

HAITI DOCUMENTS

*Adapted from: LIBETE – A Haiti Anthology by Charles Arthur and Michael Dash
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Doc 1 - SLAVERY AND PROFITABILITY

C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 1938

In 1767 [Haiti] exported 72 million pounds' weight of raw sugar and 51 millions pounds of white, a million pounds of indigo and two million pounds of cotton, and quantities of hides, molasses, cocoa and rum. ... Nor was it only in quantity that San Domingo excelled but in quality. Each coffee tree produced on an average a pound weight, equal sometimes to that of Mocha. Cotton grew naturally, even without much care, in stony ground and in the crevices of the rocks. Indigo also grew spontaneously. Tobacco had a larger leaf there than in any other part of the Americas and sometimes equaled in quality the produce of Havana... If on no earthly spot was so much misery concentrated as on a slave-ship, then on no portion of the globe did its surface in proportion to its dimensions yield so much wealth as the colony of San Domingo...

Between 1783 and 1789 production nearly doubled. Between 1764 and 1771 the average importation of slaves varied between ten and fifteen thousand. In 1786 it was 27,000, and from 1787 onwards the colony was taking more than 40,000 slaves a year... With every stride in production the colony was marching to its doom. The enormous increase of slaves was filling the colony with native Africans, more resentful, more intractable, more ready for rebellion than the creole Negro (born in the Americas). Of the half-a-million slaves in the colony in 1789, more than two-thirds had been born in Africa.

Doc 2 - TORTURE

Baron de Vastey, *Notes a M le Baron V R Malouet*, 1814

Pompée Valentin Vastey was a mulatto slave who joined Toussaint Louverture's army in 1796 at the age of fifteen. He survived the revolutionary wars to become one of the principal advisers to King Henri Christophe, an early leader of independent Haiti. Writing in 1814, in reply to an apologist for the French colonists, he describes some of the tortures that the owners routinely inflicted on their slaves.

Haven't they committed unheard-of cruelties, crimes until then unknown to humankind? Haven't they burnt, roasted, grilled and impaled alive the unfortunate slaves? Haven't they sawn off the limbs, torn out the tongues and teeth, torn off the ears, and cut off the lips of their blacks? Haven't they hung men upside down, drowned them in sacks, crucified them on planks, buried them alive, crushed them in mortars? Haven't they forced them to eat human shit? And, after having flayed them with the whip, haven't they thrown them to the ground to be devoured by worms, or onto anthills, or lashed them to stakes in the swamp to be eaten alive by mosquitoes? Haven't they thrown them into boiling cauldrons of cane syrup? Haven't they put men and women into barrels spiked with nails, closed at both ends, and rolled them from the tops of mountains, hurling the unfortunate victims inside into the abyss below? Haven't they had these miserable blacks savaged by trained dogs, until these mastiffs, full of human flesh, refuse any longer to act as instruments of the torturers who then finish off the half-eaten victims with the thrust of a knife or a bayonet?

Translated from French by Charles Arthur

Doc 3 - THE FIELD SLAVES

Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*, 1990 Fick describes the life of the field slaves, by far the largest component of the black slave population. These people were, more often than not, born in Africa, and so were known as *bossales* as distinct from *creoles*, that is, blacks born in the Caribbean.

Slaves began work in the fields at eight, were allowed to stop for a meagre breakfast, and then returned until noon. The midday break lasted until two, when they returned at the crack of the whip to labour in the field until sundown. On many plantations slaves were often forced at the end of the day to gather feed for the draft animals, often having to travel considerable distances from the plantation. Finally, firewood had to be gathered, and dinner, consisting of beans and manioc, or a few potatoes, but rarely, if ever, any meat or fish, had to be prepared. During the grinding season on the sugar plantations, slaves then faced what must have seemed like interminable hours of night work at the mills, or of husking and sorting on the coffee plantations.

What little time the slave had for rest was consumed by other types of work. The two hours per day of rest at noon, as well as Sundays and holidays, were granted the slaves by law. And on most plantations, slave families were allotted a small piece of land on which to grow their food. Cultivation of their garden, upon which they were more often than not totally dependent for their subsistence, could only be undertaken on Sundays and holidays, or in the meagre time remaining after the preparation of the midday meal...By allotting small plots to the slaves for their own subsistence, the owner freed himself from the cost and responsibility of feeding them; yet these “kitchen gardens,” meagre as they were and with as little time as the slaves had to plant and tend to their crops, came to be seen by the slaves as their own and thus eventually contributed to the development of a sense, if not of “proprietorship,” at least of the firm notion that the land belonged to those who cultivated it.

