Chapter 6

WEATHERING THE STORMS LIKE BAMBOO

The Strengths of Haitians in Coping with Natural Disasters

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The bamboo symbolizes the Haitian people... The bamboo is really weak, but when the wind comes, it bends, but it doesn't break. Bamboo takes whatever adversity comes along... that's what resistance is for us Haitians; we might get bent... but we're able to straighten up and stand.

—Bell and Danticat, Walking on Fire, 23

Haiti as a country has faced many political, economic, and environmental storms over the centuries and these storms have significantly impacted the lives of the people residing in Haiti. In addition to these storms, Haitians have been faced with the occurrence of many natural disasters and they are in desperate need of support. While support from outside of Haiti is certainly beneficial and helps to reduce the stress of their circumstances, it is also important for the people of Haiti to be able to access their own resources and tap into their own strengths when dealing with their many challenges. Therefore, it is important to think about questions such as: what are the strengths of the country and its people in coping with these disasters? and what role do history and social support systems such as family, religion, and community play in facing these challenges? These are some of the main questions that are addressed in this chapter. Specifically, a description of the following issues is provided: (1) Haiti’s history of political instability; (2) Haiti’s misfortune with natural disasters; (3) a
description of the intersections of trauma and natural disasters; and (4) the cultural strengths of Haitians in coping with natural disasters.

AN OVERVIEW OF HAITI'S POLITICAL HISTORY

Haiti is a small island, equivalent to the size of Maryland and often referred to as “the pearl of the Antilles” (Coupeau 2002; Hickey 1982). The French developed the western part of the island whereas the Spanish developed the Eastern part, which is now the Dominican Republic (Hickey 1982). St. Domingue was eventually called Haiti (which means great mountains or great land) by its original inhabitants, the Arawaks and Tainos, and this name has remained throughout its existence (Heinl and Heinl 2005).

Haiti was appropriately named the pearl of Antilles because it was both lush and verdant with forests (Coupeau 2008). Haiti was also the first island to produce sugar, and the mining provided precious stones. In essence, Haiti was rich with many natural resources that yielded wealth for the French colonists, and eventually became one of the most prosperous colonies and the leading producer of both sugar and coffee by 1791 (Hickey 1982). Unfortunately, this wealth was enjoyed by the French colonists and not by the black slaves, whose arduous work had provided the prosperity (Coupeau 2008). This chasm between the white (the have) and black (the have-nots) populations of Haiti led to discontentment, frustration, and ultimately a revolution led by Francois Toussaint (Hickey 1983).

Francois Toussaint, who became Toussaint L’Ouverture (his name was changed to L’Ouverture because of his ability to escape effortlessly from traps), was an ex-slave who became a general and led the revolt against the French (Knight 2000). Haiti was certainly a small nation compared to France, yet the tenacity of L’Ouverture and those on his side was powerful, and that is what overthrew Napoleon Bonaparte and his army (Knight 2000). This unlikely victory reverberated throughout the world and instilled fear among leaders (Knight 2000). Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, L’Ouverture was eventually captured, sent into exile, and died in France (Knight 2000). Jean-Jaques Dessalines succeeded him and declared Haiti as an independent nation in 1804. However, it would take some time for other nations to acknowledge Haiti’s independence; it took the United States 60 years (Coupeau 2008).

As Haiti attempted to reconcile differences among leaders and establish its own government, Dessalines was assassinated, and from 1806–1820 the country became divided into two: (1) the predominantly mulatto population lived under the rule of General Alexandre Pétion; and (2) the predominantly dark skinned people lived under the rule of King Henri Christophe (Coupeau 2008). This division was the beginning of the turmoil in leadership that Haiti would undergo in subsequent years.
Some of the most unstable political times for Haiti have been within the last 30 years. President François "Papa Doc" Duvalier reigned as dictator of Haiti from 1957–1971 (Coupeau 2008). President Duvalier remained in power by killing people he suspected to be enemies (Farmer 2006), and this continued under the rule of his son Jean Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier who was president from 1971–1986 (Heinl et al. 2005). Both regimes resulted in Haitians fleeing Haiti to save themselves and their loved ones; the large majority of them immigrated to New York City and Miami (Stepick and Portes 1986).

