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LA Times and AP News

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Haiti's History as First Black Republic Creates a Special Bond with Many African-Americans

By Jesse Washington
AP National Writer

A terrible earthquake anywhere in the Caribbean would have hit a sympathetic nerve in most Americans. But as the first black republic of the West, born when slaves overthrew white rulers, Haiti holds a unique place in the hearts of many American blacks.

That's why Toussaint Tabb, a college student named after the Haitian slave-turned-general who led the revolution more than 200 years ago, was jolted when he saw televised images of the devastation in Haiti.

"They looked just like any other black people over here in America," said Tabb, a history major at North Carolina Central University. "They're the same people."

"I would say it hit home harder because it was a predominantly black country, and my name is Toussaint and it's Haiti."

Joel Dreyfuss, a native Haitian and editor of the black-oriented Web site TheRoot.com, said American blacks easily "could have ended up in Haiti instead of the U.S., depending on where the slave ship stopped."

"I think there is a connection," Dreyfuss continued. "It's not unreasonable or racist, it's human nature, just as Jews identify with Israel. ... There's a natural sense of identification with people who look like yourself."

Much of that connection revolves around racial issues, said Jean-Max Hogarth, a physician born in the United States to Haitian immigrants.

Haiti's status as the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere "has a lot to do with the fact it has been independent since 1804, it had a long period of
discrimination, it had to pay reparations" and had corrupt dictators, said Hogarth, whose medical practice donated a five-figure sum to send him and other doctors to Haiti to treat earthquake victims.


"That has created further solidarity with African-Americans," he said. "We think about Haiti being a nation that gained its own independence through struggle. It gives a sense of pride not only for Haitians, but for African-Americans as well."

Under French rule, Haiti's abundant sugar plantations made it perhaps the richest colony of the Caribbean. The slave rebellion began about 1790 and a leader soon emerged: Toussaint L'Overture. After years of fierce fighting, L'Overture was captured by Napoleon's forces and died in France.

The rebellion lived on, and Napoleon's mighty forces were defeated. Haiti declared itself a nation on Jan. 1, 1804. For years to come, however, Haiti would pay reparations to France.

The loss of Haiti's riches and strategic location was part of Napoleon's decision to sell the Louisiana Purchase, which doubled the size of the United States.

In America, where blacks were still seeking freedom, there was pride and wonder that Haitians had seized their destiny. This left an indelible imprint on African-American culture. [Read the full article in the L.A. Times >>>.]