

Is It Fair to Equate the Restavèk System with Slavery?

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Two weeks ago, a friend of mine attended a conference on slavery at Yale University, and e-mailed me a picture of a panelist, with the caption: Haitian man claims he was enslaved in Haiti. The panelist, it turned out, was Jean Robert Cadet, author of *Restavec: From Haitian Slave to Middle-Class American*, and founded Jean R. Cadet Restavek No More, Inc, an Ohio-based organization dedicated to "ending child slavery in Haiti."

Through the lens of the late Haitian storyteller Maurice Sixto, most Haitians became familiar with the travails of the restavèk — underage child servants (who have been the subject of many books, anecdotes and controversy). In a country where abject poverty is a common denominator for the great majority, this phenomenon, a combination of unfulfilled promises and self-serving opportunities, has matured into an issue that is more repugnant than the poverty in which people live. From the perspective of many who are not familiar with Haitian culture, the practice may be considered repulsive and a violation of human rights. But is this social-philosophical aspect of the problem the correct hypothesis or an emotional reaction to a delicate and complex issue that is mostly misunderstood by well-meaning individuals and/or human rights advocates? Or, is the restavèk issue being misused by unrepentant supremacists, unprincipled journalists and self-appointed nation-builders for insidious purposes?

Because slavery, as it has been universally defined, officially ended in Haiti on January 1, 1804, I consider such comparison flawed, offensive and unjustifiable.

For starters, restavèk (which has been inaccurately defined as forced child labor) was fairly common throughout Europe and the Americas well into the beginning of the 20th century. Therefore it should not be seen as intrinsically Haitian, as many misinformed people are inclined to believe. Most importantly, it is disingenuous for anyone to equate the practice with slavery, which was an institutionalized economic system, rather than an abhorrent socio-economic reality that could be redressed through economic development, political reforms and social mobility.

Given that the Haitian state was structurally defective for most of its 208 years of existence, restavèk was practically a non-issue for the authorities and the great majority of Haitians. But thanks to Maurice Sixto's satirical portrayal of a restavèk in *Ti Sentaniz* in the 1970s, which helped raise the issue to a "cause célèbre" for human rights campaigners, the Haitian state has been actively trying to eradicate the scourge through legislative measures and public awareness. However, a lot remains to be done because of scarcity of resources and other pressing challenges. Nonetheless, the pontificators remain adamant that the practice is widespread and that nothing is being done about it. Anderson Cooper, the host of CNN's AC-360, once made the bold claim that 400,000 Haitian children are currently "enslaved" in Haiti. Interestingly enough, his flawed reporting was accepted as fact, even though the numbers do not add up. It is therefore not surprising that the issue is somewhat referred as "modern-day slavery" despite the absurdity of the hypothesis.

Only a thorough understanding of the socio-economic realities that earn Haiti the unenviable title of "poorest country in the Western Hemisphere" can truly help foreigners evaluate the situation without being judgmental. A restavèk is customarily an underage orphan or a child from an impoverished family in the countryside, who is placed with an urban family as a domestic servant with the understanding that he or she will be fed, clothed, housed and schooled. Unfortunately for many of these children, the promises made under these informal arrangements were not always fulfilled for reasons ranging from the host family's delusion of grandeur (many hosts are marginally better off than their servants), to mendacity, cruelty and other human idiosyncrasies.

For Haitians, or any member of the African Diaspora for that matter, the word "slavery" is distinctively associated with the transatlantic slave trade in which millions of Africans were forcibly uprooted from their villages and sold like domesticated animals in faraway lands. It is also a reminder of one of the most horrible crimes against humanity. It gives comfort to those supremacists who see slavery as a humanitarian undertaking that brought civilization to a primitive group of people. Hence, the notion of associating the restavèk phenomenon with slavery is a naked attempt at trivializing one of the most grotesque episodes in human history.

The practice of child servitude is not unlike that of undocumented workers in the US that are taken advantage of by unscrupulous bosses because of their status. It certainly does not help the matter when a native of the country, whose singular contributions to the destruction of slavery as an economic system, is making this insensitive and bizarre claim. To make matters worse, this native son is spreading such imprudence, while many in the community remain in the dark about his claims. I must admit that I have yet to read his book, but will definitely do so in the near future.

Jean Robert Cadet's story from abject poverty to acclaimed author and lecturer may be compelling — but the man is not entitled to exaggerate a complex reality for personal gain or otherwise. Haiti's image certainly does not need another nail in the coffin.

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The views expressed in this column are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of Haitian Times.

