

Demonizing Democracy:

Christianity vs. Vodoun, and the Politics of Religion in Haiti

By Richard Sanders, editor,
Press for Conversion!

When it comes to politics in Haiti, religion is often the unspoken elephant in the room.

Understanding the pivotal role—for both “good” and “evil”—played by religious institutions in the struggle for political power in Haiti, can help to explain much about the slavery, dictatorships, propaganda and betrayals that have all-too-often characterised this country’s tormented history.

Revolution!

To begin with, Vodoun is credited or blamed—depending on one’s religious and political worldviews—for playing a major part in the overthrow of France’s colonial regime in Haiti. In 1791, when slaves gathered to organize another uprising, they performed a Vodoun ritual and

“sealed a sacred pact, swearing to die rather than live under the misery of the slave system. ... [A] week later, a slave rebellion began, quickly spreading across

the whole colony. The rebellion became a revolution, and, over the course of twelve years,...half a million black slaves fought and defeated the armies of France, Spain and Britain. Slavery was abolished, and, in 1804, Haiti became the world’s first black republic.”¹

This proud Haitian history is seen rather differently by some Christians, like Reverend Tom Barrett, the American editor and publisher of *Conservative Truth*. Within two weeks of the 2004 coup that violently and illegally deposed President Jean-Bertrand Aristide on the bicentennial of Haiti’s founding, Barrett used his fundamentalism to desecrate Haiti’s heritage, demonize its most widespread and be-

loved religion, and to sanctify the vicious regime change that had just robbed Haitians of their duly-elected government:

“[T]he nation of Haiti was dedicated to Satan 200 years ago. On August 14, 1791, a group of *houngans* [Vodoun priests] ...made a pact with the Devil... They sacrificed a black pig in a voodoo ritual [and]....asked Satan for his help in liberating Haiti from the French. In exchange, the voodoo priests offered to give the country to Satan for 200 years and swore to serve him. On January 1, 1804, the nation of Haiti was born and thus began a new demonic tyranny.”²



This replica of a sword from the 1492 fleet of Christopher Columbus is emblazoned with a Christian cross.

Origins of the Conflict

Barrett’s bigoted ethnocentrism is nothing new. It belies a religious conflict with deep roots that are gnarled together through the five centuries since European crusaders brought genocide, slavery and Christianity to the New World. Their first point of contact with America was Hispanola, the island on which Haiti is now the western portion.

Sponsored by the Catholic monarchs of Spain, Christopher Columbus and his conquistadores “discovered” Haiti in 1492. The island was soon a source of gold and slaves for Europe and as his journal notes:

“From here one might send, in the name of the Holy Trinity, as many slaves as could be sold.... [I]t appears that we could sell four thousand slaves, who might be worth twenty million and more.”³

Because Catholic law forbade the enslavement of Christians, Columbus would not allow the baptism of native people.⁴ Three decades later, with the brutal annihilation of the island’s entire aboriginal population, its

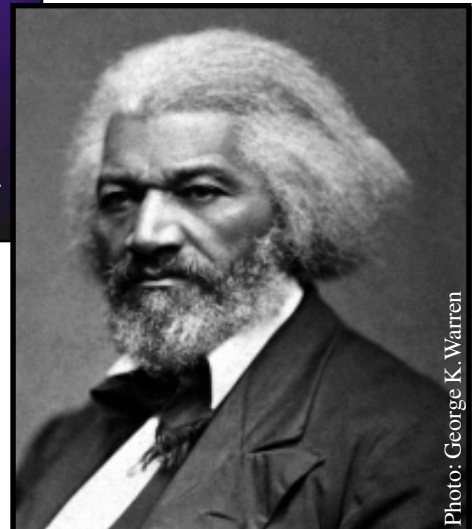


Photo: George K. Warren

“Until Haiti struck for freedom, the conscience of the Christian world slept profoundly over slavery. It was scarcely troubled even by a dream of this crime against justice and liberty.”

Frederick Douglass, 1893.
(Abolitionist and statesman)

Christian conquerors began importing shipments of African slaves to Haiti. Thus began the horror-filled history of the infamous transatlantic slave trade.

French settlers started occupying the island in 1625 and Spain was eventually forced to cede Haiti to France in 1697. Because French colonists knew that Vodoun was a “focus of resistance to and a rejection of Christian, white supremacy,” they “tried, without success, to stamp it out.”⁵ France enforced its *Code Noire* laws stipulating that “All slaves in our Islands will be baptized and instructed in the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman religion” and that

“We forbid any public exercise of any religion other than the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman; we wish that the offenders be punished as rebels and disobedient to our orders.”⁶

