

WHEN THE HANDS ARE MANY

Community Organization
and Social Change in
Rural Haiti

JENNIE M. SMITH



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COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION AND SOCIAL
CHANGE IN RURAL HAITI

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Dedicated to

my grandfather, Lawrence D. Smith,
in celebration of his contagious love of learning, and his
lived commitment to community,
&
to “outsiders” everywhere.

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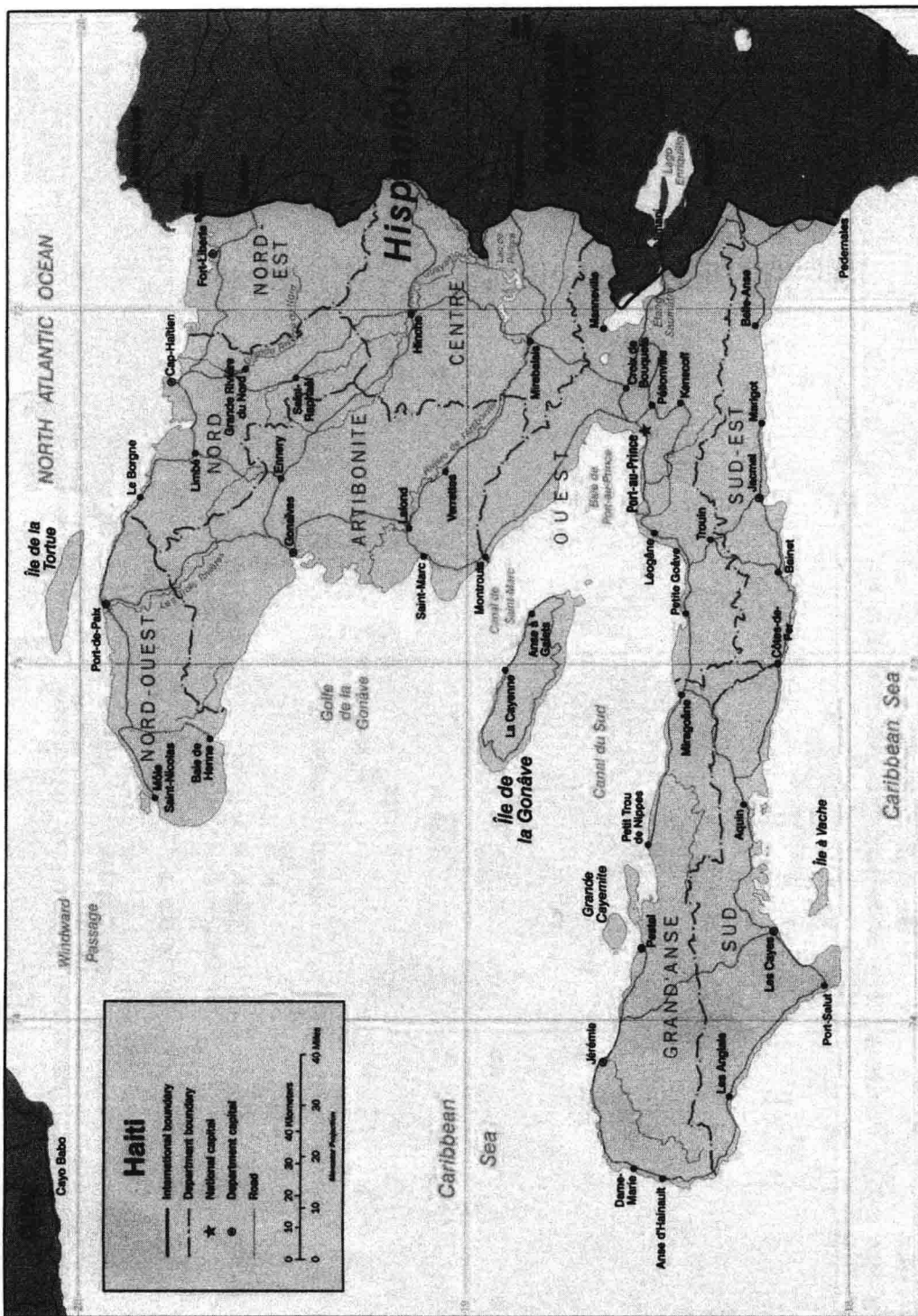
Acronyms

