

Haitians in the DR: Reflections from DR XI

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After terminating my DR XI service, I became an anthropologist specializing in Haiti. Maria (my Dominican wife) joined me for a two year “honeymoon” in a Haitian village after our marriage in 1972. Over 50 years later, we still get phone calls from the villagers every week. (Their homes have been ransacked and occupied by gangs. Some have joined the caravans through our southern border.) Both Haiti and the DR are central elements in our lives.

In the decades following DR XI, Haiti and Haitians have also become a central concern in the DR. The following paragraphs will discuss that transformation and its implications.

Haiti’s presence in the DR has catapulted in the past half century. Back in the days of our PC service, Haitian issues were not prominent in daily Dominican life. There was anger at memories (taught in school) of the Haitian occupation of 1822 and pride at the revolution of 1844. (Recall: Latin America celebrates liberation from Spain and Portugal. Dominicans celebrate liberation from Haiti.) The migration of Haitians into the border area stopped after Trujillo’s massacre of 1937. The few Haitians in the DR during the 1960’s were mostly temporary sugar-cane cutters, dwelling apart on *bat-eyes* in the East or Southwest before returning to Haiti. PC volunteers may never have encountered one in their two years. I know that I didn’t, even though I worked near the border.

Now Haitians can be seen throughout the country. Most have come “*anba fil*”, as they say in Creole: “under the wire.” They pay smugglers, who in turn pay border soldiers. (There’s a rumor that assignment to the border used to be a military punishment; in recent decades some military began paying for potentially lucrative border assignments related to Haitian border crossings.) Whatever the case, formerly out of sight in the sugar cane fields, Haitians have now become a major labor force in urban construction sites and rural farms. I’ve also encountered them as *colmado* assistants in Santo Domingo and, in the East, as preferred employees in the massive Chinese department stores that have sprung up since the DR unceremoniously dumped Taiwan for the People’s Republic. I have chatted with Haitians as they rake seaweed from the booming tourist beaches of Punta Cana in the far east.

Even in the campo, Dominican farmers now depend almost totally on Haitian labor, in a manner not true in the DR XI world. Rural Dominican youth will now emigrate to the cities. Or they’ll buy motorcycles and transport neighbors from village to town. To find workers, Dominican farmers have to negotiate with a bilingual Haitian foreman, who then organizes a team of Haitian workers, many of them monolingual Creole speakers. And Dominican landowners have assured me that this is no longer “cheap labor”. Though visa-less, Haitian groups know what Dominican workers would be paid and can now negotiate similar salaries. Haitian women now not only bring their entrepreneurial impulses to many urban street markets; they are also increasingly being hired as domestic help (cooking, sweeping, laundry, etc.) in middle class urban Dominican homes. In La Romana Haitian youth at traffic lights have imitated Dominicans (at separate traffic lights) in squirting unsolicited water on my windshield. Haitian women, some with a baby in arms, approach drivers in the capital

with an outstretched hand. Nasty rumor has it that some of the babies may be rented. I recall complaining at a traffic light to a woman in Creole who protected her own head from the sun with a kerchief but left the child's head bare. Was it a rented child? (I didn't actually ask her that.) At any rate, the Haitian presence is just one of several ways in which the DR today is quite different from the country of DR XI.

Two questions: (1) Is this Haitian presence helpful or hurtful to the country? (2) Are Haitians being systematically abused?

As for the first question, the DR economy is one of the few in Latin America that is booming. It's not booming *because* of the Haitians. But several major sectors (agriculture and construction, for example) would be in trouble if all Haitians suddenly flew to Nicaragua (as some in our Haitian village have done) to join the caravans crossing into the US through Mexico. On the other hand, the new gang regime in Haiti has led to the building of a protective border wall and increased deportations. (This has probably paralyzed the market for migrant kickbacks to cooperative soldiers.) The Haitians are now needed but their massive presence (anywhere from half a million to two million depending on your source) provokes tensions.

That leads to question two. Are Haitians being abused? High-decibel outraged accusations fill the American media about the abuse by those racist Dominicans of vulnerable Haitians because of their black skin. Point of fact: 75% of Dominicans are of mixed Afro-Caucasian ancestry in addition to the 10% who are phenotypically black. If born with anglophone surnames in the U.S under our "one-drop" rule, they would be called Black. The percentage of Dominicans of mixed Afro-Caucasian ancestry is far greater than in any other Caribbean or Latin American country. The major abuses of Haitians are at the hands of Dominican military, particularly in the sudden street roundups during deportation outbursts. As for ordinary Dominicans, one hears a variety of statements about Haitians. What I hear very frequently from Dominicans themselves is: *Lo' haitiano' hacen trabajo' que ya lo' dominicano' no queremos' hacer. Somo' jaragane'. Lo' haitiano' se fajan.* "We Dominicans are lazy; Haitians work their butts off." This "lazy Dominican" image is of course a stereotype. But the negative swipe is made by Dominicans against Dominicans themselves, not against "black Haitians."

