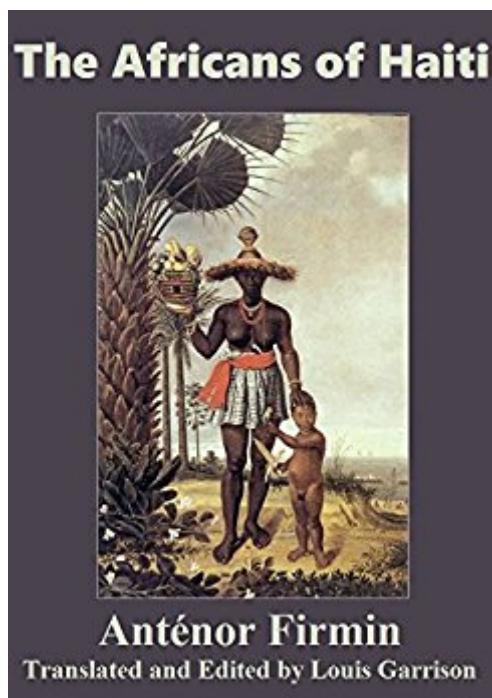


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The Africans Of Haiti



Synopsis

À œAfricans in Haïti • is a translated excerpt from à œM. Roosevelt President des Etas Unis et La Republique Dâ™Haïti • (à œMr. Roosevelt, President of the United States, and the Republic of Haïti™, published 1905), by Antenor Firmin (1850-1911). Firmin was a Haitian politician, anthropologist, writer, and journalist. His best known book was à œDe lâ™Egalité des Races Humainesâ • (à œOn the Equality of the Human Racesâ •, 1885). Firminâ™s 1885 book was a response to the French writer Count Arthur de Gobineauâ™s à œEssai sur lâ™Inégalité des Races Humainesâ • (à œEssay on the Inequality of Human Racesâ •, 1853-1855). Gobineauâ™s book was an early example of scientific racism, and it provided inspiration for later groups such as Adolf Hitlerâ™s Nazi Party. Gobineau argued that the à œAryan raceâ • was the worldâ™s master race, and the driving force behind all world civilization. Firmin, on the other hand, rebutted Gobineauâ™s book by arguing that all human races were equal. Firmin was a pioneering anthropologist who influenced later Haitian anthropologists Jean Price-Mars (1876-1969), and American anthropologist Melville Herskovits. Price-Marsâ™ was a descendant of Jean-Baptiste Belley (c. 1746-1805), who was also known as Mars. Born in Africa, Belley had been taken to the colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) as a slave. He later won his freedom, and represented the colony in France after emancipation. Another ancestor of Price-Mars had been a black freeman who had fought in the revolt of coloured freemen Vincent Oge and Chavannes in 1790. Price-Mars was known for his studies of Haitian Vodou and peasant folk culture. In earlier generations, the educated Haitian elite had generally emulated French culture, while looking down on and ignoring the African-influenced folk culture of the peasant population. His most famous book was à œAinsi Parla lâ™Oncleâ • (à œSo Spoke the Uncleâ •, 1928). Price-Marsâ™ work was part of the Negritude movement in Haiti, a literary and cultural movement that extended across the French Caribbean, France, and the French African colonies. Key members of the Negritude movement included Senegalese president Leopold Sedar Senghor, Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, and French Guianese poet and politician Leon Damas. Firmin can be seen as a forerunner of this movement. In this excerpt, Firmin describes the diversity of the African slaves brought to Haiti during the colonial period. In the colonial era, Haiti was a French colony called Saint-Domingue. French pirates had seized control of the western side of the island of Hispaniola from Spain in the 17th century. They went on to develop the territory into a plantation colony. Saint-Domingue became the worldâ™s largest sugar and coffee producer in the 18th century. The plantation production depended on the labor of thousands of enslaved Africans. Slaves died in large numbers of the plantations, so new African slaves were constantly brought into the colony. The African slaves came from a large

geographic area of Africa, extending from Senegal in West Africa, to Angola in West-Central Africa. They came from many different regions, cultures and ethnicities, and spoke different languages. The largest proportion of the African slaves brought to Haiti, however, were born in either the Bight of Benin or West-Central Africa. The former were called "Aradas" in St-Domingue, while the latter were known as "Congos". When the Haitian Revolution began with a slave revolt in 1791, the majority of the people in Haiti were still African-born. Many of the highest ranking leaders in the revolution were "Creoles" (locally-born people), including Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Henri Christophe, Jean-Francois, and Georges Biassou. But many of the most effective fighters and commanders in the revolution, like Macaya and Sans-Souci, were African-born, in many cases from the West-Central African kingdom of Kongo. Over time, the different African ethnicities were gradually absorbed into a more unified Haitian culture.

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