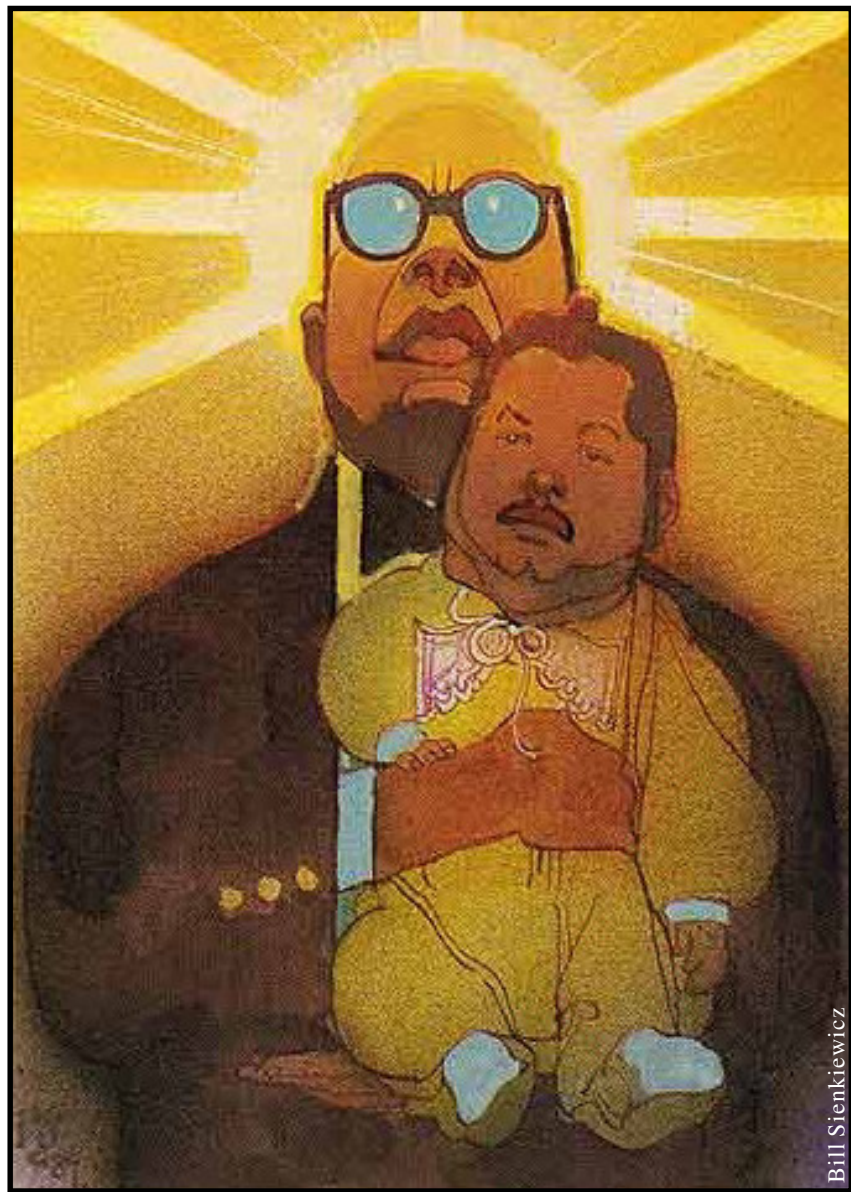
The Revolution Betrays Vodoun

After Haiti’s revolution, the colony’s all-white Catholic clergy—who had always been sent from Europe—went home and the Vatican cut all relations with the new republic.⁷ During “the Schism,” the U.S., Britain, France and other world powers placed an economic embargo on Haiti. And, Vodoun faced repression from Haiti’s elite which treated it as a pariah religion. It wasn’t long before the laws of independent Haiti expressly banned Vodoun practice. This was the case from 1835 until 1987.⁸

After its slave-led revolution, Haiti’s more prosperous classes still “sided with French culture. From the colonial period on the Haitian mulatto and black bourgeoisie have embraced the Catholic religion, European culture, French language and Western ways.”⁹

But, while Haiti’s elite still “looked to France and to Catholicism for its cultural and religious identity, ...the majority of the population, living as peasant farmers..., developed a way of life and a system of beliefs drawing on African traditions.”¹⁰

In 1860, the Vatican restored relations with the Haitian state and Catholicism was decreed as Haiti’s official state religion. With the signing of this *concordat*, “the Church began a long on-again, off-again campaign against Voodoo.”¹¹



Bill Stenkiewicz

“Papa Doc” and “Baby Doc”

“God and the people are the source of my power. I have twice been given the power. I have taken it, and damn it, I will keep it.”
Dictator François “Papa Doc” Duvalier (1957-1971)

“Papa Doc” pretended to be a Vodoun spirit and was supported by the Catholic hierarchy in Haiti and Rome. His son, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc,” was “President for Life” (1971-1986).

Anti-Vodoun Pogroms

These periodic campaigns to uproot and “cleanse” Haitian society of its African religious heritage were genocidal cultural pogroms, involving horrible acts of cruelty perpetuated against Vodoun practitioners. One particularly vicious period occurred during the direct military occupation of Haiti by the U.S. Marines (1915-1934). At that time, the Americans, “with the support of the French Catholic clergy,” attempted “to eradicate the practice of Vodou.”¹²

Eventually, this history of per-

secution “culminating in an all out war” called the “anti-superstition campaign.”¹³ This drive against Vodoun reached a frenzied peak between 1939 and 1942.¹⁴ Colluding with Haitian authorities, the Catholic Church targeted Vodoun priests as “the principal slave of Satan.”¹⁵ One French missionary who “enthusiastically welcomed” this effort was Roger Riou, whose autobiography describes how he led groups of vigilantes who demolished sacred Vodoun symbols and places of worship. Riou was among those who also igno-

rantly blamed Vodoun for “Haitian poverty and underdevelopment.”¹⁶

This Catholic crusade was to “‘cleanse’ the country of ‘abominations’ and ‘superstitions,’... destroy vodou temples; burn cult icons, drums and sacred objects; and imprison recalcitrant Vodou priests and priestesses... [E]very Catholic was enjoined to take an ‘oath of rejection’ and to publically repudiate vodou practices as satanic.”¹⁷

In the process of waging this “all out physical, holy war,” Vodoun leaders were jailed, beaten, “some say killed,”¹⁸ and

“[t]housands of pre-Columbian artifacts kept in the *houfò* [Vodoun temples] were either destroyed or shipped to [museums in] France.”¹⁹

Christ’s “Chosen One” plays the Devil

It was not long before Dr. François “Papa Doc” Duvalier entered the scene, declaring himself “President for Life.” Adept in the use of religious symbolism, he even “instigated a graffiti campaign which baldly claimed that ‘Duvalier is a god.’”²⁰

During his brutal dictatorship (1957-1971), “Papa Doc” cunningly manipulated popular Vodoun beliefs to tighten his grip on power. Tapping into deeply-seated Haitian fears by “exploiting his knowledge of Vodou,” he “deliberately emulated *Bawon Samdi*,”²¹ the Vodoun Spirit of the Dead:²²

“With his black clothes, top hat and other-worldly aura, he aped the style of Baron Samedi, a particularly malevolent voodoo deity.... Image became reality, as the fact that Papa Doc resembled this spirit edged into the conviction that he was actually a god in human form.”²³

Besides employing Vodoun symbols to create a climate of fear,²⁴ Duvalier used gestapo-like death squads to terrorize his opponents. Soaked in Vodoun imagery, these *Tontons Macoutes* were named after a Haitian bogey man that punished children.