Although the Haitians who fled Haiti expected to experience safety and a sense of security in the United States, they were viewed as an economic threat, were not granted political asylum, and the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) made a concerted effort to assure that Haitians were ineligible for permanent residence (Stepick and Portes 1986). In response, various community organizations and churches lobbied on behalf of Haitians for better conduct towards them. In addition to the stress they encountered upon arrival to the United States, it is also important to recognize the trauma they experienced in relocating to a new country (and particularly to big cities) where many of them did not know the language or the system by which America operates (Stépick and Portes 1986). Haitians' plight in the United States was further exacerbated in the early 1990s when they were targeted by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) as the group responsible for carrying the HIV virus (Glick-Schiller and Fouron 1990). This false accusation spread throughout the country (and eventually the world) and resulted in many Haitians losing their jobs and support network, and having the general population within the United States afraid of associating with them. Haitians throughout the United States protested against the CDC's claim that they were carriers of the HIV virus and this fight eventually resulted in the removal of Haitians from the at risk list for AIDS (Glick-Schiller and Fouron 1990).

The government in Haiti remained relatively unstable after President Baby Doc's ousting in 1986, having five brief administrations from 1987–1990 (Coupeau 2008). Unexpectedly in 1991 Jean Bertrand Aristide, a priest turned political figure, ran for office and won one of the first open and democratic elections in Haiti. This event provided a sense of hope that the war-torn and impoverished nation would become a safe and prosperous place, not only for its inhabitants but for the world (Farmer 2006). Aristide strived to regulate the economic system and redistribute the wealth that had been hoarded by a small minority. President Aristide's political stance instilled fear among other foreign leaders, including the United States. Unfortunately, seven months later hope quickly expired when a military coup, with United States knowledge and involvement, ousted President Aristide from office (Coupeau 2008). It was this fear that led to two other coup
d’états when President Aristide was in power from 1994–1996 and then from 2000–2004. The last coup led President Aristide into exile in Central Africa, leaving Haiti once again in great distress (Farmer 2006).

HAITI’S PLIGHT WITH NATURAL DISASTERS

Along with political devastation, Haiti has also been battered by natural disasters throughout its history. The island lies in the middle of the hurricane belt and is subject to strong storms from June to November (i.e., hurricane season) and these storms have resulted in severe wind damage, flooding, landslides, and coastal surges (World Bank 2008). Hurricanes have been a part of Haiti’s history, with the first hurricane documented in 1508, since it is surrounded by water. The first official devastating hurricane was an unnamed hurricane in 1935 that resulted in 2,150 deaths (National Hurricane Center Publication 2008). Hurricane Hazel followed in 1954, contributing to the death of over 1000 people. Hurricane Flora (ranked as the 6th most deadly hurricane) hit Haiti in much greater magnitude in 1963, killing over 8,000 people. The country received a reprieve in the 1970s and 1980s, but was hit once again by Hurricane Gordon in 1994, killing over 1000 Haitians. Then Hurricane Georges in 1998 killed over 400 people and destroyed 80 percent of the crops in the country.

The hurricanes and tropical storms have persisted and some of the most devastating ones have occurred in 2004, 2005, and 2008. Hurricane Jeane (ranked as the 12th deadliest hurricane of all time) hit Haiti in September 2004, resulting in the death of over 3,000 people, mostly in the town of Gonaïves (Arie 2004). In 2005, Hurricane Wilma, not predicted to cause much damage in Haiti, led to 11 deaths in the country. In the summer of 2008, Haiti was struck with three more hurricanes in less than one month (Casselman 2008). First Hurricane Fay hit Haiti, followed by Gustav, then tropical storm Hanna, and the streak ended with Hurricane Ike. Collectively, these storms led to over 800 deaths, 10,000 people without homes, and damages estimated at tens of millions of dollars.

