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Latortue, Paul R.

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GONAIVES: THE LAST 50 YEARS

Paul R. Latortue

Photos by Doel Vázquez, 2005

The essay that accompanies these photographs recently taken in Gonaives, Haiti, consists of three parts: the place where I grew up as a young man; the place I now see; and the city I envision it could become.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Gonaives only had a population of 40,000, yet it was the third largest city after Port-au-Prince and Cap Haitien. Politically it had always been an important place.

Uprisings often started there so even dictators had to manage Gonaives with extreme care. Many believed then and still believe this trait to be a legacy from the independence movement since Gonaives is where the first black republic was proclaimed on the ashes of slavery. During my youth, it was a quiet place most of the time; at least this is the way we saw it as youngsters. People knew each other and could walk the streets at any time. Neighbors intervened in education of children when needed, and parents would be thankful for their doing so. Gonaives, the place where I learned the values characterizing life in the Caribbean, is still the only place I consider as home and the place where I wish to spend my last days.

Economically speaking, the 1950s was the best decade for Haiti as well as Gonaives in the 20th century. With the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the nation in 1954, there was a great deal of infrastructural work in Gonaives which created thousands of jobs. Since there was not enough labor, people came for other regions to fill the gap. Electricity returned again, and the highway to Port-au-Prince and to Cap Haitien was rebuilt and modernized. A new class of local merchants was surfacing. The port of Gonaives became the preferred one for the export of coffee to Europe and of mangoes to the Bahamas. Twenty to fifty miles

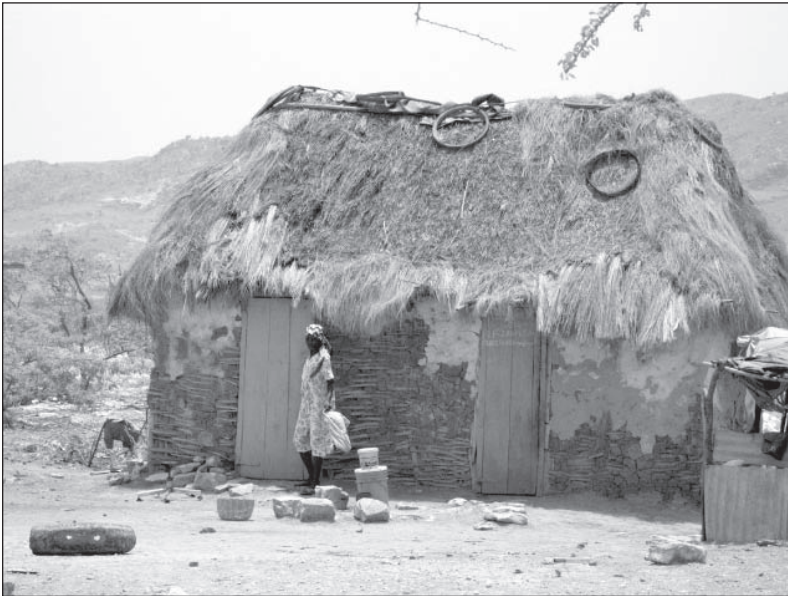


The accumulation of rains after hurricane Jeanne passed in 2004, were profitable for the rice crops in the agricultural valley of Artibonite in Gonaives which fields produce the best grain.

to the east and to the south, the biggest irrigation system ever known in Haiti was built, thus transforming 40,000 hectares of flat land into the country's food basket and bringing some prosperity to the largest peasant base in the mostly peasant society. In the 1960s, there were other irrigation projects in the traditionally dry land immediately surrounding the city which provided additional area for growing cotton and a filature. Copper mining started in a mountain 20 miles north, and yielded the opportunity to build one of the deepest ports in Haiti, Sedren. Schools grew in numbers and in size, but there were never enough for all who wanted an education. During that time, university classes began in Gonaives. One of the graduates of the Law School which attracted students as far away as Port-au-Prince was the only female president of Haiti and former judge on the Haitian Supreme Court.

Life in this typical Caribbean setting continued—extensive poverty was accompanied by some happiness and *joie de vivre*. There was no wealth, but no drugs. There was conflict, but also friendship. Gonaives and the surrounding region gave Dumarsais Estimé, Paul Magloire and François Duvalier a base of popularity as well as several key members in their respective regimes. At this time the middle class was making progress, *bon gré, mal gré*.