But Duvalier also cleverly drew heavily upon Christian traditions as well. For instance, the regime’s

“most famous propaganda image shows a standing Jesus Christ with his right hand on a seated Papa

Doc’s shoulder with the caption ‘I have chosen him.’”²⁵

Despite his open pretence at being a Vodoun spirit, most of Haiti’s Catholic elite avidly supported Duvalier’s reign of terror. As Aristide wrote:

“In the 29 years of the Duvalier family dictatorship,...bishops and Macoutes walked arm in arm, defending the same causes, but using a different vocabulary to mask their collusion for the benefit of the oligarchy.”²⁶

Not mincing his words, Aristide identified Duvalierists within the Church hierarchy, like Archbishop Francois-Wolff Ligonde, who he called “a zealous servant of Macoutism.”²⁷ For example, in 1980, Ligonde happily pre-



“Baron Samedi, in his top hat and tails, who haunts the cemeteries smoking a cigar and wearing dark glasses, spends his days, so some believe, in the Presidential Palace, and his other name is Dr. Duvalier.” *Graham Greene*

sided at the opulent Catholic wedding of Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier.²⁸

In 1986, Duvalier Jr. was finally driven out of Haiti with the help of Vodoun adherents and progressive Catholics alike. Although in the following year a new Haitian constitution stripped away much of Catholicism’s status as the country’s official faith, the Church retained “its traditional primacy among the country’s religions.”²⁹

New Threats: Communism, Liberation Theology and Democracy

Among the Catholics who helped rid Haiti of the Duvaliers, was Father Aristide from the “Popular Church” known as *Ti-légliz*.³⁰ This widespread grassroots movement, inspired by Latin American liberation theology, melded “the teachings of Christ with inspiring the poor to organize and resist their

oppression.”³¹ This “Little Church” movement was equally threatening to wealthy, foreign-backed political elite and the Catholic establishment that went on to promote Duvalierism without Duvalier. On the day after “Baby Doc” finally fled, Haiti’s Bishop François Gayot warned in a mass that “From now on, the danger we have to watch out for is communism.”³²

Many in Haiti’s elite saw Aristide as a communist threat and he was also denounced with that label by the U.S. government.³³ Undeterred, Aristide continued to point the finger at “the major centers of power in Haiti including the President, military, judiciary, elites and Church hierarchy, and beyond, to the United States.”³⁴

This behaviour was far too radical for the Catholic hierarchy and in 1988, Aristide received a “written warning not to take part in politics” from “the Vatican, the Salesian Order, the Papal Nuncio [the Pope’s representative in Haiti]..., and the CHB [Conference of Haitian Bishops].”³⁵ Aris-

tide’s Salesian order soon clamped down with a decree accusing him of “incitement to hatred and violence, and a glorifying of class struggle.”³⁶

Despite this, Haitians empowered Aristide in the undisputed landslide victory of 1990 when he became Haiti’s first fairly-elected president. This led the Duvalierist Archbishop Ligondé to warn from the pulpit of Port-au-Prince’s cathedral that Haiti could soon become “an authoritarian police regime.” He asked: “Is a Socialist Bolshevism going to triumph?”³⁷ The right-wing American Heritage Foundation was also outraged, saying Aristide “may be steering Haiti toward a communist dictatorship.”³⁸

With liberation theology thus “elevated to public policy,” Aristide faced an array of “powerful forces in Haiti, including the Catholic hierarchy, the military and the elites.”³⁹ Political

powers in Washington and the CIA's covert forces based in Langley, Virginia, were also in league with these rabidly anti-Aristide forces:

“When asked why the CIA might have sought to oppose Aristide, a senior official with the Senate Intelligence Committee stated that ‘Liberation theology proponents are not too popular at the agency. Maybe second only to the Vatican for not liking liberation theology are the people at Langley.’”⁴⁰

Exorcising Haiti, Twice:

Two Anti-Aristide Coups

Not surprisingly, Haiti's fledgling democracy did not last. Within months, Aristide was overthrown in a CIA-backed coup that killed thousands. Haiti's junta was so vicious and so blatantly undemocratic that only one state in the whole global community gave it diplomatic support. It was not the U.S., but the Vatican that “became the only state to recognize the military regime.”⁴¹ And, Church authorities in Rome

“never spoke out against the dictatorship nor called for the return of President Aristide.”⁴² In fact, when a widespread international movement demanded the rightful president's return to power, the idea was opposed outright by Haiti's eleven bishops. They openly stated that any U.S. intervention to restore Aristide would be “scandalous and immoral” and “makes us tremble with indignation.” So, not only had the Catholic “hierarchy...tried to prevent Father Aristide from running

What is Vodoun?

By Richard Sanders

When summarizing the religious beliefs of Haiti, many articles, books and encyclopedic references begin with blanket statements that 80% of the population is Catholic, though how this statistic was derived is unexplained. Then, we are told that the remaining 20% are largely Protestants. Finally, as an afterthought, a caveat is sometimes thrown in to say that many Haitians still believe in “Voodoo.”

A prime example of this portrayal of Haiti as Catholic is the U.S. State Department's Report on *International Religious Freedom*. It explains that “approximately 80 percent of [Haiti's] citizens are Roman Catholic. Most of the remainder belong to a variety of Protestant denominations.”¹ Then, after listing “Methodists, Episcopalians, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Adventists and Orthodox,” which together form a tiny minority of Haiti's population, the document refers to an even smaller fractions, namely “nondenominational Christian congregations” and “non-Christian groups... including Jews, Muslims, Rastafarians and Baha'is.” Only then does this U.S. government report on religious discrimination finally get around to mentioning “Voodoo.” This, it says, “is practiced alongside Christianity by a large segment of the population.”²

It would however be far more accurate to turn this whole orthodoxy on its head and to say that “Vodoun is the popular system of belief and the religious practice of the overwhelming majority of the population of Haiti.”³

Vodoun melds various spiritual beliefs brought to Haiti by enslaved African ancestors. Their monotheistic religion was suppressed and made illegal by Haiti's Spanish and French colonial regimes. The Christian slave masters who formed Haiti's elite did their best to denigrate and destroy Vodoun. Faced with intense cultural repression, Vodoun practitioners were forced to protect their belief system by disguising it behind a facade of Catholic symbols. While appearing on the surface to be Christians, Vodoun believers kept themselves and their faith alive by learning “to conceal their practice... behind the veil of Catholicism.”⁴

Falsely equated with savage superstitions, “black magic,” Satanism, zombis and human sacrifice, Vodoun is one of the world's least understood and most maligned religious traditions. The term “voodoo” is even used as an adjective for “highly improbable suppositions,”⁵ as exemplified by the “derogatory term[s]” “voodoo economics” and “voodoo science.”⁶

In reality, Vodoun has been a powerful unifying force in Haitian history, particularly in the hard-fought struggle for freedom from slavery and independence from European colonial domination. That struggle continues to this day. Vodoun is still seen as a threat to the status quo in which Haiti's impoverished majority are held captive by dictates from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and outright foreign military occupation.

