Black denial

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The only country in the Americas to be freed from black colonial rule -- neighboring Haiti -- the Dominican Republic still shows signs of racial wounds more than 200 years later. Presidents historically encouraged Dominicans to embrace Spanish Catholic roots rather than African ancestry.

Here, as in much of Latin America -- the "one drop rule" works in reverse: One drop of white blood allows even very dark-skinned people to be considered white.

A walk down city streets shows a country where blacks and dark-skinned people vastly outnumber whites, and most estimates say that 90 percent of Dominicans are black or of mixed race. Yet census figures say only 11 percent of the country's nine million people are black.

To many Dominicans, to be black is to be Haitian. So dark-skinned Dominicans tend to describe themselves as any of the dozen or so racial categories that date back hundreds of years -- Indian, burned Indian, dirty Indian, washed Indian, dark Indian, cinnamon, moreno or mulatto, but rarely negro.

The Dominican Republic is not the only nation with so many words to describe skin color. Asked in a 1976 census survey to describe their own complexions, Brazilians came up with 136 different terms, including café au lait, sunburned, morena, Malaysian woman, singed and "toasted."

"The Cuban black was told he was black. The Dominican black was told he was Indian," said Dominican historian Celsa Albert, who is black. "I am not Indian. That color does not exist. People used to tell me, 'You are not black.' If I am not black, then I guess there are no blacks anywhere, because I have curly hair and dark skin."

Using the word Indian to describe dark-skinned people is an attempt to distance Dominicans from any African roots, Albert and other experts said. She noted that it's not even historically accurate: The country's Taino Indians were virtually annihilated in the 1500s, shortly after Spanish colonizers arrived.

Researchers say the de-emphasizing of race in the Dominican Republic dates to the 1700s, when the sugar plantation economy collapsed and many slaves were freed and rose up in society.
Later came the rocky history with Haiti, which shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic. Haiti's slaves revolted against the French and in 1804 established their own nation. In 1822, Haitians took over the entire island, ruling the predominantly Hispanic Dominican Republic for 22 years.

To this day, the Dominican Republic celebrates its independence not from centuries-long colonizer Spain, but from Haiti.

"The problem is Haitians developed a policy of black-centrism and . . . Dominicans don't respond to that," said scholar Manuel Núñez, who is black. "Dominican is not a color of skin, like the Haitian."

Dictator Rafael Trujillo, who ruled from 1930 to 1961, strongly promoted anti-Haitian sentiments, and is blamed for creating the many racial categories that avoided the use of the word "black."

The practice continued under President Joaquín Balaguer, who often complained that Haitians were "darkening" the country. In the 1990s, he was blamed for thwarting the presidential aspirations of leading black candidate José Francisco Peña Gómez by spreading rumors that he was actually Haitian.

Resentment toward anything Haitian continues, as an estimated one million Haitians live in the Dominican Republic, most working in the sugar and construction industries. Mass deportations often mistakenly include black Dominicans, and Haitians have been periodically lynched in mob violence. The government has been trying to deny citizenship and public education to the Dominican-born children of illegal Haitian migrants.

"There's tremendous resistance to blackness -- black is something bad," said black feminist Sergia Galván. "Black is associated with dark, illegal, ugly, clandestine things. There is a prototype of beauty here and a lot of social pressure. There are schools where braids and natural hair are prohibited."

Purdue University professor Dawn Stinchcomb, who is African American, said that when she came here in 1999 to study African influences in literature, people insulted her in the street.

"I had people on the streets . . . yell at me to get out of the sun because I was already black enough," she said. "It was hurtful. . . . I was raised in the South and thought I could handle any racial comment. I never before experienced anything like I did in the Dominican Republic.

"I don't have a problem when people who don't look like me say hurtful things. But when it's people who look just like me?"

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