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Haiti, now and next:

Haiti and the unseen world

by Elizabeth McAlister

I have written a good bit recently about the intense religious responses to the Haiti earthquake, as congregations regroup in public spaces in search of meaning and mutual support. To approach such events from the vantage point of religious studies is to attend to how groups engage with powers in an unseen cosmic realm that they themselves have constructed. Now I find myself thinking about how crucial it is to engage in frank analysis about rebuilding Haiti in terms of the unseen world of hidden, covert, and sometimes illegal political and economic deals between both Haitians and Americans (and others) that have been instrumental in shaping the overlapping crises that Haitians confront. So far, many social scientists and policy commentators have written about rebuilding as if other countries, international organizations, and the Haitian government itself relate to the Haitian nation in public, official, legal, and traceable ways, when this is often simply not the case.

Many disenfranchised Haitians I have interviewed about religion see secret deals with demons, magical pacts in the invisible world, and other immoral relationships as the cause of prosperity for some and the impoverishment of others. For local, informally educated actors, explanations for social change may lie in the unseen world of predatory spiritual transactions. Hungry and "hot" spirits can demand payment of life force in exchange for wealth. Some evangelicals go so far as to posit an originary pact with demons at a meeting of revolutionary slaves at Bois Caïman. Some Vodouists theologize Lucifer as the ruler of this world, a place left unattended by God in heaven. Michael Taussig, the Comaroffs, and many others have analyzed the ways that relatively powerless groups figure rapidly changing political and economic systems as "occult economies." These occult explanations assume and reproduce the idea that real, causal power operates in a hidden realm, and that invisible powers explain material conditions and events. Haitians from Verettes to Cité Soleil spoke to me in this local idiom about relationships and dealings between local actors and global agents. They supposed secret machinations in the unseen realm to be the mechanism through which dominant groups wield power in order to produce wealth.

The thing is, real power does operate in a hidden realm in the Haitian context. The religious imagining of an unseen world indexes the hidden, covert, and often illegal world of deal making in the Haitian political and economic spheres. Haitians' familiarity with the idiom of religious

secrecy gives them the analytical tools they apply to the obscure workings of the Haitian government, the rapaciousness of the mafias, and the formidable and self-interested power of the Americans. It always surprised me to hear just how aware ordinary Haitians were of the workings of political power. Haitians in the Rara bands, Vodou temples, and Christian churches were well aware that the Haitian state was more interested in politics than services. While often spiced with far-fetched details, people voiced suspicions about foreign support for certain political parties, of the politics of trade embargoes, of the clandestine cocaine trafficking networks, and of predatory trade deals. (One of the reasons evangelicalism appeals to so many Haitians is its adamant rhetorical stance against corruption and secrecy. In the light of Christ, what is hidden must be revealed.)

One doesn't have to be a conspiracy theorist of the "paranoid style of mind" to develop a solid social scientific analysis of hidden, predatory deal making. Such an analysis will be vital in making plans to rebuild. Debates about whether it is the Haitian political class or the Americans who are more are at fault are unproductive. In this transnational era, the parties depend on one another, and sometimes overlap. "*Diri Miyami*" ("Miami rice") is a prime example. In one of the most destructive economic deals of the last decade, the international financial institutions (IMF and World Bank) negotiated a reduction of tariffs on rice imports from 35% to 3%, even while the average CARICOM tariff for rice was 25%. In a related deal, a single Texas-based corporation called American Rice Inc. gained a monopoly over rice imports. The first shipments were distributed to rice-growing areas in Haiti by military convoy, so strong was the local opposition to the imported product. Native rice production virtually collapsed, and many farmers migrated to the overpopulated capital city as a result. While these regulations and trade deals may (or may not) have been legal, they were carried out behind the scenes, unannounced to Haitian farmers and the broader public, and involved both Haitian and American elites.

Covert political operations have worked in tandem with economic interventions. The CIA funding of the paramilitary death squad FRAPH during the early Aristide years was part of a covert operation to destabilize the Haitian government. This is by now well documented. But other covert operations had also supported Aristide, and worked against the Cédras junta (which deposed Aristide in the first coup in 1991). Covert operations finally ousted Aristide again in 2004. Most Haitians understood all too well that hidden deals were shaping their lives. In 1992 *The Washington Post* ran an article titled "Haitians Look for U.S. Hand in Whatever Befalls Their Nation." To take just one example from the early '90s, when I lived in Haiti, American lobbyists were reported to represent both the junta headed by Raoul Cédras and a group of businessmen that held virtual monopolies in Haiti on staples such as cooking oil, tomato paste, and coffee. The Americans were to produce favorable publicity for the junta and damaging reports about Aristide. Everyone could see that factories shipped garments out and Texaco delivered petrol into Haiti, even during the embargo that prevented them from getting medical supplies and ordinary imports, or taking commercial flights. Americans worked hand in hand with Haitian business elites in the opaque spheres of behind-the-scenes negotiations that were shaping that period.

The covert cocaine trade that has destabilized Haiti since the late 1980s is also a result of Haitian-foreign collaborations. Colombian cocaine traffickers use Haiti as a transshipment point for tons of cocaine each year, relying on their ability to bribe Haitian officials. Published reports

accuse top government officials, including former President Aristide, the director of the national police force, the American Airlines director of security in Haiti, the Haitian anti-drug czar, as well as American drug enforcement personnel, of being involved in the trade. These highly profitable and illegal trade deals depend on international cooperation—albeit of the clandestine and illegal sort.

