



***Short Historical Sketch of the Evolution of  
the Institutions of the University System in  
Haiti***

***Leslie F. Manigat***

***President of the International Committee of aid and support of the University system  
of Haiti***

***Port-au-Prince***

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## **Short Historical sketch of the evolution of the institutions of the university system in Haiti**

*Notes prepared for the briefing of the members of the international committee of aid and support of the Haitian University system badly damaged after the horrible tragedy of the earthquake of January 12, 2010.*

### **Abstract**

On the institutions of the Haitian university system to be rebuilt by modern and even exemplary standards, on the qualitative level of the requirements of the educational system of higher learning operating as model of what a university should be in the current academical world. Haiti should not squander this opportunity, albeit given under the sad circumstance of the horrible earthquake of January 12, 2010. Thus, a reminder of the history of the institutions of the Haitian university system can help understand the problems of the past and put into perspective the new imperatives of change.

### **Introduction**

The institutions of the university system started in Haiti in the context of the end of the Napoleonic wars when the Europe that witnessed the peace treaties of 1814-1815 will begin to organize the west along the lines of the new world order with the Vienna congress under the scepter of Austria's Metternich with the hegemony of England and Russia then symbolized by the struggle between the elephant (Russia) against the whale (England). A European concert conducted by the super powers will achieve the balance of power that will usher a period of peace in Europe for fifty years, half a century.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Period - Christophian Institutions**

The institutions of the Haitian university system were created in that context marked by the conjuncture of 1814-1816. During the reign of king Christophe who had relations, on the one hand with the England of Wilberforce and Clarkson (Christophe had a lengthy correspondence with Wilberforce and mostly with Clarkson, a correspondence that was compiled into a heavy volume published at Stanford University in California), and on the other hand with the Russia of czar Alexander I (with whom Christophe initiated writing rapports through Clarkson whom he expressly and properly mandated to represent him with the Czar of the Russian entities between 1816 and 1820).

#### ***British Paradigm and Cooperation***

Christophe began earnestly a policy of national education and cultural promotion that were for him as they will later be for Bismark a «struggle for culture» against German clergy and the Catholic religion for the sake of civilization i.e. The Kulturkampf. In our History Christophe has been the great civilizer with his regime and educational program and cultural promotion under the banner of «enlightened absolutism» attributing the role of counselor and mentor to English philanthropist philosophers Wilberforce and Clarkson as Diderot was the counselor and mentor of Catherine of Russia and Joseph

II. To that end he secured the cooperation of England by asking for technical help in the realm of masters, methods, and education sciences while personally underwriting the technical assistance in its entirety.

### ***Organization***

It is thus how Haiti's king Henry I established the first institutions of the Haitian university system after the year 1816 when he would have acquired the means to conduct this policy through the prosperity boom of his kingdom.

On the onset one must view the concept of the University system as a whole, as an entity and not as sparse units scattered around in a piece-meal fashion (to borrow from Anglo-Saxon thought) as separate parts. The idea of institutions in a university system functioning as a body housed in a truly embryonic campus was demonstrated in Sans-Souci. Undergraduate and graduate schools with filled chairperson positions in the discipline of letters, sciences, and professional disciplines like medicine, education sciences, biological sciences then known as « natural sciences » where were particularly highlighted the chair of anatomy with a specialized laboratory, the arts such as painting (a painting academy), human and social sciences over which history served as laboratory for political science and religion for the moral sciences. English was chosen along with the resources of the Anglo-Saxon civilization (in its modernity the Christophian conception did not separate language and culture) as a prototype of the values to inculcate to Haitians not only for a change of language but also of religion and of culture that would achieve a true « cultural revolution » in this former French colony.

