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From the Los Angeles Times

The Benefactor

Dieuseul Lundi's native land is an economic shambles, sustained by emigre donors like him. With earnings from two jobs in Miami he supports dozens of friends and relatives, paying for food, funerals a

By Carol J. Williams
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An aging propeller plane skittered to a halt on a dirt runway. Nearby, an ambivalent greeting party had gathered to collect Dieuseul Lundi for the last bone-jarring hour of his journey home.

A nephew, Johnson Paul, had brought Lundi's four-wheel-drive Nissan with the cracked windshield. He resented his uncle's quarterly visits because otherwise he could use the vehicle as a taxi and earn a few dollars.

A cousin, Asemedi Alexis, a voodoo healer and avid gambler, had come to hit Lundi up for money to bet on the afternoon cockfights.

Jean Edner, a friend and business partner, wanted help reopening the idle cinder-block factory that Lundi helped pay for.

Since he left for the U.S. 33 years ago, Lundi has pumped tens of thousands of dollars back into Haiti through an extended family of at least three dozen people. On trips home, he resembles a one-man foreign aid program.

Alexis put an arm around Lundi's neck and patted his breast pocket, half in jest, looking for his cash. The wad of dollars was actually stuffed in Lundi's tan silk trousers, and the faces of his entourage shone in anticipation of getting their share.

There aren't many other ways to make money in Haiti, an economic basket case held together by remittances. Whereas some countries try to use money sent home by workers to create jobs and build a future, Haitians spend almost all of it on immediate needs. Its long-term effect is as negligible as a drop of water on a hot stone.

Handouts from 1.5 million Haitian emigres in the U.S., half of them in Florida, are estimated at \$1 billion a year — five times more than all foreign aid to Haiti, the Western Hemisphere's poorest country. These payments amount to 2 1/2 times the national budget and at least 20% of Haiti's gross domestic product.

"For every single person who gets remittances from someone abroad, we estimate that at least 10 more benefit in the redistribution," Finance Minister Henri Bazin said.

"The money is mostly used for food, but also for rent, weddings, baptisms, funerals."

Lundi, 50, does not really expect gratitude. His relationships are built on a sense of obligation and the understanding that new demands will await him on every trip. On one of his visits, he gave half sister Saintilia Jean money for food. On a subsequent trip, he spent thousands of dollars on her funeral.

On this trip, he would be introduced to his newest child, 3-month-old Woodson, conceived on a previous visit. Lundi, a man of few words, would examine the child with a look that suggested more dread than affection.

"I don't know if Dieuseul will be able to help me much," confided the mother, Marie Claude Lully. "He told me he has 16 children. That's a lot to take care of."

Lundi's journey, like those of many who have fled Haiti in the last four decades, began in an overcrowded wooden boat at the port of Saint-Louis du Nord. He made his way to the Bahamas and then Florida. He settled in Miami, became a U.S. citizen and has earned a living working in fish markets and selling frozen seafood from the back of a battered Ford van.

Like many emigres, Lundi nurtures close ties to Haiti and says he would return for good if there were the faintest hope of national recovery. Instead, he stays abroad and sends home at least half his earnings to support an ailing mother, half a dozen siblings, children he has fathered by nearly a dozen women, and a coterie of cousins, friends and former neighbors.

"God blessed me with good fortune, and I have to give it back to Haiti," he said in English still heavily accented by Creole. "If I have two dollars, I have to give Haiti one of them. I have a lot of friends who are always saying, 'Lundi, I need this' and 'Lundi, I need that.' And I give it to them if I can because I know God will give it back to me."

The road Lundi and his greeting party took from the airstrip in Port-de-Paix to their hometown, Saint-Louis du Nord, is a canvas for those needs.

A ribbon-candy surface of mud mounds and sewage-filled craters, the road disappears altogether where it crosses the wide, gravelly mouth of the Rivieres des Negres.

Goats grazed at the base of desiccated banana trees. Pigs rooted in the muck for fallen fruit. Naked children stood in the doorways of houses built of mud, sticks, cinder block and corrugated metal, watching a procession of women with head bundles, laden donkeys, brightly painted buses and a few sturdy automobiles, all weighed down by staggering quantities of cargo and people.

