

The Table of the Brothers of the Coast on La Tortue, Haiti.

In the 17th century, the small turtle-shaped island in the north of Haiti, La Tortue, was the home of some wild people. They were not pirates as it is widely believed, but a colorful mixture of Europeans, especially French as well as escaped slaves, pursuing a rather aggressive profession: robbing the enemies of the French king. Some lived on La Tortue under a French Governor and chased – "legally" in the name of the French king – mainly Spanish ships returning with robbed treasures from South and Central America. Others lived on the coast of Haiti's mainland, hunting pigs. Those pigs had been imported by the original Spanish settlers and had proliferated there. The "Brothers of the Coast", as they called themselves, lived in a wild, but still specially regulated way. They predominantly created their own rules and behavioral patterns.

This brotherly way of life of the "Flibustiers" on La Tortue inspired a group of blue water sailors in Chile. On April 4, 1951 they decided to idealistically revitalize the "Brotherhood of the Coast" as an association of sailors. In the following years, this very special men's club, which is not comparable to a normal yacht club, spread all over Latin America, Europe and some other coastal countries (www.secoin.org). It is organized in the form of "tables", headed by a "big brother" and aided by a "scribe" (an honorary secretary). It also reached Germany, where I became a member of Germany's first table of the Brotherhood of the Coast – in Düsseldorf on the river Rhein. Brothers of the Coast are usually given names. Mine is "Multicolor" – originating in my traditional occupation as a producer of artists' paints and my somewhat colorful private passions.

I simply liked the nostalgic and not too serious way of being with people who shared my love of sailing. One very personal definition of the brotherhood is by a brother with a strong personal connection to Haiti, Bernard Lefèvre: ***"The Brotherhood of the Coast is a highly disorganized, loosely organized group of people who are bound by love of the sea and a sense of friendship."***

Having started serious development work, training teachers and facilitating the opening of Montessori schools for deprived children in 1986 in Cap Haitien in the north of Haiti, La Tortue soon became fascinating to me due to the wild legends from the 17th century. Without my brotherly connections to La Tortue, I would probably never have ventured there.

One Montessori school project had developed right across from La Tortue in cooperation with a Canadian educational Christian brotherhood. These Canadians also managed a large school project on the mountaintop of La Tortue. With the help of the responsible Canadian school brother on La Tortue, Frère Bruno, this became one of our Haitian project schools. But the engagement on La Tortue did not limit itself to providing teacher training and Montessori material for the school projects of the Canadian educational brotherhood. Here, the 17th century origin of the new sailing Brothers of the Coast provided the starting point of a totally different kind of project. A new vision was born which needed several boat trips over to La Tortue. Crossing over to the island in one of the small open local sailing boats is fun for a sailor. It is not truly dangerous in normal weather, although the rugged small boats are often loaded to their utmost limits.

In Frère Bruno's office on top of the turtle mountain, there was always some cool beer in the generator-driven ice box. This was stimulating in Haiti's heat, but on the wall of Frère Bruno's office I found an equally stimulating print – though in a different sense. The print dealt with the French version of my early guiding slogan from country-school years: "DENNOCH": The inner connection to the 17th century idea of brotherhood initiated a second activity on La Tortue – beyond the Montessori school on the mountaintop: Along the coastline of the island, fishermen, all of them descendents of the former imported African slave population, try to make a living from the sea. They are short of everything needed to be successful, like outboard motors, good nets or a cooling system to preserve their catch. The idea was born to create a solidarity structure by simply referring to the basic idea of solidarity behind the traditional Brotherhood of the Coast – or their modern offspring in the world. Back in Germany, I mobilized our table of the brotherhood and found them like-minded – at least for an initial phase: We simply decided to create a "Table de la Tortue" with local fishermen instead of sailors. New tables of the brotherhood are always initiated by an existing table. Frère Bruno was formally agreed by the German initiators to be a special big brother. The

leaders of the various groups of poor fishermen on the coast of the island were to become his special fishermen brothers.

In 1988, I visited the various groups of fishermen guided by Frère Bruno. He translated my proposition into Créole, the local language: For every dollar, which the respective groups of fishermen were to earn, we, the German Brothers of the Coast, would add on one of our dollars. This was certainly not a very new creative idea, but it had the advantage to be understood immediately – and was also greatly welcomed by our new Tortugan brothers. Since the fishermen basically knew what had happened on their home island some centuries before, the solidarity action was well received.

I had a feeling that some of the modern Tortugans thought the German brothers, who now wanted to help them in a modest way, to be a little crazy. The daily struggle to survive does not leave space for nostalgic reminiscences of past centuries. Since the idea was, however, considered useful, all was agreed on in a harmonious way. It was certainly not an ideal project, since it was not born locally (if one does not consider the rounds of cool beer with Frère Bruno in his mountaintop office to be of local origin). It still helped to solve real financial problems as long as it could be maintained – and I simply liked the idea.

Later, I added the needed money to the initial starting funds from my German sailing brothers and Frère Bruno acted as cashier to pay our share for new nets, outboard motor repairs or for whatever the groups decided to need most. A representative of the heads of the fishermen became our contact person and the system continued to function – modestly, but efficiently – for several years. Frère Bruno, now called big brother "Ventre à Terre" was formally handed the flag number 50, the last flag of the table of the Düsseldorf Brotherhood of the Coast. A highlight of the small fishermen's project on La Tortue was the celebration of a "**boucan**" on the original ruins of the brotherhood's 17th century island village. All participating fishermen were invited. Our German table had donated some t-shirts and caps, since our big brother, the head of the table of Düsseldorf, was also the head of the yearly Düsseldorf boat show, "**boot**", a very practical coincidence. A few brothers of the coast from Europe and from the USA, who happened to sail in this region during that period, joined the festivity. I had the pleasure to pay for the drinks and for a goat, which was roasted instead of the traditional pig. It was a memorable event – and certainly one of the rare fun moments during my years in Haiti.

When the further deteriorating security situation in Haiti made it unadvisable to travel to faraway places like La Tortue, the small support system unfortunately faded out again after a few years. It simply became impossible to overcome the growing insecurity with our limited resources and to reach La Tortue by land and local channel crossing. We are, however, informed that the Montessori school project on La Tortue continues to function.

The only practical way to reach La Tortue later on was by ship or with small private airplanes. An existing tiny airstrip next to a nice beach section on the island was officially not in use, but easily usable by rolling away a few handy stones. I refuse to speculate for what kind of traffic the landing strip on La Tortue is being used in nowadays sad reality.

Later, the creation of the special "Table de la Tortue" became a controversial subject among leading international brothers who met in Bruxelles. One brother of European origin, residing in the West Indies, had claimed superiority over the Caribbean Islands – including Haiti. He had joined our boucan on La Tortue, posed in a dominating manner and insisted to hoist his different, self designed, flag with two swords instead of two rudders on top of our regular flag number 50 of the German brothers from Düsseldorf. Such attitude created bad feelings among the brotherhood of the United States who refused such attempt of dominance. The West Indian brother, calling himself "Commodore" of the Islands, was called to order by the Bruxelles assembly of "real" big brothers from around the world. At the same time, our German table and its humble brother Multicolor were informed that our creation of the special Table de la Tortue for poor local fisherman was somewhat unusual – but well in the spirit of our Brothers of the Coast. Finally all was ending gently and peacefully in the spirit of the global brotherhood and everybody was happy to have resolved this rare example of a brotherly ego-game.