The institutions of the Christophian university system were integrated on top of tri-level educational system, primary, secondary and higher by a royal ministry of public education with its chancellor, dignitaries and inspectors of the three branches. The royal directory would nominate individuals and namely officials of the Royal Ministry of Public Education in their respective positions under the leadership of De la Taste as president, De Dupuy as vice president and De Vastey as secretary. The royal press of Sans-Souci published the books of what could be called the Haitian University System Press like its theology manual of Anglican inspiration edited in Sans-Souci as a bilingual (French-English) book that was used in the Christophian schools.

### ***European Paradigm***

What more, it is worth noting that technical assistance and foreign cooperation (exclusively from Great Britain) were to place Christophe's Haiti in a concert of nations of Western Christian civilization. He was the man of enlightened absolutism following the paradigm of Fredrick II the Great and it was symbolic that the Potsdam palace was the Prussian royal domain of Sans-Souci as the Christophian palace of the same name was. About Christophe czar Alexander I told Clarkson « it was more than surprising and he was truly delighted to see the emergence of black man from the darkness of ignorance to form a new empire on the pillars of an education inspired by Christian principles » and « hoped to see this new country rival the whites in all that was grand and good ».

### ***A Premature End***

Upon being informed of the death of Christophe, Wilberforce declared: by all standards, he was a

great man. King Henry of Haiti was a CIVLIZER.

Thus was the conjuncture at the birth of the institutions of our university system at the genesis of the independent state of Haiti by the Christophian genius in the Northern part of the country.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Period – Salomon through the Conjuncture of Awakening**

A blemish on the portrait: it is brought by Boyer. His politics of obscurantism cost the Spanish-speaking, eastern part of the island, and for a great while, the closure of the University of Santo Domingo, the oldest university in the Americas.

A second significant moment in the evolution of the institutions in the Haitian university system after the brilliant founding foray of Christophe was the conjuncture of the arrival of Salomon (1879) through the American occupation of 1915 with a qualitative leap at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. [That was helped by] the holding and subsequent extension of the pedagogical congresses of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which ushered a renewal of higher learning education founded on the renovation of the secondary level whose proponent was Windsor Bellegarde of Ecole Normale Supérieure de Paris. This significant moment is situated at the apex of « the Haitian Society of Legislation » which is said by Dantes Bellegarde to have been « a true Academy of Social and Political Sciences.»

### ***French Contribution and Model***

That time it was the turn of France to provide inspiration and model for the creation of institutions for the university system of Haiti. On the one hand the reform of the secondary education was largely owed to the French Mission recruited in Paris by Guillaume Manigat for the national high school Lycee Alexandre Petion in the program of Education Minister Francois St Surin Manigat. Manigat set the tone for the Republic of letters in his salons at Eden Villa and his parliamentary debates during which « the great master of the Haitian university system » exposed his views on education ( see the evocation of this intellectual scintillation in Paul Deleage's book « Haiti in 1886 ») under the government of Salomon. On the other hand the Haitian graduates from French universities returned to the country to put their knowledge at the service of their land while taking care of the private clientele of their liberal professions (physicians, lawyers, engineers, agronomists, teachers, state officials).

### ***Brilliant Masters***

Louis Joseph Janvier belongs to the very first promotions of graduates of the soon famous « School of Political Science » that was recently founded in Paris. Janvier, with an impressive collection of university diplomas is not only a political scientist, historian, anthropologist, journalist, well connected in Parisian circles, to the point where he was chosen to speak at Victor Hugo's funeral, but is also a graduate of the Law school of Lille where he perfected his theses on the necessity of civilian regime in Haiti. Around the same time Antenor Firmin redacted and published his famous monograph on the problems of public education in Haiti in his book « St Thomas' Letters, » the first scientific analysis with the support of an important arsenal of statistical references on the schools, thus pinpointing the problems. Audain told him: there must be « a reformation of our system of public education which will

replace this cracked, disjointed, and vacillating building with a brand new building with a rational architecture, solid, stable and magnificent. »

