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"Haiti in Focus: A Guide to People, Politics and Culture"

By Charles Arthur

_Haiti in Focus: A guide to People, Politics and Culture_ is the 17th book of a series already published in the _In Focus Travel_ series by Interlink Books. Charles Arthur, the author could consider himself to be the intrepid traveler of Haiti. He is one of the co-coordinators of the Haiti Support Group, an organization based in London. The book under review is written with such controlled passion and clarity that it gives the reader a good summary and feel of the triumphs and tragedies of the Haitian people. The poorest and most illiterate republic and in the Western Hemisphere and yet its mystique, culture and pride are second to none. This book, which contains a number of “cogent insights into this unique country’s complex problems” is framed within a down home traveler’s observations of the world. Here, I concur with Bob Corbett’s comments, “this book is not a travel guide in the normal sense.” This is not to say that the 100-page travel guide carries no value for indeed, it does. In it, Charles Arthur details six chapters: the land and people, history,
society, politics, the economy, and culture of Haiti from pre-Columbian era to present day. His insights are especially important when he begins to raise a series of questions that help demystify the many misconceptions that shroud the country in mystery (5).

Charles Arthur does not try to explain away the horrible and unacceptable conditions of the people and the almost unforgivable treachery of the mulatto and black Haitian middle-class political and economic leadership. But what was most interesting is the continued and sinister support of the numerous Haitian dictators from 1915 onwards beginning with the murder of President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam by the democratic government and profit driven corporations of the United States. First, the outright US occupation of Haiti in 1915, under the false pretense that the country was headed toward a dangerous political and civil chaos lasted for 19 years! Then the American military presence remained there to train and support a series of dictators, and, to protect the exploitative American corporations. When opposition naturally rose up, the military suppressed and killed all democratic opposition. Arthur makes us see and gives us details of the thoughtless cruelty of foreign occupation and internal greed and lawlessness. For instance, organizations like the World Bank and the IMF in cohort with the influential USAID have
tied their provision of aid to an economic development plan focusing on agro-exports and the light manufacturing assembly industry.

This controversial re-orientation of the Haitian economy had a great impact on the production of food for domestic consumption and, in its place, the growth backed by foreign investment of exports, both agricultural crops and assembled goods. Haitian critics dubbed it the “American Plan,” and claimed that such a development plan would only benefit the US and the small Haitian business elite while destroying the livelihoods of Haitian peasant farmers. What is striking here is the successful try so far of keeping Haiti a debtor nation whereby the small elite gets perks from the US and world agencies and then, in turn, receive more money through the taxing of those few poor and working people that can’t manage to get a job in the country (an estimated 70% unemployment rate!).

But everything is not so bleak because of what Arthur calls the courage of the people’s movement along with the alliance of the intellectuals, students and artists that have a long tradition dating back to the 1930s and 1940s, which came to fruition during the 1970s and 1980s movements that challenged the Duvaliers: Papa Doc, the father, and Baby Doc, the son. Baby “Doc” was no match for the determined ferocity of a people who had been oppressed for so long.
From these democratic and grassroots movements came the struggles and election of a catholic priest, Jean Bertrand Aristide. Charles Arthur gives a fair account of the rise and fall of Aristide his capture of the presidency of Haiti and his founding of the Lavalas Family Party (Lafanmi Se Lavi). All of this is absorbing reading and leads me to ask a question without making excuses. Did Haiti really have a chance to develop and grow like the US or any other nation from the beginning with Goliath and his henchmen exploiters on Haiti’s back? Arthur does not preach or throw out simple answers, but he shows that the US attitudes, economic and social policies along with the cowardly and greedy Haitian political and economic leadership did not have the interests of the people in mind.

The Haitian nation started gloriously with two of the greatest leaders in 19th century world history: Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines. Leaders of the Haitian Revolution, the first and only successful revolt against a slave owning power in history, in this case, France and her allies. Arthur writes this history with such a clearness and friendly style that any neophyte will find it interesting. It is indeed a sad and tragic history: the massacre and disease deaths of the Taino Indians who were the island’s native inhabitants, the disease death and arrogance that Columbus brought in 1492, the miserable and
exploitative reality of slavery, to the contemporary struggle of oppression of the Haitian peasantry and the Haitian urban dwellers. Their existence, their struggle, their pride and later as we shall see, the cultural brilliance and uniqueness of Haitian culture within the context of the Caribbean and the world carries its pride to the next stage.