A boy cycled past with dead chickens hanging from his handlebars, headed for the riverside market.

Saint-Louis du Nord has grown tenfold, to 70,000, since Lundi left, but it is just as poor.

"If it wasn't for the people who left, there wouldn't be any life here at all," said the mayor, Wilber Lafrance. Dependent on help from seven siblings in the U.S. to keep his small food store and kindergarten running, he brandished a wad of yellow transfer invoices attesting to the monthly \$50 and \$100 handouts.

Along the crowded main drag, small shops offered canned goods, rice, cooking oil and cosmetics. Shop owners use money sent by relatives to buy goods in Cap-Haitien, a five-hour drive to the east. Often, customers shop with money sent by their relatives in the U.S.

At his first stop, Lundi was already getting an earful. His sister, Livania Paul, complained about how difficult it was to make ends meet as a seamstress.

Her four children, including Johnson, can go to school only because Lundi sends money for tuition and the obligatory uniforms of yellow gingham and sky-blue serge.

"So he sends \$100 every now and then," she harrumphed from a battered wooden chair on the veranda of her shop. "What does \$100 buy these days?"

Johnson, who had gotten a little pocket money from Lundi on the way here, was only a teenager, but already discouraged by his prospects.

"I would like to get more education, but there are no jobs anyway," he said with a shrug, kicking a loose chunk of concrete from the veranda stairs.

The story was the same a mile away at the small family farm, tended by Lundi's mother and cousin Alexis, where Lundi grew up in a two-room shack.

His 23-year-old daughter, Priscile, who studies in Port-au-Prince, the capital, because he pays her tuition, turned away as Lundi tried to kiss her cheek in greeting.

"She's angry because I don't like her boyfriend," he explained. "He drinks. He smokes. He already has three children by other women. I know I've done the same, but I want different for my daughter."

Other relatives — half sisters, nieces and nephews — stirred from midday siestas to welcome the man with the cash and a gym bag full of shoes and sandals.

They sorted through the jumble of footwear from a Miami discount store with more enthusiasm than they had displayed for Lundi himself, measuring each pair against their weathered soles.

The few that didn't fit anyone landed in a wheelbarrow of used clothes that the women bought from a trader's scow that morning. Like most of the town's residents, Lundi's relatives made their living buying in bulk and selling in pieces.

Less than an hour after arriving at the farm, Lundi was so irritated with his kin that he left to spend the night with a girlfriend.

At the Breeze Marina Motel, with a woman young enough to be his daughter at his side, he relaxed over a plate of chicken and rice, at ease for the first time since running the gantlet of griping relatives and outstretched hands.

Lundi usually brings his handouts in cash. But for emergencies and for emigres unable to go home, there is a thriving network of money-transfer offices. However it gets to Haiti, the money provides regular transfusions to an economy on life support. Additional services such as changing the currency or delivering it offer many people a chance to make a living.

Jusleine Vilesaint, pregnant with her second child, waited outside a transfer office in Saint-Louis du Nord to collect \$50 sent by an aunt in New York.

"I don't rely entirely on her," Vilesaint said. "But with the money she sends every two or three months, I can do a little extra for myself, like buy a pair of shoes or something for the baby."

Money changers fanned the midday heat with wads of Haitian gourdes, ready to buy the dollars for a tiny profit.

Vilesaint and other recipients spend the local currency at a phalanx of shops and roadside stands. Most of what is for sale comes from the United States.

As many as 700 transfers a day arrive at the Port-de-Paix office of CAM, which controls more than half the regional market, said Antonio Jacotin, director of the service. Most of the cash is collected in person; the rest is delivered by motorcycle couriers who routinely carry \$3,000 or \$4,000, 10 years' income for the average Haitian.

"People are always glad to see us," said Fritz Guerrier, a father of five dressed in tan trousers and a silk shirt who dodges mud slicks and potholes to deliver cash. "People invite me in for a glass of water and ask about the latest gossip."

Theft is not a problem, taxi driver Louis Jeune Elira said: "Thieves know if they steal from the couriers that they'll die."