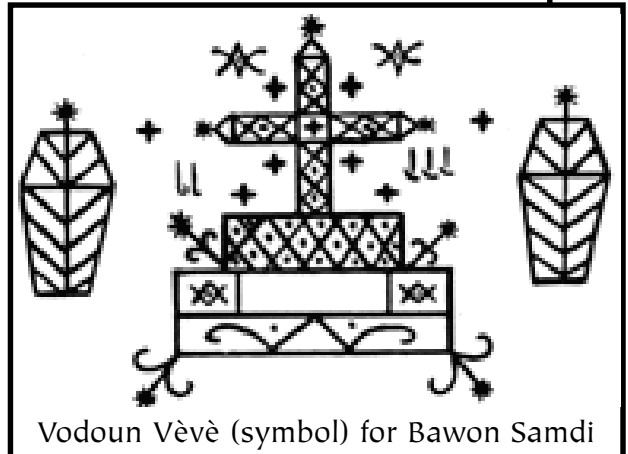
So powerful are the negative

stereotypes of Vodoun, that some may be surprised to learn of its progressive stands on religious tolerance, feminism, the key role of women as religious leaders, the right to use contraceptives, and equality for gays and lesbians.

Vodoun believers are also major proponents of the extremely radical idea that once a popular government is empowered in landslide elections by a country's impoverished masses, it should not be overthrown in coups lead by wealthy domestic or foreign elites.

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Vodoun Vèvè (symbol) for Bawon Samdi

for office,” and then “condemned his presidency before he was even sworn in,” they also “supported the military leaders who overthrew him and opposed American efforts to restore him to power.”⁴³

Despite opposition from Haiti’s Catholic bishops, President Bill Clinton did empower U.S. Marines to return the diminutive priest to power in 1994. However, this was only after Aristide had agreed to implement some of the business-friendly dictates of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. While in Haiti, the U.S. military did not even try to disarm the elite-backed death squads. However, they did seize 160,000 secret documents from offices of the death squad and military rulers that were the American government’s close allies in Haiti. By stealing and withholding these records detailing decades of state-sponsored violence in Haiti, the U.S. thwarted efforts by Aristide’s government to bring these American-backed terrorists to justice.⁴⁴

Over the following years, before the next coup against them in 2004, Aristide and his Lavalas party government managed to champion many causes on behalf of Haiti’s impoverished majority. One of the actions that particularly upset Haiti’s Catholic elite, was Aristide’s willingness to invoke the obvious truth that Vodoun is an “ancestral religion” and “an essential part of national identity.”⁴⁵ But his government’s offence was thought to have gone even farther when it gave official recognition to Vodoun as a legitimate religion. The Catholic hierarchy “reacted with alarm” that Vodoun practitioners would be legally allowed to perform baptisms and marriages.⁴⁶ The bishop of Port-au-Prince, Msgr. Joseph Lafontant condemned the policy as “excessive,” calling it “an obvious mistake.”⁴⁷ Other Christians have been far less diplomatic.

Demonizing the Diminutive Priest

Rev. Doug Anderson, an American raised by a missionary family in Haiti—who was himself a missionary there until 1990—responded that “Haiti is the only country in the entire world that has dedicated its government to Satan.” And, Rev. Tom Barrett proclaimed that



Gerard Fortune

“Damballah Titid”

Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide (“Titid”), a priest who was twice elected as Haiti’s President, was forced out in two coups supported by the Catholic hierarchy in Haiti and Rome. He is portrayed here as Damballah, the chief of Vodoun spirits—a primordial serpent deity who created the world and the gods.

Haiti’s leaders “make no attempt to hide their allegiance to Satan,” it is “a government of the devil, by the devil, and for the devil.”⁴⁸

Christian efforts to literally demonize the Haitian masses, their uniquely syncretized African religion and their choice of government are of course patently ridiculous. However, these slurs are potent linguistic weapons in the arsenal against Haitian democracy and Vodoun. And, such attacks are not restricted to religious fanatics in the U.S., they have also been wielded by their Haitian allies.

Just before the coup in 2004, when U.S.-backed former military, police and death squad members were ter-

rorising the country,

“rebel leader Guy Philippe accused Aristide of sacrificing children in a voodoo ceremony—a fabrication presented as fact on some private radio stations.”⁴⁹

Playing to the farcical prejudices that permeate the Haitian elite’s view of both Vodoun and Aristide,

“Philippe told a mob of his supporters he had discovered small coffins which contained dead babies. He said President Aristide had sacrificed the babies in a ‘black voodoo ceremony.’ Haitian radio [owned by the county’s corporate elite] reported the story as a fact.”⁵⁰

Witch hunt by the Enemies of Democracy

When Aristide and thousands in Haiti's popular government were then illegally removed from power, the elite's outrageous propaganda was actually taken seriously by the coup-empowered regime. The de facto government's CIDA-funded "Department of Justice" even used these outrageous rumours to arrest and illegally imprison prominent supporters of Aristide's Lavalas government. In mid-2004, a U.S. human rights delegation to Haiti reported that:

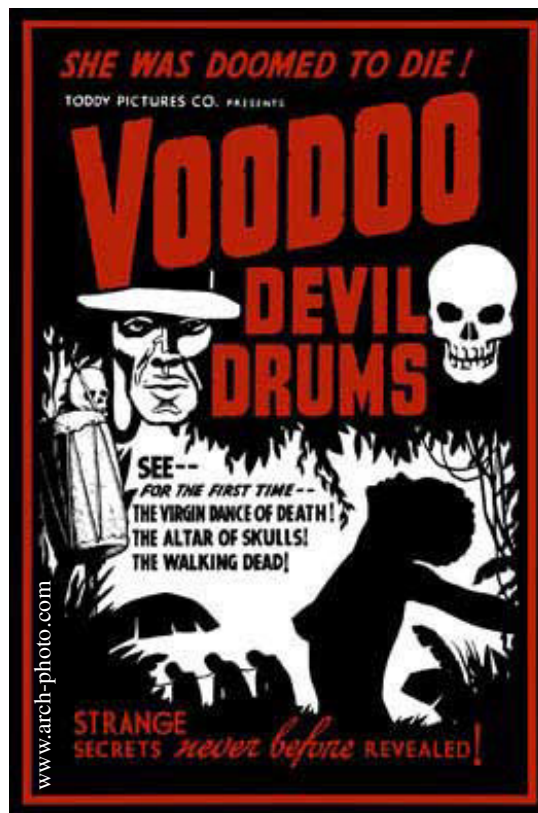
"Members of Fanmi Lavalas have been using the word witch-hunt to describe the ongoing repression of Lavalas.... We were shocked to find that this term can be taken literally. While we were in Haiti, a wild story was being circulated by the media and Haitian authorities. It claimed that a baby was sacrificed during a ceremony attended by many members of Lavalas in the year 2000. While we initially took this to be at the level of tabloid sensationalism, it became clear that this ludicrous charge is being pursued by the current de facto authorities.