Despite Haiti’s history of being impacted by tropical storms and hurricanes, there is very little governmental infrastructure in place to respond to these events. In fact, the Haitian Red Cross is the only national group in Haiti that responds to these occurrences. This is due in part to the support of the American Red Cross that maintains a 15 person office in Port-au-Prince that works with other Haitians in carrying disaster response activities such as evacuation, search and rescue, acute emergency care, distributing supplies, and so on. However, given the number of tropical storms and hurricanes that impact the country yearly, one disaster response network (that
is not fully staffed) is clearly not enough to handle the devastating impact of these events.

With all of this devastation, there is fear and uncertainty about the future of the country. Michelle Pierre-Louis, the prime minister of the country, reported, "the whole country is facing an ecological disaster... We cannot keep going on like this. We are going to disappear one day. There will not be 400, 500 or 1,000 deaths. There are going to be a million deaths" (The Guardian 2008). In fact, Robert Zoellick, the president of the World Bank, reported that Haiti as a country is at "tipping point" and requires immediate attention and intervention from the world. Thus, he warned that the old Haitian saying "bourik chaje pa ka kanpe" (an overloaded donkey cannot stand up) may be applicable to the situation in Haiti with respect to the effect of natural disasters. Understanding the factors that lead to the vulnerability of the country may be one step in rectifying the overall impact of these tropical storms and hurricanes in Haiti.

CAUSES OF NATURAL DISASTERS IN HAITI

A number of causes have been documented as possible explanations for Haiti's high vulnerability to storms and hurricanes. Some of these include poverty, inadequate infrastructure, deforestation, and an unstable political system. Each of these areas merits their own detailed examination, which is beyond the scope of this chapter. Below is a summary of one of these factors, deforestation, as an example of the ways that such a factor can increase the country's vulnerability to storms and hurricanes (Arie 2004).

The lack of Haiti's once dense forests limits the extent to which trees can absorb the rain from tropical storms. As a result, rain is able to rush down the mountains and hills of Haiti, destroying anything in its path (Arie 2004). For example, in 1980 Haiti had 25 percent of its forests in existence, enabling the country to avoid devastation despite the heavy rain of Hurricane Emily (a category 3 storm). However, only 1.4 percent of the forests remained in 2004 and they are believed to have decreased even more in the last two years. As a result, tropical storms such as Jeanne and Gordon (which were not the same caliber as hurricanes) can cause excessive flooding (due to the lack of tree cover resulting in flooding), leading to devastation in the country. In May of 2004, more than 2,600 people were killed as result of flooding in the towns from three days of significant rain (approximately 18 inches).

Therefore, as just one example, the lack of trees (combined with the susceptibility to major tropical storms and hurricanes) in Haiti results in damaged crops and ultimately perpetuates the cycle of poverty (for those people who rely on farming as their source of income) in the face of tropical
storms (Arie 2004). Although the Haitian government cannot prevent the storms from hitting Haiti, it can put systems in place that help to limit the extent to which the storms can devastate the island when they occur. For example, putting programs in place to help replace the forests that have disappeared could help to prevent such extreme and dangerous flooding from occurring. Therefore, part of the reason that Haiti is so vulnerable to disaster in the face of tropical storms and hurricanes is that the country does not have systems in place to help reduce or limit the potential damage that can occur when storms strike the island.

TRAUMATIC IMPACT FROM NATURAL DISASTERS

Disasters are commonly viewed as mass traumatic events, involving groups of people, often connected to economic and housing hardship. In the broadest sense, trauma is defined as the response a person has to what is considered a disaster, whether it is on a large scale or a more personal level (Allen 1996). A recent review of disaster studies highlights that natural disasters, technological disasters, and mass violence, including terrorism in the United States and other developed countries, and in developing countries, can have severe impacts on those affected (Norris et al. 2001). There are various forms and degrees of trauma, but it is the uncontrollable and unpredictable elements of events that often trigger traumatic responses to certain events (Nicolas et al. 2006). The current understanding of trauma needs to be broadened even further to take into account the type of responses and support that people receive when they experience traumatizing incidents, such as natural disasters. Specifically, this response trauma is broadly defined as stressors associated with a lack of support from governmental agencies following a disaster or traumatizing event (Allen 1996). Nicolas and colleagues (2008) assert that response trauma can be as traumatizing as the traumatic incident itself, if not more so, and thus must be taken into account in the assessment and treatment of individuals impacted by disastrous events. This is particularly true for Haitians, who are living in a country with limited resources for coping with natural disasters.