CDC	Center for Disease Control
CHA	Council on Hemispheric Affairs
CIVPOL	UN Civilian Police Force
CNG	National Governing Council (ruled Haiti 1986–88)
CRS	Community Relations Service (U.S. Department of State)
EERP	Emergency Economic Recovery Plan
FRAPH	Front Révolutionnaire Armé pour l'Avancement et le Progrès Haïtien
GP	<i>gwoupman peyizan</i> (peasant group[ing])
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GFV	<i>gwoupman fanm vanyan</i> (strong women's group[ing])
GNP	Gross National Product
GT	<i>gwoupman tètansanm</i> (heads-together group[ing])
IDB	Inter-American Development Bank
IGO	intergovernmental organization
IHERC	Inter-Hemispheric Education Resource Center
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INS	U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MICIVIH	UN/OAS International Civilian Mission to Haiti
MSPP	Ministry of Public Health and Sanitation (of the Haitian government)
NED	National Endowment for Democracy
NGO	nongovernmental organization
OAS	Organization of American States
ODA	Office of Overseas Development Assistance (Great Britain)

xii Acronyms

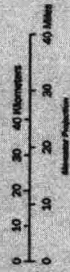
OTI	Office of Transition Initiatives (USAID)
PEPPADEP	Programme pou l'Eradication de la Peste Porcine Africaine et pour le Développement de l'Elvage Porcin
PNH	Haitian National Police
PSC	Project for Social Change
PVC	polyvinyl chloride
SAP	structural adjustment program
TKL	<i>ti kominote legliz</i> (little church communities)
TNC	transnational corporation
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
VSN	Volontaires de la Sécurité Nationale
WB	World Bank

WHEN THE HANDS ARE MANY



Haiti

- International boundary
- Department boundary
- National capital
- Department capital
- Road



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Introduction

All nations have varying degrees of associational culture which feed into organisational life, which in turn constitutes civil society. Civil society is therefore not an entity which can be created or imposed from above, depending on the needs of the state or international agencies. (McIlwaine 1998, 667)

“Formerly the things which happened in the world had no connection among themselves. . . . But since then all events are united in a common bundle” (Polybius, as quoted in Robertson 1990, 21). Penned in the second century B.C. this declaration seems tailored precisely for our own times. As the twenty-first century begins we are truly becoming an intricately interconnected world. Yet just as dramatic as the pace of global integration is the growing rate of inequity between the world’s citizens. Despite several decades of ambitious international aid initiatives, the post–World War II vision of closing the “First World”–“Third World” divide is more distant from our grasp than ever. Even as North-Western governments and nongovernmental agencies respond by developing new and improved agendas, gaps in wealth and power expand.¹ It is time for radically new ways of thinking and acting globally and locally.

The country of Haiti provides a superb case study of the limitations of the post–World War II attempts of North-Western powers to develop and democratize the rest of the world. Founded in 1804 by former slaves following one of the most extraordinary revolutions of modern history, Haiti once stood as a beacon of hope and inspiration for colonized peoples throughout the New World. Today, despite the innumerable development and democratization programs implemented there, it is famous instead for the desperate poverty of its people and the violent instability of its state.

But the deficiencies of aid are not all we stand to learn from Haiti. It also offers us unique guidance in how the problems and challenges presented by the inequalities that plague our contemporary world might be ad-

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dressed more effectively. This book looks specifically at lessons we stand to learn from the country's poorest citizens—its rural peasantry.

Haitian peasants are some of the most politically disempowered, malnourished, and illiterate people of the world. It is not surprising, then, that they are consistently viewed by others as victims in need of rescue or social problems in need of reform. Their eroded fields, their exhausted bodies, their undernourished children, their collapsing schoolhouses—all of these make them potential targets for material and technological aid. I argue that they also are potential teachers and guides.