Similar ideas bursting forth from everywhere ignited the flames of this second stretch in the growth of the institutions of the university system. Frederic Doret, engineering student from 1897 to 1900, will go on to become one of the eminent Haitian engineers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dr. Leon Audain, educated in France, former intern in Parisian hospitals, became a medical celebrity. He returned to the country to found the Medical School that quickly achieved fame through its art of diagnosis after the French paradigm. Audain will make his name through a genre that he mastered: « social studies. » He will play a critical role in the second pedagogical congress of January 1904 over which he presided and closed. He was the kind of Renaissance man of « high society » that an education minister enjoyed quoting and whom Dr. Audain saluted as « the great master of the Haitian university system. »

The Law School is created under Salomon as a result of a private initiative that the state will own and rename Law Faculty of Port-au-Prince with a legion of graduates from Paris and mostly from Bordeaux. Boyer Bazelais completed his Law studies at the Law faculty of Paris. Stenio Vicent the « exceptionally gifted » specimen of the intelligentsia of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century illustrated with his unmatched eloquence the virtues of oratory art in the courts and during the retirement celebrations of the great masters of the bar and of the magistrature while being the man who accurately diagnosed the ills of Haiti which he attributed to the traditional elite. « Haitian society suppurates through all its pores. » It was Law performing social work! First through words then later by letting the verb incarnate itself...with or without success.

### ***Conjuncture of Awakening: 1940-1960***

This significant moment is the last stage before the creation of the permanent State University of Haiti with the conjuncture of the cultural and artistic awakening of years 1940-1960. Oftentimes I refer to the « conjuncture of awakening » to which I consecrated a monograph in my book « Nouveaux combats pour l'Histoire Vivante d'Haiti » (New struggles for the living History of Haiti). This conjuncture cast the preparatory foundations to edify a new educational system that will usher in the new institutions of the Haitian university system. It was a judicious choice to extend to this entire period the emblematic word « Renaissance » which was found on a sign at Rue du Centre street on the opposite side of the national penitentiary which inspired a humorist to write on another sign « we are better here than across the street! » Finding the word « renaissance » was a treasure trove because it reminded of the exceptionally great moment of the flourishing of the letters and of the arts born of the Italian Quattrocento from Florence which swept through Italy via its Antiquity-inspired works putting man at the center of everything in a universalizing humanism that spread throughout Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

People have witnessed a comparison that was fruitful for the 1940-1960 and beyond intellectual and artistic blossoming of Haiti (for example Haitian painting naive, primitive or modern with its masterpieces) her literature expressing the « Haitian fantastic » the Haitian cultural genius, vodou as religion and Creole as language, naturally understood.

## **Expansion of Disciplines**

It was in that context that new pieces came to expand the fabric of the institutions of the Haitian university system with the discipline of Ethnology for which are created the School of Ethnology (which would later become the Faculty of Ethnology with the first chair being Jean Baptiste Roumain) and an ethnology bureau on which Jacques Roumain will leave his imprint; a National Folkloric Troupe; an Education School of Higher Learning (first director Pradel Pompilus); an Arts Center (first director Dewitt Peters) and Foyer of Plastic Arts which will be the nursery for the future ENEARTS (National School for the Arts); a National School for International Studies (first director Leslie F. Manigat, the school will later become the National Institute Management and International Studies); a faculty of Social Sciences; a faculty of Linguistics; a National Musical Conservatory; a Center for Social Sciences Investigations (first director Hubert de Ronceray). These were added to the initial and classical kernels of the Law Faculty, the Medical Faculty and Odonatology; the Polytechnic School (formerly known as the School of Applied Sciences), the Agricultural Faculty. A rectorate was created which will be placed under the leadership of Dr. Jean Price-Mars, physician-ethnologist-historian-diplomat, the author of «Ainsi parla l'Oncle », in short the finest on the Haitian intellectual landscape and of international renown.

## **Problematics and Solution Paths**

Now comes an exposé of the problematics and of some of the resulting or related problems - as a conclusion on the Haitian « what's next » with regards to the needs of the renovation of the institutions of the Haitian university system, in order to offer a better comprehension of the situation of the country, already precarious before but significantly worse after the horrible earthquake of January 12 2010. The International committee of support to the new University of Haiti that is so badly hurt and damaged is undoubtedly, and more so than others, very interested in surveying the work at hand to contribute morally and materially to the operation of a Haitian university worthy of the name.