Better-developed countries are trying to pool remittances to finance public works projects, housing or export industries. A few such projects have been attempted in Haiti: a school in Bas Limbe and some orchards near Jacmel in the south. But those are the exception.

"Haiti has such a subsistence economy that most of the money has to go straight to consumption and education," said David Adams, former head of the Haiti office of the U.S. Agency for International Development.

"What Haiti has to aspire to," he said, "is an arrangement like you have in Mexico or El Salvador, where people have confidence in the state and engage in co-financing projects."

For the foreseeable future, Haitians will depend on handouts. Bazin, the finance minister, disagrees with analysts who say this fosters sloth.

"Whatever you hear to the contrary, Haitians are hard-working people," he said, pointing to the men and women pushing overloaded wooden carts with crooked wheels through the streets in hopes of selling a few cents' worth of food or trinkets. "There is nothing more demeaning for Haitians than to have nothing to do."

From Lundi's perspective, the current U.S. policy of deporting Haitian boat people is self-defeating. Remittances from Haitians working in the U.S. are far more effective than governmental aid, he said.

"When I landed in Miami, they took me to a doctor and gave me food stamps," he recalled. "Now they take you to jail and throw you back as soon as they can."

Stefan Previlon, a neighbor of one of Lundi's cousins, said he'd like to stay in Haiti but can't make a living. The 48-year-old father of six has been caught trying to enter the Bahamas seven times in the last four years.

For Edner, Lundi's friend who made cinder blocks, being with his wife and three children is more important, so he stays in Haiti.

Edner borrowed \$3,000 from Lundi a decade ago, and sales of cinder blocks perked along until the economy took a nose dive and political strife paralyzed the country. He ran out of money for supplies, and electrical service became more erratic than usual.

He sank all his remaining money into a four-wheel-drive vehicle, which Lundi purchased on his behalf in Miami. Edner planned to resell it at a profit in Haiti and pour the money into his business.

"He hasn't found a ship yet to bring the car, but as soon as I get it and sell it, I can restart the brick factory," Edner said. In the meantime, he makes a little money using an open pickup truck as a bus.

After two weeks with friends and relatives, Lundi got on another prop plane at Port-de-Paix for the bumpy, 40-minute hop to Port-au-Prince, followed by a two-hour flight to Miami. He was exhausted and thousands of dollars poorer.

Back home, Edner's 6-year-old Mitsubishi Montero was parked outside Lundi's Miami apartment, a constant reminder of his obligations. So were all the people milling around.

Lundi needed to sleep before heading to the fish market, where his 11-hour shift would begin at 1 a.m. But every place where he could doze was already taken.

Six people were loitering in his tiny living room, occasionally checking the progress of a fish stew bubbling in the kitchen. Two of them had come to discuss how to get Edner's vehicle onto a freighter docked in Miami.

A third visitor had come to catch up on the latest goings-on in Saint-Louis du Nord. The friend of a cousin was staying over en route from Port-au-Prince to an appointment in Miami. A stepdaughter had dropped by to remind Lundi that her community college tuition was overdue.

An uncle seeking immigration papers was sound asleep on a cream-colored sofa still covered in showroom plastic.

Lundi watched him with a mixture of fatigue and envy.

When he arrived from Haiti, the uncle planned to stay for a few days. That was six months ago.

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About this series

Four articles examining the worldwide flow of remittances.

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Mexico: Catalina Sanchez plowed her husband's earnings from California into a project to provide jobs at home.

{ Today }

Haiti: When Dieuseul Lundi comes home for a visit, dozens of outstretched hands await him.

{ Thursday }

Philippines: Money from expatriates props up the economy, but many doubt the country is any better off.

{ Saturday }

Kenya: Benta Wauna worked abroad to give her sister alternatives to arranged marriage and extreme poverty.

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

Haiti by numbers

Facts based on most recent figures available.

Population estimate	8 million
GDP, per person	\$1,600
Percent living in poverty	80%
Remittance income annually	\$1 billion

Sources: CIA World Factbook, World Bank, Times reporting. Compiled by John L. Jackson

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