish for “Latinate, civilized negroes”) and numbering in the thousands during the 1400’s — had undergone acculturation, exemplified by their having to learn the Spanish language.

After Spanish explorers had introduced illnesses (Vigil, 1971) (such as smallpox (Smith, 2017), typhus, and measles (Smith, 2017)) and inflicted other harms that eventually decimated Amerindian populations, Spanish settlers, at first, imported slaves from Spain (de Almeida Mendes, 2008) to occupy Hispaniola, the Spanish-named, 30,000-square-mile island of which Haiti is one territorial, mostly-mountainous (Hadden & Minson, 2010) third.

Then, starting at the dawn of the 16th century, Spaniards abducted hundreds of Africans (Wise & Wheat, n.d.-a) and shipped them across the Atlantic, in brutally inhumane conditions, to work as slaves. A number of them were forced to toil away as miners (Wise & Wheat, n.d.-b) in Hispaniola.

The Spanish referred to the above, second group of imported slaves as “negros bozales” (Spanish for “wild, untamed negroes”), given their African faiths and little (Rueda, 2017), if any, familiarity with Iberian languages and cultures.

Another contextual clue that is crucial to understanding the making of early Haiti encompasses an understanding of the econo-cultural factors that gave rise to, as well as supported, the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Rodney, 1967), through which Europeans had procured the African slaves that they later shipped to

Haiti, and across the Americas (O’Malley & Borucki, 2017).

Involving actors and locations in Western Europe, West and Central Africa, along with North and South America, this triangular trade system, which lasted from the 16th to the 19th centuries, facilitated an amalgam of transactions. At African ports, European traders swapped prized goods, such as guns, beads, and precious metals, for captive Africans who had been brought, partly by fellow Africans (Ronen, 1971), to coastal locales, from deep within Africa’s inland.

As part of this intercontinental process, countless African captives lost their lives, with survivors facing confinement in fortified slave castles on their way to the New World.

Spanish colonists who had originally taken over Hispaniola’s eastern region eventually found themselves grappling with a conflux of obstacles on, and off, the island.

Back in Europe, Dutch subjects (Schmidt & Klooster, n.d.) who had found themselves suffering under the yoke of the Habsburg King Philip II of Spain revolted. In dealing with the difficulties that arose, Spain could neither squash the rebellion nor prevent Dutch merchants from traveling to Hispaniola’s coasts to trade.

As a last resort, Spain decided to resettle its colonists (Knight, 2011) and slaves, away from the island’s coasts.

French Colonialism

While relocating to inland Hispaniola, many lives perished, leaving cattle abandoned and affording African slaves the opportunity to escape. More importantly, Spain’s relocation decision eventually led to significant French invasion of the island’s western territory.

Subsequently, having settled various parts (Dubois, 2004) of Hispaniola’s western third by the mid 1600’s, French colonists earned formal recognition from Spain of their control of the rough equivalent of present-

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day Haiti, via the 1697 Treaty of Ryswick (Davenport, 1698).

Throughout the latter half of the 1700’s, bearing the name Saint-Domingue, Haiti would become the world’s richest colony (McClellan III, 2010), producing unsurpassed yields of sugar and coffee, prized cash crops of the day.

Eventually, in 1791, enslaved Afro-Haitians decided to revolt against French rule. They started what would become the Haitian Revolution with a celebration at the Bois Caïman (“Caiman Woods”) ceremony (The Black Atlantic, 2021).

At its core, Bois Caïman symbolized revolt politically, as well as religiously. In marking a turning point during which Afro-Haitians pneumatologically, or spiritually, relied on Haiti’s vodou religion (History, 2020, October 15) to incite rebellion, Bois Caïman resulted in a formalized rejection of Catholicism.

France had sought to impose Catholicism on all of the Afro-Haitian slaves that its colonists had imported to western Hispaniola, invoking, for instance, Article II of French King Louis XIV’s Code Noir (“Black Code”) (Garrigus, 2016). This Article required that “All the slaves who will be in our Islands [to] be baptized and instructed in the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman religion.” In deviating from this mandate, and the Catholic Church’s hamartiology, or views on sin, Bois Caïman signified resistance, in putting into practice vodou’s African-derived (Hebblethwaite & Dubois, 2021) liturgy, or form of worship.

Haitian Independence

Ultimately, in 1804, amidst a sea of hostility (Salt, 2018) and shock, and after a hard-fought war (James, 1962) that spanned nearly a decade, Haiti proclaimed its independence as the world’s first Black-led republic.

On the world stage, Haitian independence proved significant for at least three reasons.

First, the Haitian Revolution inspired slave revolts (Geggus, 2020) in the U.S., throughout the Americas and beyond.

Second, and of relevance to American readers, Haitian independence also played a key role in motivating (Midlo Center for New Orleans Studies, 2018, October 10) France’s 1803 sale of the near 900,000-square-mile (Our Documents, n.d.) Louisiana Territory to the U.S., almost doubling the size (Alagna, 2004) of America.

By implication, had the Haitian Revolution not taken place, the U.S. — now the world’s third-largest country — would be confined to its eastern seaboard, an area much smaller than its current 3.8 million square miles.

Third, achieving sovereignty allowed Haiti to majorly contribute to the international struggle against slavery.

More than a decade after independence, Haiti developed a “free soil” principle (Ferrer, 2012), enacted via Article 44 of its 1816 Constitution (George A Smathers Library, n.d.), allowing thousands of African-Americans, and other escapees from slavery as well as free Black persons in the Americas, to settle in Haiti.

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