Escobar has pointed out that

One must then resist the desire to formulate alternatives at an abstract, macro level; one must also resist the idea that the articulation of alternatives will take place in intellectual and academic circles, without meaning by this that academic knowledge has no role in the politics of alternative thinking.

Where, then, lies “the alternative”? . . . A first approach is to look for alternative practices in the resistance of grassroots groups present to dominant interventions. (1995, 222)

In the context of Haiti, this necessarily involves looking toward the peasantry. Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot urged us to do just that more than a decade ago: “Any solution to the Haitian crisis must find its roots in the resources of the peasantry. . . . And to do this, . . . intellectuals, politicians and planners—foreign and Haitian alike—[must] talk less about (or ‘for’) the peasantry and begin listening more attentively to what its diverse subgroups have said in the past and have to say now about their own future” (1990, 229–30).

This book may be seen in part as an answer to that call.

By taking as my primary theoretical and methodological point of departure the words and practices of Haitian peasants themselves rather than either scholarly constructions of them or a particular theoretical framework. I part ways with traditional anthropological work. In this text it is Haitian peasants who are “doing theory,” who are debating the meanings of social progress, development, democracy, and modernity. In highlighting the poor’s own models for positive social, economic, and political change, this book also departs from dominant patterns in development literature. Neither does it follow the path taken by most analysts of Haiti itself. While often bemoaning the state of Haiti’s most populous sector Haitianists have rarely provided accounts of what these internal “outsiders” (*moun andeyò*, or “the people out there,” as they are called by their fellow citizens) have said and done about their situation (A superb exception to this pattern is Drexel Woodson’s 1990 work).

This attempt to re-present the Haitian peasantry should not be seen as an exercise in glorifying “the voices of the voiceless” or ennobling the downtrodden. It is, rather, a portrayal of an uneven struggle of a few groups of ordinary people to survive the harsh realities of the world in which they live—and in the process, to find meaning, protect their dignity, build community, and work toward a more decent tomorrow. In documenting this struggle, I trace the historical roots of the peasantry’s current situation, document its experiences with foreign development and democratization agendas, describe the collective strategies its members have developed, and reveal the spiritual and cultural resources they have called on for help.

I focus specifically on an in-depth ethnographic study of a song tradition called *chante pwen* and rural civic organizations called “peasant groups.” Representing a large variety of organizational structures and objectives (some focus on agricultural labor exchange, others on mutual economic assistance, community development, or political advocacy), contemporary peasant groups draw on a history of community-based organization predating the Saint Domingue Revolution. Still reflective of this past, they also are actively engaged in the globalizing, transnationalizing, developing, and democratizing world in which the peasantry is immersed.

A Haitian priest once told me that peasant groups have been for his country an “underground spring.” My research bears out this metaphor. I found not only that these groups have long provided sustenance to rural Haitian communities but also that they have important contributions to make in the formulation of Haiti’s future, as well as in larger endeavors aimed at challenging some of the disparities, injustices, and divisions characterizing our contemporary human community.

Such a view of civil society in rural Haiti will undoubtedly be met with skepticism. It is not uncommon for analysts to claim that the country has no real civil society. (This argument has been used to assert that Haiti is not ready for democracy and to explain why it seems unable to develop.) Again, like Haiti’s disappearing springs, peasant groups have remained largely invisible to outside observers. Although certain types of groups—namely, those associated with externally based development and democratization initiatives—have gained more attention in recent years, even discussions of grass-roots organization in Haiti have virtually ignored those groups initiated and directed exclusively by peasants.² Most analyses that do exist are grounded in the development-oriented ideologies and the modernist scholarly classifications of the North–West. By evaluating these groups on the basis of foreign concepts of success and progress, such standards leave us with a myopic lens through which to view them—a lens that compels us to see Haitian peasant groups primarily in terms of what they are not, do not have, and do not do. As a result, they are generally portrayed as either

counterprogressive or irrelevant remnants of a backward traditional culture, remnants whose survival, while hitherto remarkable, is inevitably doomed by the pressures of contemporary economic, environmental, and social pressures.³