Doc 4 - WHITE SOCIETY

Moreau de Saint-Méry *A Civilization That Perished: The Last Years of White Colonial Rule*, 1985 Moreau de Saint-Méry, a French colonist, wrote his extensive and critical survey of Saint-Domingue in the period just before the 1789 French Revolution.

In Saint-Domingue everything takes on a character of opulence such as to astonish Europeans. That crowd of slaves who await the orders and even the signals of one man, confers an air of grandeur upon whomever gives the orders. It is in keeping with the dignity of a rich man to have four times as many domestics as he needs. Since the highest good for a European man is supposedly to have servants, he rents them until he can buy them ...

With little kindness and politeness, [whites] have a thousand boasts and are all too free, among themselves, in showing their lack of education. They argue among themselves over their seats at the plays. They tot up their visits and their invitations. If there are several parties for the same day, for example, there are some who must have the hairdresser sleep at their house so that they will be the first ones ready; and they go ahead of time to take possession of the best seats. In a word, one could never imagine (conduct) more childish and more suited to preventing all friendship...

Doc 5 - BOUKMAN'S CEREMONY

H. Pauléus Sannon, *Histoire de Toussaint L 'Ouverture*, 1920

Mixing fact and legend, Haitian historian Pauléus Sannon wrote the following account of the Bois Caiman ceremony where Boukman Dutty a Vodou priest, made the sacred pact of the general slave revolt. The

ceremony remains a seminal event in the minds of many Haitians. This version is the one taught to most Haitian schoolchildren.

He exercised over all the slaves who came near him an inexplicable influence. In order to wash away all hesitation and to secure absolute devotion he brought together on the night of 14 August 1791 a great number of slaves in a glade in Bois Caiman near MorneRouge. They were all assembled when a storm broke. Jagged lightning in blinding flashes illuminated a sky of low and sombre clouds. In seconds a torrential rain floods the soil while under repeated assaults by a furious wind the forest trees twist and weep and their largest branches, violently ripped off, fall noisily away. In the centre of this impressive setting those present, transfixed, gripped by an inspired dread see an old dark woman arise. Her body quivers in lengthy spasms; she sings, pirouettes and brandishes a large cutlass overhead. An even greater immobility, the shallow scarcely audible breathing, the burning eyes fixed on the black woman soon indicate that the spectators are spellbound. Then a black pig is brought forward, its squeals lost in the raging of the storm. With a swift stroke, the inspired priestess plunges her cutlass into the animal's throat...The hot, spurting blood is caught and passed among the slaves; they all sip of it, all swearing to carry out Boukman's orders. The old woman of the strange eyes and shaggy hair invokes the gods of the ancestors while chanting mysterious words in African dialect. Suddenly Boukman stands up and in an inspired voice cries out, "God who made the sun that shines on us from above, who makes the sea to rage and the thunder roll, this same great God from his hiding place on a cloud, hear me, all of you, is looking down upon us. He sees what the whites are doing. The God of the whites asks for crime; ours desires only blessings. But this God who is good directs you to vengeance! He will direct our arms, he will help us. Cast aside the image of the God of the whites who thirsts for our tears and pay heed to the voice of liberty speaking in our hearts..."

Doc 6 - SLAVE TURNED GENERAL

René Depestre, *Toussaint Louverture: Haiti's Tragic Hero*, 1981

Haitian poet, René Depestre, pays tribute to hero of the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint Louverture.

"Brothers and friends, I am Toussaint Louverture; my name is perhaps already known to you. I am intent on vengeance. I want liberty and equality to be respected in Santo Domingo, and I shall work until this goal is achieved. Join us, brothers, and fight alongside us for the same cause..."

Toussaint Bréda was born on 20 May 1742 ... and his godfather Pierre Baptiste taught him how to read and write...