While hurricanes are often referred to as natural disasters, their impact is rarely natural. For example, the traumatic impact from a disaster is often associated with factors such as poverty, inequalities, and housing crises (among other factors) as opposed to the actual storm. Thus, there is a risk of providing inadequate treatment to a client impacted by a disaster without an integration of the sociocultural and political factors that are often attached to the traumatic experience of a natural disaster (Blaikie et al.
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A detailed account of the impact of natural disasters and the symptoms associated with the impact of such stressors is found in other chapters in this book. It is important to note, however, that several factors contribute to the impact of a natural disaster beyond the actual event itself and the symptoms of the individuals must be understood from a sociocultural, historical, and political perspective. Therefore, given the lack of coordinated governmental efforts in Haiti to address the devastating impact of natural disasters (as described in the previous section), it is important to consider the sociocultural, historical, economic, and political factors that are inevitable aspects of the natural disasters, as well as the strengths of the Haitian people in coping with these events.

THE SOCIOCULTURAL TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS OF THE HAITIAN PEOPLE

Knowledge and awareness about Haitians and Haiti predominantly comes from popular media, which unfortunately is often negative in nature. Given the stressful and essentially disastrous experiences of Haitians over the years, it is clear that as a people they have undergone extremely difficult times, politically, economically, and through natural disasters. However, as documented by many, Haitians have considerable cultural pride and are resilient when faced with distressing situations (Carroll 2007). In this section of the chapter, a summary of the main cultural strengths of Haiti and its people is provided with a specific focus on: (1) cultural traditions and customs; (2) family; (3) religion; and (4) community. An understanding and appreciation of these strengths may be useful to mental health providers and researchers working with Haitian clients who have been impacted by natural disasters, and systems that are not able to adequately deal with natural disasters.

Haitian Cultural Values

Through its difficult history, many Haitians have taken pride in believing that they are capable of overcoming many obstacles and that they have the inner strength to cope with most challenges. This belief system is largely rooted in their historical victory in defeating Napoleon’s army and in freeing themselves to become the first black independent country in the Western Hemisphere. In addition to the cultural pride that many Haitians take from their historical bravery, there are many other cultural strengths characteristic of the Haitian people. First, regardless of their situation and level of poverty, Haitians will always extend kindness and hospitality to strangers. It is not unusual for Haitians to extend their only means and resources
to complete strangers who are guests in their home. Directly connected to this is Haitians’ tendency to use food to connect with, educate, and soothe themselves as well as others. The majority of Haitians are skillful cooks, who often will utilize food as an opportunity to connect with and provide comfort to those in need. Second, as a people, Haitians take the law very seriously and are, for the most part, followers of the law. Despite the portrayal of violence in Haiti in the media, the crime rate in Haiti is much lower than in other countries. Finally, Haitians have a strong work ethic and are often acknowledged for their dependability. Few obstacles hinder Haitians’ desire to go to work and fulfill their obligations. In a similar vein, education is highly valued by Haitians, and they are willing to exceed what is necessary to ensure the upward mobility of their children, and firmly believe that the road to such mobility is through academic success. These strengths are connected to the people and are integral parts of their lives.

**Cultural Elements**

Haiti as a country has a strong African root, which significantly contributes to the culture of the people, including its language, music, and religion. The culture of Haitians is distinct from other ethnic groups (i.e., Latino cultures) and other Caribbean cultures. Within the fabric of Haitian culture are the artistic and musical impressions that are distinct to the Haitian people. For example, the well-known Haitian style music of compass (also known as Konpa or Kompa) is an important aspect of the Haitian culture. This musical style combines music and dance through the application of African drumming, guitars, saxophones, horn, and Creole lyrics to create music that is unique. Kompas music groups such as Tabou Combo, T-Vice, and Carimi are well known not only to the Haitian community but also to the world.