The social scientists participating in the SSRC essay forum "Haiti, Now and Next" are important researchers and thinkers on the political economy of Haiti and beyond. They call for concrete steps towards future direction, such as debt relief, strengthening government, multi-lateral negotiations, ending unfavorable trade tariffs, and educating a productive peasantry. Their recommendations to policymakers and political actors would surely facilitate a change from the past dysfunction to a forward-moving orientation for Haiti. Other American commentators have weighed in through the media on what "we" can do to rebuild Haiti. Many offer support for reforestation, education, public health, and agricultural revitalization. Who would argue that these things are not desirable? The problem is that Haitian government actors, international banks, development organizations, policy-makers, and private business interests must all cooperate *visibly* if the system is to function for the common good of Haitian people. Unfortunately this has never happened before. Power has long operated in the hidden world of predatory, behind-the-scenes deals betweens competing factions. Strategies for rebuilding must avoid a kind of mythmaking that acts as if foreign and Haitian governments have been above-board and other groups have been legitimate, open, and fair.

Thinking and planning for rebuilding must be frank and proactive about revealing and reshaping the entrenched pattern of unpublicized deals and agreements. One key document now circulating is economist Paul Collier's published Report to the Secretary General of the U.N. [pdf], which discusses the Haitian economy in the aftermath of the devastating 2008 hurricanes. Leaving aside the question of its merits as an economic plan, as a religion scholar I read his document in part as a good example of mythmaking. Collier relies on a narrative that euphemizes the history of secret Haitian-foreign dealings as "a long history of socio-economic fragility." Collier refers to the ousting of Aristide in 2004 as "a period of crisis," although (regardless of one's position on Aristide's merits as president) it was a clear example of Haitian-foreign covert operations. The private deals that led to the importing of "Miami rice" go unmentioned, and Collier writes that "food [...] suddenly became too expensive relative to people's expectations." Ironically, Collier avers that "the price of agreement cannot be the suspension of realism." Yet he writes as if international parties relate to Haiti in open and visible ways, when, as I am arguing here, they do not.

Rebuilding plans will need to be proactive about predation and corruption if past patterns are to change. In 2009, the group Transparency International published their annual corruption survey. Haiti ranked in the bottom ten, along with Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Haiti had risen from even closer to the bottom since 2007, when Preval declared "war without end" on corruption. Yet American-Haitian Richard Morse tweeted from downtown Port-au-Prince in the days after the quake about the international aid given after the hurricanes: "2009 was the YEAR of FRAUD in Haiti. If Haiti is part of IMF auditing system, then why is no one in JAIL?" After a church service in Port-au-Prince on the second Sunday after the quake, a woman opined to a reporter about foreign assistance in the coming season: "They only give the aid money to the same big

families, over and over. So I ask, what is the point? They have given money to these families to help Haiti for 50 years, and look at Haiti. I say the Americans need to make up a new list." People in Haiti can see that corruption and predation are transnational affairs, and that the present moment risks repeating all the errors of the past.

Concepts like "democracy," "fiscal accountability," and "transparency" imply a public openness that does not exist in the Haitian case. Much discourse about public openness regarding Haiti tends to be a form of mythmaking. Plans to rebuild must incorporate a solid analysis of hidden forms of predation, and strategic plans to proactively thwart it. Social scientists can work towards producing analyses of the covert operations, predatory trade deals, development failures, and illegal trafficking that journalists have revealed. The anthropology of corruption, mafias, and development can be consulted in order to apply specific strategies, best practices and concrete ways to thwart hidden predation. These analyses and strategies must be factored in to rebuilding plans, to end the present, routine "suspension of realism."

In his January 28 testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations [pdf] sixteen days after the earthquake, Paul Farmer spoke frankly about the "beltway bandits" and the need for transparency in the reconstruction of Haiti. He advocated "a reconstruction plan that uses a pro-poor, rights based approach based on something far different from the charity and failed development approaches that have marred interactions between Haiti and much of the rest of the world for the better part of two centuries." Farmer has written sustained analyses of the hidden processes of wealth extraction away from ordinary Haitians. He has implemented his knowledge through the tremendously successful organization Partners in Health. I take it as a glimmer of hope that Farmer currently occupies a central position in both the American and Haitian arenas of power.

Exemplary social science analyses that do not ignore hidden deal making include those by Alex Dupuy, who shows the international dimensions of political crises in Haiti, and Catherine Maternowska, who illustrates the transnational dimensions of development failures. Besides them, I have found that the most useful analyses of Haitian history are by anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who has carefully shown how silence has shaped the writing of the history of Haiti, how the Haitian patronage system culminated in the Duvalier family, and how the state weakened the nation by exploiting and repressing civil society. I find myself wishing to know what Rolph would say now. Of the secret dealings in the realm of political economy, he might quote to us from page 73 of his book *Silencing the Past*: "If some events cannot be accepted even as they occur, how can they be assessed later?" He would probably agree with the Vodou lyric "konplo pi fò pase wanga": "hidden schemes are stronger than magic."