The principal historical claim to fame of Toussaint Louverture is that he transformed groups of Maroon negroes into a seasoned and disciplined army of liberation. ... Toussaint was aware that the new power directing France and his fears were justified, when Bonaparte lost no time introducing a decree which made it obligatory to place on all the flags of Santo Domingo the following inscription: "Gallant black people, remember that the French people and only the French people recognise your liberty and the equality of your rights". Toussaint Louverture reacted sharply to this measure: "It is not", he said, "a circumstantial liberty conceded to us alone that we wish, but the unequivocal adoption of the principle that no man, whether he be born red, black or white, can become the property of his fellow-men."

Doc 7 – LAND AND COLOUR

David Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier*, 1979

Jean-jacques Dessalines, the first leader of independent Haiti, was an early victim of the long-running struggle between mulattoes and blacks.

Independence had been won as a result of the tenuous alliance between the *anciens libres* (those who had freedom before the revolution, usually mulattoes) and the *nouveaux libres* (those who gained freedom during the war, usually black slaves)... It was Dessalines' ambition to eliminate colour prejudice... and this was reflected in the constitution... which referred to all Haitians as black. It was clear that Dessalines intended the land to be divided with equity and distributed to the people... and this is certainly one of the reasons for his assassination in October 1806.

Doc 8 – TAXING THE PEASANTRY

Michael-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti's Nightmare and the Lessons of History*, 1994

Unable to restore the plantation system in the period immediately after independence, urban elites established an alternative way to amass fortunes during the presidencies of Petion (1807-18) and Boyer (1818-43)..

Traders, politicians, and state employees lived off the peasants' labour... and dominated an import-export economy. Taxes on coffee, Haiti's main agricultural export, ... accounted for from 60-90% of government revenues from the late 1800s to the first half of the 20th century... Up until recently, the various charges on coffee amounted to a 40% tax on peasant income in a country where ... the government has yet to collect income tax from most merchants, civil servants, or middle-class employees. Successive Haitian governments also heavily taxed food and other necessities such as flour, oil, kerosene and matches. Meanwhile, luxuries consumed by the elites entered the country free of charge.

Doc 9 – EPHEMERAL PRESIDENCIES

Various Sources, Haitian Heads of State and Regime Changes, 1843-1915

The coup d'état has been the established method of changing governments throughout much of Haitian history.

Head of State Political Fate

R. Herard (1843-1844) Overthrown
P. Guerrier (1844-1845) Died in office
L. Pierrot (1845-1846) Overthrown
J.-B Riche (1846-1847) Died in office
F. Soulouque (1847-1859) Overthrown
F-N. Geffard (1859-1867) Overthrown
S. Salnave (1867-1869) Overthrown
N. Saget (1870-1874) Retired after full term
M. Dominique (1874-1876) Overthrown
B. Canal (1876-1879) Overthrown
L.F. Salomon (1879-1888) Overthrown
F. Legitime (1888-1889) Overthrown
F. Hippolyte (1889-1896) Died in office
T. A. S. Sam (1896-1902) Completed term

N. Alexis (1902-1908) Overthrown
A. Simon (1908-1911) Overthrown
C. Leconte (1911-1912) Died in office (killed by bomb explosion in national palace) T. Auguste
(1912-1913) Died in office (poisoned)
M. Oreste (1913-1914) Overthrown
O. Zamor (1914) Overthrown
D. Theodore (1914-1915) Overthrown
V.G. Sam (1915) Overthrown and assassinated

Doc 10 – DIVIDED ELITE

Spencer St. John, *Hayti or the Black Republic*, 1884

The British ambassador to Haiti from 1863 to 1884 discusses race.

There is a marked line drawn between the black and the mulatto, which is probably the most disastrous circumstance for the future prosperity of the country... The black hates the mulatto, the mulatto despises the black; proscriptions, judicial murders, massacres have arisen, and will continue to arise as long as this deplorable feeling prevails.

I remember having a conversation with a young mulatto lady, no longer in the freshness of youth, on the subject of intermarriage; and having faintly indicated that I thought she had been unwise in refusing the had of one of the best-mannered, best-educated, and richest blacks in the country, I received a reply which completely surprised me, "Sir, you insult me to imagine I would marry a black. No, I will never marry anyone but a white."

This contempt of the black is felt by nearly every coloured girl, and is bitterly resented. I have seen young mulatto women refusing to dance with blacks at a ball... Yet, what can be more absurd than such prejudice, when, but two generations removed, their mothers were African slaves!