During the 20 years since the fall of Duvalier in 1986, I have spent half the time in Haiti. Gonaives was still my hometown even though I worked and lived in Port-au-Prince from 1995 to 2001. I now see a city of at least 200,000 that has lost much of its economic bases. Gone are the export of coffee, mangoes, and copper as well as the cotton fields and the thread mill. Gone is the flourishing rice production of the Artibonite valley. It was once hoped it would yield enough rice for the entire island of Hispaniola and perhaps beyond. The irrigation systems built a generation ago are no longer working due to weak maintenance systems. The port now serves for the import of Sugar from Cuba and elsewhere. Rice from as far as Thailand is given brand names of the high quality brands developed in the Artibonite and sold to Haitians in Haiti and in Miami. Other imports include cement



In the coastal grasslands, a woman takes of her head the buckets of drinkable water before entering her home. The limestone chunks will be crushed by hand and used as raw material for restoration.



In the rural area the use of any motorized vehicle takes the transportation of agricultural products as a priority.

from Mexico, Columbia and Cuba, as well as frozen chicken and turkey parts brought from Miami and the United States Midwest. By land, agricultural products from Cibao in the Dominican Republic reach Gonaives and the largest rural market which is 20 miles away in the Artibonite Valley. Despite a large inflow of remittances from Haitians abroad, the local currency, the gourde, has been devalued by more than 800% in the last 20 years.

In September 2004, the city was directly hit by hurricane Jeanne in a way analogous to what Katrina did to New Orleans, except that water did not come from the sea. It came from mountains that lost the capacity to absorb several days of heavy rainfall due to erosion and deforestation causing the death of more than 3,000 people in one night.

Gonaives is still an important center of land transportation because of its central location in the highway system. One study undertaken in 2000 by l'Unité Centrale de Gestion (UCG) estimated that at any point in time Gonaives has a floating population of at least 30,000 people most of whom while in transit stay with family or friends for several days. This is a city in the position to catch the political sentiments of the country north of Port-au-Prince where the majority of the population live. I now understand why political uprisings that get started in Gonaives often meet with success. Indeed whenever I could spend four days in a row in Gonaives, I came away with a good sense of what the people at large were thinking about the issues being discussed. Such a large presence of non-local residents brought changes. There were motorcycle type taxis, more hotels and traditional type public markets. A modern marketplace recently built to serve Gonaives North was never inaugurated but is used by UN forces. Although the city had originally supported both François Duvalier and Jean-Bertrand Aristide, it was instrumental in leading the revolt against them which reinforced the city's reputation as a political center. Today the secondary school system is still relatively strong; however, there is not enough space for everyone. While the university has added a business and economics section, graduates migrate



In Gonaives' urban center it is common to see children digging among the rubles. The shortage of raw material for construction compels the inhabitants to accumulated garbage in order to use it as landfill in areas of eroded soil.

to the capital, Canada and the United States. Many middle class people of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s migrated abroad as did many well off people in the peasant group. Recent public investments are few, with the obvious exception of street paving that created temporary jobs in late 1990s under the leadership of UCG. Both private and public sectors are afraid to start new ventures in Gonaives, largely seen as ungovernable.

Yet this is a city with much potential. With a deep water port facing the Windward Passage and surrounded by large tracks of empty non agricultural land, planners can easily see Gonaives as a potential spot for industrial and commercial developments. The Windward Passage is a preferred route for shipment to the east coast of North America where some of the world's richest people live. Gonaives as a historical city carries a potential for tourism development. In addition, three of the most well known voodoo yards are located less than ten miles away with all the music, dancing, painting, culture and folklore accompanying the presence of voodoo. By helicopter the city is 15 to 20 minutes away from the Citadelle Henry Chistophe near Cap Haitien and 30 minutes away from Port-au-Prince. The biggest rural market is in Pont Estere only 20 miles away. As a central city, Gonaives is a good location for hotels, universities, health centers, auto shops and varied commercial enterprises.

It is unfortunate that the leaders of Haiti do not think along these lines. They wish for self-perpetuating power to control budgets, police, judges as well as the life and death of others while keeping full immunity for themselves. How long will such behavior last? Will the power to start successful uprisings some day yield leaders with more light than heat? No one knows how long it will take.

Río Piedras, Puerto Rico, August 2006



The route of Port-au-Prince to Gonaïves is demarcated by agricultural products marketing zones in which women are solely in charge.



A group of Raboteau young residents interrupt a marble game to smile for the lens.



The coastal grasslands in Gonaives are notable by the production of salt. The families live isolated from each other and in subhuman conditions.



One of the chores commonly assigned to the children includes water gathering. The girl riding the mule loaded with water containers frames a typical scene of a late afternoon in Gonaives' roads.



The interior of a cooperative society of consumption founded by the Ebenezer Methodist temple.



In Gonaives, the presence of a young woman in front of the agricultural markets setting.



Raboteau slum. In the background, the *batey*, where the hand-crushed limestone pile will be used to reinforce the hut's walls.



Most of the marketing of non-agricultural products takes place in posts located along the sidewalks of Gonaives' urban center.