"On three occasions individuals have gone on National Television, reportedly at the behest of the Minister of Justice, to describe their participation at this so-called ceremony. Despite the fact that the stories told by these individuals are not even consistent,... Haitian authorities are using these out of court, unverified statements as the basis for issuing arrest warrants for Lavalas officials. These charges are also the justification for continuing to hold [prominent Lavalas activist and community leader] Annette Auguste."⁵¹

Two particularly virulent enemies of Haitian democracy who have pushed these absurd, religious smear campaigns are Yves A. Isidor, a professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, and Raymond Joseph a former *Wall Street Journal* financial reporter who became the 2004 coup-regime's ambassador in

Washington. Isidor, who accused Ms. Auguste of being Aristide's "voodoo medium," said she bathed him in human blood to place a curse George W. Bush and to ensure the election of Al Gore in 2000. Isidor's grotesque story was later embellished by Joseph who said that as part of their Vodoun ritual, a newborn baby was crushed with a heavy pestle in a giant mortar.⁵²

The most well-connected figure who aided and abetted this particular psychological warfare campaign is Stanley Lucas, director of the right-wing Washington Democracy Project's



This 1944 horror film, aka "Virgin Brides of Voodoo," was a pseudo-documentary about witchcraft, satanism and human sacrifice in Haiti.

program on Latin America and the Caribbean. In 2007, this long-time Haitian representative of the U.S. government-funded International Republican Institute, disseminated extravagantly detailed slander regarding the alleged Vodoun infanticide that was supposedly engaged in by President Aristide and his closest political allies.⁵³

To establish his credentials and lend credibility to these outrageous lies, Lucas' website displayed dozens

of photographs of himself posing with business executives, Premier Jean Charest, U.S.-backed heads of state, Afghan "tribal leaders," U.S. senators, congressmen, ambassadors, three former U.S. Secretaries of State, a former National Security Advisor, a former CIA director, and other such so-called "friends" of Haiti.⁵⁴

184 Ways to Destabilize Haiti

The source relied upon by Lucas for his fable, called "Aristide and the Baby," was a lengthy 2004 interview on Vision 2000, one of Haiti's right-wing radio stations. Vision 2000 is owned by Reginald Boulos—president of Haiti's Chamber of Commerce and Industry, is a multimillionaire of middle eastern heritage who helped lead Haiti's most powerful anti-Aristide alliance—the Group of 184 (G184). The G184's efforts to destabilize Aristide's government took many forms but their biggest and most widely-publicised protest campaign was the so-called "Caravan of Hope." This marathon anti-Aristide drive to promote their CIDA-funded "social contract," culminated in a highly provocative incident staged at the Catholic Church's meeting centre in Cité Soleil, one of the poorest areas of Port-au-Prince.⁵⁵

Many of Haiti's Catholic bishops publicly called for Aristide's resignation after the so-called "Black Friday" incident in late 2003, when Aristide supporters were falsely blamed for initiating a violent confrontation at the university. (See pp.21-23.)

The CIA's *World Factbook* provided a list of Haiti's main "Political pressure groups." This CIA list of major groups that had opposed Aristide's widely-popular government, predictably included the G184, the "Roman Catholic Church" and the "Protestant Federation of Haiti."⁵⁶

During the lead up to the 2004 coup, the G184 included numerous member organizations with obvious Christian affiliations, including:

- Christian Foundation for the Social Development of Destitute Haitians

- Christian Youth Action for Rural Development
- Christ-King Youth Association
- Development Association of God's Chosen
- Ecumenical Human Rights Center
- Mother Theresa Foundation for Democracy
- Organization of Young Haitian Christians
- Peace and Justice Commission of the Catholic Church
- Village of God Women's Association
- Youth Association of the Philadelphia Church of God at the Airport.⁵⁷

One of these—the Ecumenical Human Rights Center—is run by Jean-Claude Bajoux, a founder and leader of the anti-Aristide, Konakom political party who coined the phrase “Operation Baghdad.” This label was used to great effect in a major propaganda effort by pro-coup forces to blame Lavalas activists for crimes that they did not commit. (See pp.23-30).

Just before President Aristide was kidnapped and exiled in February 2004, foreign military forces occupied Haiti. Then—in collusion with the country's religious, corporate and political elite—these foreign powers started an unconstitutional regime change process. The principal step in this illegal transition was to create a hand-picked clique called the “Council of Sages.” This seven-member council was appointed to select a new Prime Minister to replace the Lavalas Party's Yvon Neptune—who was soon illegally arrested (see pp.44-46). The council's undemocratically appointed Prime Minister then chose his Cabinet which quickly began to dismantle Aristide's entire legitimate government. Officially represented on the coup regime's so-called “Council of Sages,” which unravelled Haiti's democracy, were official representatives of the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches.⁵⁸

Vodoun: Haiti's Whipping Boy
Unlike Haiti's Catholic and Protestant churches, the Vodoun religion was not party to the illegal regime change of 2004. Quite the opposite. As the religion of the vast majority of destitute voters who had legally empowered Aristide through landslide electoral victories, Vodoun was obviously not

Haiti's historic role as a leading voice for justice and democracy began when Vodoun helped to unify that country's enslaved masses in a successful revolution against slavery and colonialism. Since then, Vodoun has been demonized as a dangerous force by both domestic and foreign elites who hold Haitian democracy in utter contempt.

supportive of the unconstitutional coup that deposed his government.