### ***1. Nature and Functionality***

The first question is on the nature and the functionality of the University of Haiti. Shouldn't it take advantage of this sad ordeal to ask the question of whether it should continue to remain a « glorified secondary » school as I vehemently and justifiably denounced upon witnessing the situation or whether it will become an authentic university system breaking off with the practice of letting the main professor's lecture be the sole means to dispense knowledge but letting it be the skeleton around which a host of other learning activities can be grafted. Nothing could replace an excellent university professor whose lecture brings and distributes academic knowledge at the highest level of human understanding. However it has always been the norm to complement his lectures with practical exercises, supervised work, laboratory work, and experiments the importance of which has been acknowledged at least since the publication of the experimental method of Claude Bernard. In some cases we are still using the lectern of our classrooms for an exercise of dictation that is regurgitated verbatim to satisfy middle-age like exams of faculties of old. De profundis, from the depths of the current Haitian distress, the imperatives of an authentic, quality university is to fulfill the mandate to be the brain on top of the complete educational system of the country. It is incumbent

upon our true friends to help us realize this.

## ***2. Research – Key to the Future***

The second question is the necessity for research, another companion of the lecture that implies that the university professor would have, by and large, previously done investigative work on his subject matter. It is his intellectual duty to keep his lecture material up-to-date by constantly being himself updated. When I began my career I remember a colleague who boasted of his notes written on yellowed paper while sporting a satisfied look of self-sufficiency. That was yesterday! Today research as is it known is organized outside of the individual professor's briefcase into a body dedicated to scientific investigations. Scientific research centers are spreading everywhere and the time is right for such activities. Today scientific research has overtaken the instructions provided in classrooms in the area knowledge enrichment and individual researches (students writing theses and dissertations for example and researchers in postdoctoral institutions) or group researches (research teams to which the results of the investigations belong the very teams or on behalf of private or public well known and prestigious bodies). One researcher may belong to this body, while that other one belongs to that body... The collaboration of research teams of different countries is the new sign of the supremacy of matters of the mind in the new technologies of human knowledge, in digital humanism. Haitian scientific investigations should be geared more toward group research.

## ***3. Students - Significant part of the equation***

Taking a closer look at the problems of the institutions of the Haitian university system it is necessary to focus on those who are being taught and what they're being taught. It has been customary to think that a university is just the professors. What about the student population? Does it come simply to listen to the lectures? The university counts 50,000 students, half of which belongs to the state university system organized as 13 faculties and schools of higher learning. The needs of this microcosm are relatively tremendous and the problems of scholarships are not resolved even by the standards of appropriation and justice let alone according to the urgent needs of the nation. What about a closely supervised partial take over to solve this problem? More foreign cooperation could be solicited from the start to prepare the end game of spreading out of the talents toward national and international shores.

## ***4. A Campus – A Decentralization Challenge***

The project of a university campus with living quarters for professors and students as realized in France or the The University of the West Indies (Mona, Jamaica) stumbled against, I know this from experience, the obstacle of government apprehension of concentrating in one location a potentially subversive student population. The opportunity to prepare a site for a central campus came up twice, once for a site at Cotes-Plages and once for Jean-Claude Duvalier's ranch with scaled models prepared by a specialized firm. I speak from personal knowledge since I held in my hands the scale model for the School of International Studies, having ordered the model based on the school's needs and after consultation with concerned students. Today the problem is reframed in different terms since there are several other campuses with wide multipurpose space capital including sports facilities, Diquini for example. With the decongestion, relocation, and decentralization thought about there will be the



opportunity to change the landscape of the Haitian university system with regard to a future regionalization even though the constitution failed to mention the region in its list of territorial collections.