Certain Dominicans do vigorously badmouth Haitians. They do so, however, not because of their skin color, but because of behaviors associated with Haitians: their supposed hygienic practices, their supposed religious practices ("voodoo"), and their supposed hopes for making the whole island "one and indivisible" under Haitian control. (The latter fear is laughable. Haitians uniformly and eloquently detest their own government. The last thing they would want would be to bring it to the D.R.) Black Dominican soldiers are as fierce with deportees as their brown-skinned colleagues. And in terms of bad-mouthing, black Dominicans can be as eloquent as others in their anti-Haitian moments. The hot-button issues, however, are *ethnic and national, not racial*, in character.

The badmouthing, by the way, is bilateral. In the early 70's, I made a preliminary visit to my future research village in Haiti to prepare a house before flying across the border to wed Maria. Some villagers expressed shock that I was about to marry a Dominican woman. (The local Creole term is *fam panyol*, "Spanish woman".) *Fam panyol* were the major sex-workers in Port-au-Prince. Some villagers assumed that this profession was as common to Dominican women as marketing produce was to Haitian women. Across the border, after our wedding, some Dominicans in turn were shocked that I was bringing Maria to a Haitian village. "O-o! Tú ere' loco?? Lo' haitiano' comen

gente". You're crazy. Haitians are people-eaters. Some 18 months later in Haiti, my village friendships were solid enough that I could ask two older men in an interview: Excuse me. Have you guys ever heard of people in Haiti eating people? The two men looked embarrassingly at each other. One answered apologetically but affirmatively: "E bon pawol. But we thought only whites did that." Ethnic stereotyping, in short, is multi-directional.

And the widespread reports of Dominicans bad-mouthing Haitians should be balanced by pointing out that the Dominican government gives equal rights to free primary schooling for undocumented Haitian children. In certain schools near the Dominican border, most of the pupils are Haitian. The Dominican government also gives the same free health care, particularly maternity care, to Haitians as is given to Dominicans. There are public maternity wards even in Santo Domingo where 3 or 4 out of every ten neonates are born to Haitian women. They don't come to have their children born with local citizenship. (Dominicans sometimes fly to Miami in month 8 explicitly with that purpose.) Haitian women cross over because the services and general treatment they receive in the DR are superior to those in their own country.

This citizenship issue is another sore point for some American observers. They are shocked at the practice of denying citizenship to Haitian children born in the DR and deporting them later back to a country where they have never lived. "Dominicans born in the US get American citizenship. How do they dare deny citizenship to Haitians born in the DR?" The criticism is based on an unwarranted assumption. The US follows the *jus soli* system – citizenship by location of birth. The DR follows the *jus sanguinis* practice of Spain, which is also the practice of most countries in Europe, Africa, and Asia: citizenship by blood. A neonate is a citizen of the country only if at least one of the parents is a citizen. That is why children born to Haitians in the DR are not Dominicans. But they are not stateless. They are Haitian citizens. If they are not given papers, blame the Haitian consulate. Dominicans didn't invent the *jus sanguinis* principle. Most countries in the world use it. This principle doesn't justify brutal deportation procedures by soldiers who round up Haitians on the street and drop them off the next day across the border. But Americans should hold off on screams of "racism racism!" simply because the country doesn't follow the American way in the matter of citizenship. The hot-button issues of "race" and "racism" as they occur in the DR and in Haiti warrant more detailed treatment than is possible here.

To summarize the preceding: These paragraphs have discussed three points:

1. The growing presence of Haitians in Dominican economy and society since the days of DR XI. The Haitian issue may now confront PCVs, depending on their assignment.
2. The benefits and pitfalls that this increased presence generates both for Dominicans and Haitians.
3. The way in which outsiders, particularly Americans, are prone to project their own victim-villain racial views onto the Dominican Republic. The script of this soap-opera usually assigns to Dominicans the role of villains, to Haitians the role of victims.

In-depth experiences in villages and towns on both sides of the border incline one to throw the simplistic victim-villain script into the nearest trash can.

It would be interesting to learn what the current cohort of PCVs is experiencing with respect to the Haitian presence in the DR.