This contrast exemplifies the distinct roles that these religions have long played in Haiti's agonizing history. As Max-G. Beauvoir, the founder of the *Péristyle de Mariani*, Vodoun Temple in Haiti, has put it:

“Roman Catholic priests and Protestant pastors of the many Christian denominations have set up the social climate in which the Vodoun populations of that country had to live.”⁵⁹

Beauvoir goes on to explain that although Vodoun is Haiti's primary religion, it has always been forced into a subservient role “by the imperialist and the neo-colonialist Nations of the Western hemisphere and their financial institutions.”⁶⁰ This, he says:

“explains more than sufficiently the reason why an atmosphere of intolerance, of absolutism and of despotism has permeated all the political structures resulting in the condition of endemic underdevelopment which characterizes Haiti today.”⁶¹

Vodoun is still widely portrayed as a backwards cult characterised by “black” magic, devil worship and even human sacrifice. As a result of such sensationalised depictions of Vodoun as primitive and evil, this religion's adherents have been subjected to prejudice not by Haiti's wealthy elite, but by global audiences under the potent spell of Hollywood-inspired mass culture.

What's more, unjust portrayals of Haiti's most prevalent faith have long been used not only for religious persecution but for political witch hunts as well. The Vodoun label has thus provided a convenient pretext for scapegoating enemies of the corporate oligarchies that dominate Haiti.

The U.S. government's State Department report on “religious freedom” during the 2004 coup period is a case in point. It ignores Haiti's savage climate of oppression, and does its best to whitewash the situation with a heavily-cloaked allusion to the intense bigotry and oppression faced by Vodoun's adherents. It states that “In many ways Roman Catholicism retains a position of honor” and that “Voodoo continues to be frowned upon by elite, conservative Catholics and Protestants.”⁶²

Even the most cursory perusal of the role of Christianity in Haiti's political history amply reveals that the country's elite, and its colonial masters abroad, have done much more than merely “frown upon” Vodoun. The proponents of this African-based religion have, for centuries, been demonized, enslaved and blamed for a litany of crimes. And, Vodoun has been used as an excuse for the political persecution of those who dare to challenge the structural violence of Haiti's status quo.

However, despite being subjected to centuries of brutal, near-genocidal attacks aimed at eliminating it, Vodoun continues to thrive. It is, without doubt, one of the most powerful unifying forces within Haiti's rich cultural tradition, particularly among the continually disenfranchised poor who compose most of the country's “civil society.”

Ever since Vodoun played a central role in bringing together Haiti's enslaved masses in a successful revolution against colonial oppression, the potential has been there for it to restore the country's historic role as a leading global force for justice and democracy. This is the key to understanding why Vodoun has long been vilified and demonized as a dangerous and threatening force by the domestic and foreign elites who hold Haiti's democracy in such utter contempt.

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CIDA's Affinity with Elite and Blindspot for Vodoun

By Richard Sanders, editor, *Press for Conversion!*

Among the CIDA-funded Canadian organizations listed by the government as its “partners” in Haiti, about 70 have websites. Within these sites, there are hundreds of positive references to the efforts of Christian churches and related religious groups in Haiti. About 20 of these Canadian government sponsored “partners” are themselves explicitly Christian in origin or orientation.

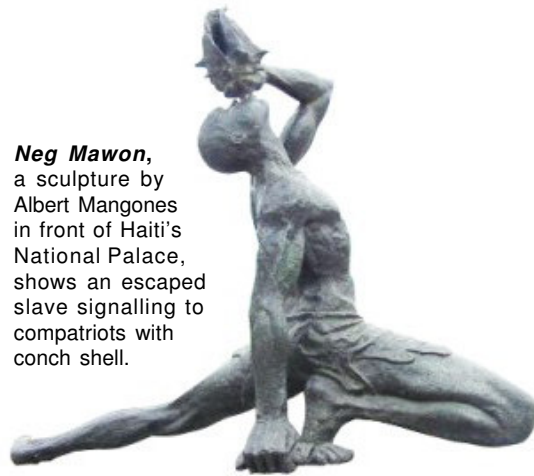
However, no reference whatsoever could be found on any of these websites that even hints at the controversial role played by Christian institutions in promoting either slavery or the dictatorships that have dominated Haitian history. Christianity is consistently portrayed as having only had a positive influence in helping Haiti's impoverished masses.

In striking contrast, among the websites of the 70 CIDA-funded “NGOs” working in Haiti, only one made even passing reference to Vodoun. International Child Care—a “Christian health development organization” founded in the U.S.—states that 80% of Haiti's population is Roman Catholic. Second on its list is “Protestant denominations” and then, under that, is a statement saying “Roughly one-half of the population practices Vodoun.”¹

Elsewhere, ICC says: “Catholicism is the primary religion for Haitians and Dominicans, although people on both sides of the border have incorporated aspects of spirit faiths, like voodoo and santeria, into their Catholic practices.”² In both of these fleeting references to Vodoun, the ICC

downplays the importance of Vodoun as Haiti's primary and most prevalent religion. However, in describing it as a “spirit faith” that has *in part* been “incorporated” into Catholicism, the ICC is at least mentioning Vodoun's existence! This is more than can be said for all the other CIDA-funded “NGOs.” The ICC's brief remarks on Vodoun are the only references to Haiti's African-based religion within any of the 70 websites created by Canadian government-financed “NGOs.”

Another CIDA partner working in Haiti is the Province of Quebec's Ministry of International Relations (MRI).³ The MRI website states that Catholicism is Haiti's “dominant religion,” while “traditional African rites and Voodoo are practised by about half of the population.”⁴ Like the ICC reference to Vodoun as a “spirit faith” that is merely part of Catholicism, the MRI's statement seems to relegate Vodoun to a status somewhat less than a *real* religion.



Neg Mawon, a sculpture by Albert Mangones in front of Haiti's National Palace, shows an escaped slave signalling to compatriots with conch shell.

CIDA-funded Canadian “NGOs” identify with Haiti's French-speaking, Catholic social sector but have a blindspot for the popular, grassroots “civil society” that is Creole-speaking, Vodoun, extremely poor and overwhelmingly supportive of Aristide.

Haiti's “Two Solitudes”

By examining the websites of CIDA's Canadian partners active in Haiti, it quickly becomes apparent that the Canadian government is funding “NGOs” that closely identify with Haiti's elite society. Haiti is described by the Caribbean Group for Cooperation in Economic Development (CGCED) as a “dual system” that is “in perennial conflict.”⁵ It notes that these “two parts of society” are not merely a matter of “social class” but are, in fact, two “parallel” social systems:

“On one side, the peasants, including the largest part of the rural immigration towards the capital, with Creole as exclusive language, *the voodoo as religion*, a tradition of property rights founded on feudal practices, and a social structure based on self-sufficiency and enlarged family.