A description of the cultural strengths of Haitians would be incomplete without including the cuisine. Like the arts and religion, the traditional food of Haiti is influenced by African, Taino, and French cultures. Although food items such as rice and beans, fried pork (griyo), cornmeal (mayi moulen), bean sauce (sòs pwa), and fish (poisson) may be found in other Caribbean and Latin cultures, the herbs and spices used to create these dishes maintains the authenticity of these cuisines to the Haitian culture.

In summary, Haiti is a country that is rich in culture and cultural traditions. There are numerous strengths that have been found to be associated with Haitians and increasing awareness of these strengths is instrumental in providing culturally competent services to Haitian clients who have been exposed to a natural disaster. Although many writers have noted the
cultural strengths of Haitians, few have documented the components that comprise such strengths. In addition to the cultural values, traditions, and elements, other factors such as family, religion, and community connection are important cultural strengths of Haitians that allow them to cope with the impact of natural disasters.

**Family Support**

Prior to the 20th century, the *lakou*, an extended family—usually defined along male lines—was the principal family form in Haiti. The term *lakou* referred not only to the family members, but also to the cluster of houses in which they lived. Members of a *lakou* worked cooperatively and they provided each other with financial and other kinds of support. Similarities in these family experiences can be seen in current Haitian families. Haitian families are not only extended and flexible (i.e. multi-generational and fluid in members), but more importantly, they also provide the fundamental foundation of Haitian life (Nicolas et al. 2008). Families (one’s relatives) and households (with whom one lives) include parents and children, but also grandparents and grandchildren, uncles and aunts, cousins, and even non-blood relatives from one’s hometown in Haiti (Stepick 1998). Additionally, Haitian families constitute a transitional community as they link individuals in different countries not only in Haiti and in the United States, but also in the Bahamas and Canada (Stepick 1998).

Family members support and assist each other, both instrumentally and emotionally, regardless of the distance and the individual hardship such support entails (Stepick 1998). For example, Haitians living in the United States often send goods and money to their family members who remain in Haïti. This type of support is particularly important in the face of natural disasters, when residents in Haiti are able to count on financial support, among other kinds, to help them get through the crisis situation (Nicolas et al. 2008). Thus, families are a supportive unit that is cohesive beyond oceans, borders, and natural disasters. It is incredibly important to Haitian life and should remain at the center of the discussion on strengths. In addition to family, religion has been shown to be an important aspect of the Haitian culture that warrants further investigation.

**Religious Support**

The literature on Haitian religion is plentiful and diverse and provides an illustration of the function of religion for Haitians in Haiti and abroad (Bibb and Casimir 1996). Although historically Catholicism was the official recognized religion in Haiti, there is an increased diversity in religious
affiliations among Haitians (Bibb and Casimir 1996). In a recent study of Haitian immigrants in the United States, Nicolas and DeSilva (2008) found that Catholicism and Protestantism are the two primary religious affiliations reported by the participants. In addition, Voodoo is prevalent and has a tremendous impact on the lives of Haitians (EchodHaiti 2004). In fact, in 2003, Voodoo was formally recognized as a religion in Haiti (Bellegarde-Smith 2003). Although religion serves many functions for the individual who practices it, the overall impact of religion and spirituality transcends individuals to families and communities. For example, research has found a high connection between family and church attendance, suggesting that religion is probably a shared experience among Haitians (Nicolas and DeSilva 2008). Religion has also been shown to be associated with coping in dealing with poverty, illness, and death (Bibb and Casimir 1996; Stepick 1998). Thus, in times of psychological distress such as experiences from natural disasters, religion can serve as a protective force by providing individuals with a sense of community and a support network (Bibb and Casimir 1996; Stepick 1998).

Hence, when dealing with the devastation of natural disasters some Haitians may look towards religion as a way to cope. By having a religious or spiritual leader, people can feel as if they are getting the help they need to survive in the face of having nothing. Additionally, Christian congregations and other churches can offer support not only by providing spiritual guidance and support, but also a means of monetary and material services. Thus, it is clear that religion and the church are integral aspects of Haitians’ lives that need further exploration to fully understand its influence and impact in the lives of Haitians and their communities.