### **5. Reining in “Borlette<sup>1</sup>” Universities**

5) The brand new problem of private universities. There is a proliferation of private universities that are mushrooming because of the critical mass, both socially and numerically, of high school graduates growing at an annual rate in the order of hundreds of thousands. The sole state university is unable to welcome them all. We have no less than thirty thousand students who would register in the private universities, most of which are for profit. As the « Borlette» schools of the secondary level there is a contamination of « borlette » universities. An optimistic joker commented that it was better to have « borlette » universities than to have none at all. There are probably one hundred and fifty private universities of which about forty are operating legally. The ratio of public institutions of higher learning versus private institutions of higher learning is worrisome because there is a problem of coexistence. For example the state faculty of medicine allows only two hundred new students every year. A single university from the top private universities will admit twice that amount. Medical internships, which must be performed in public hospitals, are on a rationing measured in terms of droplets and diplomas from private universities must be approved by the state. Some specialties are only available at the state university. The rivalry between state and private universities is reminiscent of the rivalry between priests and mayors in movies by Marcel Pagnol. I am caricaturing evidently. It must be said that the reputable private universities are at the leading edge of progress in their disciplines, thanks to foreign aid and cooperation. What more, old vocational and trade business schools of renown not requiring a high school diploma have morphed into schools of higher learning with an admitted university format.

### **6. Speculative Knowledge vs. Pragmatic Knowledge**

Another question being quietly debated has to do with the choice between fundamental and speculative knowledge, aesthetically and preferably classical (pleasure?) and pragmatic knowledge (business ?) or theoretical and philosophical knowledge of Greco-Latin inheritance of people like Plato and Aristotle versus the practical teaching of Anglo-Saxon pragmatism, a residual form of the old « Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes » (Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns). One will recall that we have found that the problem was framed is our analysis of the substitution of American hegemony to French preponderancy in the 1910-1912 conjuncture. Things were left to follow their own course and the stakes were raised to strategically important levels for the country: elitism or populism, free choice or dirigism, these two pieces of inheritance from cultural tradition that I have placed in the long lived Braudelairian tradition and which Mirlande Manigat has just denounced the discriminatory character in their effects. Familial and individual Laisser-faire have won but social pressure is hard pressed to correct their spontaneity.

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<sup>1</sup> Borlette is a lottery that is administered by particulars and relies on the last 2 digits of the winning numbers of state lottery. Although the state requires borlette sellers to register, most of them don't and can disappear overnight if they don't have enough money to pay the winners. A « borlette » school is thus an unregistered school that may or may not be around for long.

## **7. Other Success Factor - Use of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Tools**

7) Legislation on teaching on the higher level still in the works drags its feet in settling the questions that are in suspense in the era of modernization and globalization for the institutions of the Haitian university system. It is in that category that we must list the importance of the human development index in strategic choices to undertake in praxiology, the administrative and technical training of the support personnel and its specific training in its appropriate disciplines, in the institutions of the Haitian university system, the use of new technologies, Internet in the schools, the construction and utilization of school and university buildings, the diversification of the continuous control of knowledge, the quantifying of compared growth in promoting and correcting policies in human progress based on criteria related to the basic personality of each civilization. International cooperation must in will lead in these areas of human intervention and Haiti must seize upon its misfortune as a good opportunity for the forward leaps that are imposed not by her « backwardness » (such terminology is no longer used) but the archaism of her developmental stage.

## **Conclusion**

The international committee of support of the University of Haiti afflicted with the destruction of six private universities and the damage of almost all the others, the public one and the private ones in the martyr-cities of Port-au-Prince, Leogane, Petit Goave, Grand Goave, and Jacmel, among the best of the country, can only understand and shoulder the solidarity push that seeks to compensate the ills that overwhelm the Haitian country in distress but with the sympathy of international opinion superbly moved and mobilized by the unjust misfortune that the Haitian people did not deserve. The beautiful word solidarity is the password that unlocks the doors for the sake of Haiti.