“On the other side, the urban citizen, with a more hierarchical social structure, regulated by the Napoleonic law, *Catholicism as his official religion*, and French as his official language.

“This bi-polarity has been rarely recognized, especially by the latter half, which considers itself as representing progress and modernization.... The following figures demonstrate this duality: “In 1999 the World Bank estimated that 80% of the 2/3 of the population who live in the countryside are poor, with 2/3 of this portion being in extreme poverty. Furthermore, 4% of the population owns 66% of the total resources of the country, whereas the 70 percent on the other extreme of the scale only dispose of 20% of the income.”⁶ (Emphasis added.)

While CIDA and the Canadian “NGOs” that it mentors, have proven time and again their close affinity with Haiti's French-speaking, Christian elite—which helped organize and lead opposition to Aristide's elected government and then supported the coup-installed dictatorship—they have equally demonstrated their blindspot for the popular, grassroots “civil society” that is Creole-speaking, Vodoun, extremely poor and overwhelmingly supportive of Aristide.

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NCHR-Haiti: A Prime Source of Canadian-funded Lies

By Richard Sanders, editor, *Press for Conversion!*

Before, during and after Haiti's 2004 coup period, several prominent CIDA-funded agencies in Canada repeatedly cited and praised one of Haiti's most notorious anti-Aristide groups, the so-called National Coalition for Haitian Rights-Haiti (NCHR).

By early 2005, NCHR-Haiti's propaganda had become so blatantly partisan that it was forced to change its name and become the National Network for the Defense of Human Rights (RNDDH).¹ They did this after their U.S.-based, parent organization became so embarrassed that it issued a media release to disassociate itself from NCHR-Haiti.²

Background

Numerous independent human rights organizations also criticised NCHR-Haiti for being patently biased, untrustworthy and extremely partisan.³

NCHR-Haiti had not only helped destabilize Aristide's legitimately elected government by exaggerating and fabricating stories about supposed human rights abuses, it continued its anti-Aristide efforts throughout the illegal two-year rule of the coup-empowered regime.

Early on during the coup regime, authorities came to an arrangement with NCHR-Haiti to illegally arrest pro-Aristide/pro-Lavalas Party activists based solely on accusations levelled by this supposed human rights organization. The imprisonment of Aristide's Prime Minister Yvon Neptune and Lavalas Party activist "Sò Anne" Auguste are cases in point. (See pp.44-46 and pp.47-49, respectively.)

In an April-2004 media release, NCHR-Haiti described a "courtesy visit" they received from the new coup regime's "prosecutor," Daniel Audain. In describing this cordial meeting, NCHR-Haiti said they were "extremely encouraged" by his "determination... to restore strength in the law." Most tellingly, they noted his commitment to:

"Taking public action against all

those denounced by human rights organizations for their implication in acts of human rights violations."⁴

Haiti's CIDA-funded "Ministry of Justice," during the vicious coup regime, relied exclusively on NCHR-Haiti to monitor and evaluate "human rights" conditions. NCHR-Haiti commanded this important position because its anti-



Aristide credentials exactly matched the illegally-empowered government's requirements. CIDA employee Philippe Vixamar, who the Canadian government literally installed and bankrolled as Haiti's Deputy Minister of Justice, worked very closely with NCHR-Haiti. For instance, he admitted to using this small, thoroughly discredited "human rights" group to screen hundreds of former military troops for "human rights" abuses before recruiting them into the top ranks of the coup-regime's police force throughout Haiti.⁵

The Canadian government's generous funding of NCHR-Haiti⁶ and the group's very cozy relationship with the unconstitutional regime that replaced Haiti's democratic government, created an obvious conflict of interest that should have disqualified it as a reliable, unbiased source. However, the organization is, even today, still widely regarded—especially in government-funded circles—as Haiti's most authoritative source on human rights.

NCHR-Haiti's executive director, Pierre Espérance, said he was "a primary source of information for international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International

and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights."

He also bragged of being "invited to address the U.S. State Department."⁷

As Canadian author and activist Anthony Fenton has said:

"Sadly, though not surprisingly, the NCHR is treated as though it is a legitimate human rights organization by the occupying forces, Human Rights Watch, the OAS [Organization of American States], CARICOM [the Caribbean Community], and Reporters without Borders, among others. In reality, Espérance should be behind bars."⁸

CIDA-funded Cheerleaders for NCHR-Haiti

Several CIDA-funded agencies in Canada have uncritically cited NCHR-Haiti/RNDDH as if it were a reliable source of information on human rights in Haiti. These include:

- Alternatives
- Development and Peace (D&P)
- Entraide Missionaire (EMI)
- Mennonite Central Ctee. (MCC)
- Rights and Democracy (R&D)

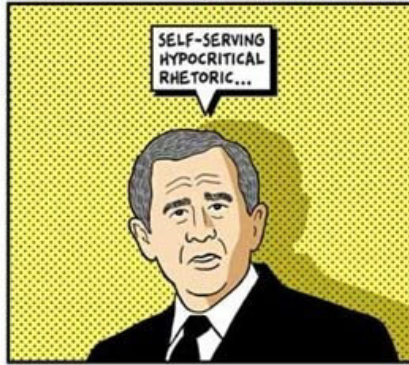
Two of the above organizations, namely D&P and EMI, are members of Concertation pour Haiti (CPH)—Canada's most vociferous anti-Aristide coalition.⁹ (And, CPH has issued joint media releases with R&D, a government-created and -funded agency that still counts RNDDH among its partners.¹⁰ On at least seventeen separate web pages within its website, R&D makes uncritical references to NCHR-Haiti/RNDDH and uses its disinformation.)

Although it is not known whether CPH has received CIDA funds, most of its 15 members have certainly been on the Canadian government's payroll. And, CPH media releases have made use of bogus NCHR reports.¹¹

The quasi-governmental Canadian agencies listed above have often quoted from NCHR's biased publications, published whole NCHR articles and reports online, linked to its documents and website, and generally helped to promote the notion that NCHR-Haiti/RNDDH is a reputable source of information.

None of these Canadian govern-

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON A CARTOON SEQUEL TWELVE YEARS IN THE MAKING



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ment-funded agencies sent delegations to Haiti during the coup period to prepare reports on the grave human rights violations there. Instead, they simply relied on their CIDA-funded colleagues in that country, such as NCHR-Haiti.