Community Support

Within the United States there is the constant struggle to define sense of community and neighborhood, laboring over the specifications of notions such as boundaries and membership. Haitians, however, are more likely to have a distinct concept of community based on their way of life. The influence of neighborhoods and communities has received considerable attention as researchers attempt to understand the positive and negative impact of these systems on individual lives (Cantillon, Davidson, and Schweitzer 2003; Colombo, Mosso, and de Piccoli 2001). According to Regis (1988), the development of sense of community for English-speaking Caribbean immigrants is based in part on perceived commonalities, which include sharing a common interest in educational and economic advancement, similar experiences of adjustment and acculturation to the American way of life, shared experience of being different from Americans, and being
grouped in the same category by Americans. This sense of community that immigrants develop towards each other is consistent with two of the community elements described by McMillan and Chavis (1986): membership and shared emotional connection. For Haitians, communities, in essence, combine both family and religion in creating a sense of community support for the people (Stepick 1998).

Social networks extending out from the family provide emotional and material resources as well as knowledge to each other. A norm of generalized reciprocity operates within the Haitian community (Stepick 1998). In the cities of Haiti, and around North America, people will call each other cousin, which denotes good friendship and a sense of equality. This also applies to community members that have been good neighbors for a long time (Stepick 1998). This closeness among neighbors is not only a source of support and strength; it may also be seen as a source of reference for childcare and a network for jobs. Everyone has social networks of friends and relatives, and these networks serve the purpose of exchanging goods and services as well as for conviviality (Stepick 1998). For example, social networks provide transportation to and from work and for shopping and other errands. Networks are also used to form credit associations and for informally borrowing and lending money. Among Haitians, plates and pots of cooked food are constantly exchanged across households as people express and reinforce their social ties to others in their networks of family and friends (as cited in Stepick 1998, 21; Richman 1992). Hence the Haitian community works together to take care of their own, even in troubled and desperate times. However, this sense of community may change drastically upon migration to another country such as the United States.

In examining the social support network of Haitian immigrant adults, Nicolas and colleagues (2007) found that the sense of community for Haitian immigrants in the United States is markedly different than in Haiti. For example, the participants in the project report having few family members living in their neighborhood and feeling that they did not and could not necessarily rely on their neighborhood to provide them with a sense of belonging or membership, fulfillment of their needs, or a shared emotional connection (Nicolas et al. 2007). The results from this study suggest that the social support that Haitians are accustomed to in Haiti may be lost upon migration to the United States. Nevertheless, a sense of community and obtaining and providing support to members of the community is a significant characteristic of the Haitian people that should be integrated in the understanding of the social support network of this group. This is particularly true when thinking about the experience of Haitians who have endured natural disasters and a lack of support from their government in
dealing with the disaster; they can rely on their community connections to help buffer against the significant impact of natural disasters.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Despite the negative portrayal of Haiti and its people often depicted in the media, it is a country that is steeped in cultural traditions and strengths. An understanding of the cultural strengths of Haitians is necessary as we seek to provide services to Haitian clients in Haiti and abroad. In this chapter, we have sought to provide not only a summary of the impact of natural disasters but also an overview of the strengths of Haitians and their cultural resources as potential sources of support when dealing with natural disasters. This is a particularly important area of study given the lack of support that is offered through the Haitian government.

Haiti is a country stricken with poverty, weak infrastructure, and a history of ineffective political leadership. As a result it is vulnerable to natural disasters because of its physical location in the world, the lack of resources available to help buffer against the effects of these disasters, and the lack of preparedness for these disasters. Such vulnerabilities have significant ramifications for the country when its people are trying to cope with natural disasters. However, despite multiple devastations, Haitians continually prevail where resources such as family, religion, community, and culture help to increase their resilience. This history and these strengths, together, are the roots that continue to sustain Haiti and that allow it not only to regrow but to flourish in the midst of the storms.

REFERENCES


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