Unfortunately, this myopic viewpoint has closed the door to understanding the diverse objectives of Haitian peasant groups and appreciating the multilayered and heavily nuanced value they have for those who participate in them. Using a number of case studies from my work with peasant groups in Haiti's Northeast, Central Plateau, and Grand'Anse regions, I seek to paint a quite different portrait, grounded instead in what group members say about their lives, their communities, their society, and about what social change can and should mean. From this account there emerges a coherent, if "partial and halting" (Haraway 1988, 590), vision of a "good society" and of how that society might be brought about. Contained in this vision are a number of provocative critiques of dominant North-Western understandings of concepts such as progress, development, democracy, and civil society, as well as suggestions about changes that need to be made in the ways we attempt to understand and contribute to the struggles for survival and social change instigated by those identified as poor and disempowered.

"Americans Don't Have Democracy!"

Walking along the mountainous footpath toward the northeastern community of Kayayo, I thought about the community-group meeting I was going to.⁴ It was the fall of 1990, and as December 16—the date for what would be Haiti's first democratic elections—quickly approached, civic education campaigns were being carried out all over the country. In the rural area where I lived, the primary forum for this voter education was the local peasant group. Today, the Kayayo group would be discussing the concept of democracy. As I walked, I considered how the Haitian people had never before been ruled by a democratically elected government, and contemplated how I might contribute to the meeting by sharing my more cultivated understanding of democratic philosophies and procedures.

When I arrived at the one-room schoolhouse where the group would be meeting, I took a seat by the educator, Ton Gi, a farmer and preacher from a neighboring village.⁵ As we chatted, people began to arrive. Although it was barely eight o'clock in the morning, most of the group members had already spent a few hours in the fields, and walked in wiping their brows and placing their machetes on the dirt floor by their bare feet. Once we all greeted one another, prayed, and sang a group song, Ton Gi opened the meeting with a question: "What is democracy?" After a long pause, one man

tentatively offered a definition. “Democracy,” he said slowly and thoughtfully, “is when every person is able to have enough food to eat—and good food—not just corn meal mush with no bean sauce.” A woman with a child nursing at her breast added, “It’s when everybody has the chance to give their children an education, instead of having to keep them out of school because we can’t afford shoes or books, or need them to work in the fields.” “It’s when the ‘little people,’” her brother chimed in, “not just the ‘big men’ in town, or those folks in Port-au-Prince, have a right to say what they think without getting beaten up by the section chief [the local military commander]. Everybody ought to have that right.” Several other people continued: “Democracy is having a bed to sleep on, instead of a pile of straw or rags heaped on the floor.” “Some people shouldn’t have to walk miles to get cruddy water while other people get *ice* in their glasses every day.” “I hear that folks in La Gonâve are boiling green mangoes to stay alive these days. That’s not democracy.”

As the discussion continued, Ton Gi challenged those present to reflect on factors inhibiting democratic change in Haiti. Several members described the traditional power structures of their local community, and shared stories of corruption and abuse. A woman finally suggested, “Well . . . I have heard that some people have *too* much food to eat, so much that they can’t even eat it all! Maybe *they’ve* been getting some of *ours*.” The group agreed that in order for democracy to be established in Haiti, a redistribution of wealth as well as of political power would have to occur. They ended the meeting by talking about the upcoming elections as one opportunity to work toward their vision of democracy.

This was not the first time I had gone into a meeting of Haitian peasants thinking I had something to teach, only to be presented with compelling lessons—many of which forced me to reexamine my own notions of how things are and how they should be. Among the most dynamic and provocative community-group meetings I attended were those centered on democracy. A number of those have closely resembled the Kayayo discussion. The following two excerpts are from a meeting that took place six years later, in the mountains of Haiti’s southwestern peninsula:

“The Americans, they come here to tell us what democracy is, but as for me, I don’t see that they truly understand the thing.”

“American democracy, that’s not real democracy! How can you have democracy if you don’t have respect?” “Hmmp.” . . . “*Demokrasi? Se pa demokrasi sa, sa se demokrachel!*” [Democracy? That’s not democracy.

That’s democra-*spit!*]⁶

What is going on here? From media and scholarly accounts, one could easily surmise that few Haitian peasants have thought at much length about