Besides helping to spread NCHR-Haiti's rabidly anti-Aristide propaganda, three of these Canadian organizations have also been linked as official "partners" to NCHR-Haiti, namely D&P,¹² MCC¹³ and R&D.¹⁴ (And, MCC is not only "partnered with NCHR-Haiti," it has had "a member 'seconded' to it since June 1998."¹⁵)

Independent NGOs vs. Government Agents

In contrast, several independent U.S. human rights organizations sent delegations to Haiti during the 2004-2006 coup-regime period. Upon their return, they each issued comprehensive reports detailing the systematic repression of Aristide supporters and Lavalas Party leaders and activists. These non-government funded agencies include:

- Center for the Study of Human Rights, Univ. of Miami, Law School
- Ecumenical Program on Central America and the Caribbean
- Haiti Accompaniment Project
- Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti
- National Lawyers Guild
- Quixote Center

Significantly, each of these organizations unequivocally denounced NCHR-Haiti for its role in spreading propaganda as well as for aiding and abetting the coup regime's persecution of prodemocracy advocates.¹⁶

Although CIDA-funded groups in Canada made numerous references to the extremely biased articles and reports issued by NCHR-Haiti, none of their websites contain a single reference to the work of the above listed U.S. organizations in Haiti, let alone to their comprehensively documented reports on flagrant human rights abuses during the Canadian-backed coup regime.

Increasingly, as CIDA and other government departments and agencies use their financial clout to contract "NGOs" in progressive movements at home and abroad, Canadians will have to learn to expect the kind of extremely prejudiced research, reporting and activism that occurred in support of Haiti's 2004 coup d'état.

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Epithets without Borders

By Richard Sanders, editor, *Press for Conversion!*

Every war ever fought has had its own peculiar linguistic arsenals. Like poisonous barbs, an aggressors' epithets are powerful weapons designed to vilify and dehumanize the enemy.

During the Vietnam war, U.S. soldiers used racist slurs like "gooks" and "slants" to attack not only their Viet Cong enemies but all those who might be harbouring them.

When psychologically preparing soldiers for the "killing fields," such terms of abuse are useful in framing innocent people as subhuman demons to be annihilated. This facilitates the guilt-free, mechanical murder of fellow humans as if they were merely mythical beings in a video game between gallant heroes and evildoers who deserve to be targeted and punished.

Such verbal abuse is also valuable in preparing the general public for the cognitive dissonance that will arise with the growing awareness of their fiscal and electoral complicity in the crimes of war. By quashing the home populations' psychological resistance to war, malicious invectives are useful in conducting internal "mopping-up" operations to wash away empathetic thoughts. In short, by tagging innocent victims as if they were the aggressors, one can rationalize violent actions and assuage associated feelings of guilt.

Hate Crime Spreads Abroad

In the war to oust Aristide's elected government, the aspersion of choice was "*chimère*." After having lost two landslide elections to Aristide's Lavalas movement, the Haitian elite was struggling to regain political power. One means at their disposal was the media. Using their control of radio, magazines, newspapers and TV, Haiti's elite began wielding the swear word "*chimère*" to target all of Aristide's supporters. Although this term had traditionally referred to a violent monster, ghoul or ghost, it was soon used in diatribes that demonized the vast majority of Haiti's voting citizens—those who would be disenfranchised by the 2004 coup.

The virulent term spread like a disease in Haiti, cropping up frequently in statements by Haiti's former military, the armed rebels, police, judges, businessmen, journalists, foreign-funded "NGOs" and all other anti-Aristide proponents of regime change.

But it didn't stop there. Such epidemics do not respect international borders. The "*chimère*" virus spread

Julie Maas / Gerald and Maas with Night's Lantern



to foreign media, government and NGO communities abroad. It was dispersed through the following contacts:

- (1) Elite-owned Haitian media and their foreign counterparts;
- (2) Haiti's corporate-backed politicians and their Canadian and U.S. mentors;
- (3) AntiAristide "NGOs" in Haiti and their government-funded partners abroad.

However, many groups and individuals remained financially and ideologically independent of the U.S. and Canadian governments. Uninfected by the term "*chimère*," they always denounced its use to tar prodemocracy advocates. See sidebar: "*Chimère*: What does this term really mean?"

In contrast, there are hundreds of examples of how CIDA-funded "NGOs" in Canada unquestioningly used the swearword "*chimère*." They were no doubt largely infected by interactions with their elitist CIDA-funded Haitian partners (like NCHR/RNDDH, CONAP, EnfoFanm, PAPDA, etc.) who frequently hurl this opprobrium at their political enemies.

Many of CIDA's Canadian "NGOs" also refer positively to two of the most virulently antiAristide sources

of information: AlterPresse and Reporters sans Frontieres. The former has some 65 webpages within its site contaminated with the slur "*chimère*," while the latter has 50 such webpages. Because the term is often used numerous times within any one article, news release or statement, "*chimère*" actually appears hundreds of times within these websites. This use of the abusive label is indicative of the fact that these "NGOs" took lead roles in the propaganda war leading to Aristide's overthrow.

These CIDA-funded agencies have not apologized for using the term "*chimère*," or for spreading the misand disinformation that helped destabilize Haiti's elected government. To do so would be tantamount to their admitting culpability in the campaign that set the stage for the 2004 coup. And, it would be an admission of their guilt as apologists for the human rights disaster and coverup that followed.

"Chimère":

"The most dangerous problem is the Haitian elite, whose hatred and disrespect for the 'slum priest' Aristide and his barefoot followers knows no bounds. Any leader of the poor is a gangster or '*chimère*' in their words."¹ John Maxwell (veteran Jamaican journalist who has been reporting on Caribbean affairs for more than 40 years.)

"*Chime* is a pejorative name given by the bourgeoisie to the poor in society."² Privat Precil (former Director General for Aristide's Ministry of Justice)

"The people speaking against Aristide didn't want the poor people to speak, and he was our voice. The criticisms of Aristide come from very racist people. They call us Big Toes, Kinky Hair, Dirty Feet, *Chime*."³

Anonymous Member, Sept. 30 Foundation (Haitian human rights group)

"In Haiti, the word is used generically, in much the same way the word 'terrorist' now is used in the U.S."⁴

Rev. Angela Boatright (Episcopal priest and representative of the Fellowship of Reconciliation.)