Charles Arthur uses several photographs to capture the vibrant cultural life and singular identity of Haiti. This is a worthwhile book for both new and seasoned readers of Haitian history. It manages to be serious and yet open. Though I felt somewhat upset and depressed reading about what Arthur calls "the fantastic failure" of the numerous dictators and their militia thugs, I was somewhat overjoyed, grateful, and full of pride when reading the section on Haitian culture. The author paints an honest and open picture of Haiti including its faults and problems only to remember that the book is for neophytes or the general public since the country remains little known or understood (5). Haitians are known all over the world for their unique culture, religion and artistic style. The author writes about the golden age of Haitian literature, which was in the 1930s and 1940s with writers like Philippe Thoby Marcelin and Jacques Roumain; Arthur briefly but with special care talked about the painters, musicians past and contemporary. You get the feeling that he has enormous respect and warmth
towards these artists and writers and the many others since they have sacrificed their comfort and even their lives for the cause of Haitian freedom. He has a subsection on the influence of voodoo and carnival, and the fact that Haiti was the first Caribbean nation to qualify for the World Cup Final. It’s all in this wonderful small book and Arthur did an excellent job. He also has a section on tourism and places to visit in Haiti.

If readers appreciate such concise historical and cultural overview then, this book is an appropriate one. If however, one wants a critical, thoughtful perspectives on the social and cultural history, on the economic inefficiency, and the nature of the political challenges of Haiti which goes beyond homespun and other self serving stories, the reader should ensure that his or her library on Haiti includes more than this text. Charles Arthur is an individual with his heart in the right place: he is concerned about Haiti, its people, history and culture. He finds, for example that “the quantity and high visibility of international NGOs in Haiti – their new four-wheel drive jeeps with painted logos on the side can be spotted on every major route – prompts cynics to ask what exactly they contribute to development in Haiti” (34). Arthur comes across, then, as a concerned individual, one who wishes to revisit the societal environment so that Haitians and friends of Haiti are part of a humane
environment. An environment not only that knows its people but supports them as well. He admits that this is not an easy task. "Haiti", he says, "almost always evokes negative associations. The genesis of this bad press can be traced back to the slave uprisings and revolutions 200 years ago" (5).

So this is not a book to dislike. There are a number of important messages that Arthur makes, not the least of which is the idea that "Haiti is a place steeped in history" (15). His analysis of the history is by itself a gem. Here, Arthur suggests that much of the history has taken the "form of rivalry by political disputes and massive economic inequality". He writes, "when in 1996, Aristide created a new party, The Lavalas Family, and criticized the government structural adjustment program, the divisions on the center-left deepened. In mid-1997, following disputed partial elections in which only a tiny percentage of voters participated, the prime minister resigned, prompting a major institutional and financial crisis" (27). In fact, this is a logical analysis statement, not without cynicism. The front cover of the book displays the picture of a young boy playing a homemade guitar from a recycled cooking oil tin container is full of symbolic significance. The book has not a single footnote, this in itself is indicative of the nature of the text.
However, the overall tone of the six chapters in the book is overwhelmingly positive.

In summary, Haiti: A Guide to the People, Politics and Culture is a compilation of Arthur’s years of experience as both an informed traveler, researcher and the coordinator of the London-based Haiti Support Group. It is a book that is easy to read, and while it does not address in-depth the many serious and challenging issues of national development, political culture and economic disparities that plague the Haitian society, it is a small step towards getting the general public to enlarge their worldview on Haiti. The book is unique since it packs so much in such a brief format. Charles Arthur, I think has provided a readable if idiosyncratic journey into Haiti’s vibrant cultural life. His observations regarding the society, the people, the land, culture, politics and the economy, are for the most part well taken, yet they lack the bite, which may lead to real intended change within Haitian society. His traveler’s guide is certainly a step above the kind of information that one usually finds in travel books. Despite its limitations, Haiti: A Guide to the People, Politics and Culture is a remarkable start for beginners of Haitian culture and history.