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JOURNEY OF A DISPOSABLE HERO OF THE REVOLUTION

TIMALO[1]

The birth of a nation

Much of what is considered our cultural roots is actually fifty years old and was the result of a political agenda. Before the ´70s, Creole was uniquely the language of poor and uneducated people. The activists, usually after successful education abroad, insisted on using Creole more often, and specifically to address the issues of the masses. By normalizing the usage of this language, they empowered the workers to speak for themselves in Creole. They actively went from town to town to encourage them to do so. The large diffusion of Creole language, the establishment of the lewoz events as the main form of gwoka, our traditional drumming, the development of the *gwoup a po* (skin drum carnival bands, as opposed to snare drum carnival ones) can be traced back to a defining moment: the sugar cane workers' strike of Grosse Montagne, Lamentin in 1975. The catalyst of this moment was Chérubin Céleste, a Catholic priest whose name literally means "celestial cherub."

1 TiMalo is a Creole writer, musician, producer, and activist. He won the Best author SACEM (Society of Authors, Composers, and Publishers of Music) Award in 2008 for his album *Pawòl Funk-Kè* and book *Pawòl a lòm vo lòm.* He is the author of the Dyablès series of novels written in Guadeloupean Creole. TiMalo has also produced *Tann èt Konprann*, a podcast entirely in Guadeloupean Creole. https://www.timalo.com.

The strike was initiated by UTA, the Agricultural Workers' Union. It was a new type of union, created at the end of the ´60s, by the independence activists. Previously, the unions were led by well-established, well-educated people. Most of them, even though they were influenced by communist ideals, ended up leaving the workers behind as they progressed through the political landscape. At the same time, the independence activists were experiencing major setbacks. The violent repression of construction workers in 1967, followed by the incarceration of most of its leaders, had crippled the movement. The remaining forces understood, then, that to mobilize the mass of the population behind the idea of independence, two things must occur: the people must understand and experience first-hand the origin of the oppression and domination, and the people must come to realize that being Guadeloupean was something totally different from being French, culturally.

The main idea in this new kind of union was to put the workers in the driver's seat, no longer having those who speak more eloquent and elaborate French deciding for them. The workers would be those in leadership positions, making the decisions. Therefore, the well-educated, mostly their children coming back from France after finishing their studies, were to explain and educate about what was going on. The best language to do so, it was decided, was Creole language.

Chérubin Céleste was at those meetings. Ordained a priest by the Prado Institute, he felt he needed to be with the poor and the working class. He saw firsthand, because the Creole language was used, the high level of understanding among all the people. He understood that, if he wanted his parish to understand the message of God, he must say mass in Creole. He thus translated the Lord's prayer to this language. The Creole translation was accompanied by gwoka music, written by my father.

My father had met Chérubin Céleste a little less than a decade before, as he was starting a secular Christian movement for rural young people called MRJC (Mouvement Rural des Jeunes Chrétiens). My father had entered the movement and later remained in a facilitator position. This is where he met his wife, my mother. Chérubin Céleste married them, and I was born six months before the sugar cane workers' strike, in Grosse Montagne, Lamentin.

The strike had been going on for days and the plantation owner, Charles Simmonet, consistently refused to discuss terms with the workers. The prefect, ruler of Guadeloupe at the time, was pushing for workers to be hired from abroad so as to break the strike. The union was about to give up the struggle. Little did they know that Chérubin Céleste was so outraged by the prefect's inclination that, after a day of reflection and prayers, he announced a hunger strike, an "unlimited fast," demanding that the workers be treated as human beings one could talk with, not as slaves.

The priest's decision rekindled the flame of the workers' struggle. The symbolic aspect of his gesture was seen as a reversal of power. It was also a theological dilemma. Could a Catholic priest risk the capital sin of suicide? Could a Catholic let someone else die for him? Again? All these debates put a very bright spotlight on the strike, the union, and its methods. The police tried to raid the chapel to seize the priest, but the activists had exfiltrated him at the last minute. Chérubin Céleste's fast lasted twelve days until he won his case. The UTA was successful too, for they obtained much more from the plantation owner than the pay raise they had been asking for. More importantly, this moment carved into the hearts and minds of the population that Creole was and is our language, and gwoka our music.[2] These are the fundamentals of our culture, proof that we are a nation and have the inalienable right to self-determination.

2 This episode is described and well analyzed by Dany Bebel-Gisler and Laënnec Hurbon, *Cultures et pouvoir dans la Caraïbe: Langue créole, vaudou, sectes religieuses en Guadeloupe et en Haïti*, Les Éditions L'Harmattan, 1976.

Guadeloupe: are you gonna go my way[3]

When I came back to Guadeloupe after studying in Paris, I was trying to contribute to the advancement of my people. But I was failing miserably. I was unable to connect with anyone besides my long-time friends and my work was not having any significant impact as I had hoped. Frustrated, I saw an occasion of relief when the first slam session was announced in the year 2006. I went there with no intention, no agenda, but to get a few things off my chest.

Very spontaneously, Creole was my voice, and my way. I didn't sound like the long-established poets who appeared that evening. Nor did I perform my poetry like some acapella rap, as did the hip-hop wordsmiths who dominated the event. I was speaking from my heart, using the language I had used with my loving family. My body was moving as much as my tongue. My emotions were echoing in the night club, surprising the audience. Here I got to live for myself what Chérubin Céleste had told me he witnessed: the connection with people via language.

From that moment forward, I didn't miss a day. As the slam movement gained momentum during the summer break, for young people studying abroad was coming back to Guadeloupe on vacation, I was getting more experienced. Humor and irony were in my arsenal, but my poems always ended with a punch line, a statement, a strategy I borrowed from Léon-Gontran Damas' poetry after reading *Pigments* and *Névralgies*.

There was jubilation in surprising and tricking the public. For example, in a text about what I envisioned for my country, alluding to the American TV show, *The Bold and the Beautiful,* I used prominent male movie stars as props to illustrate toxic masculinity.[4] Less obvious for the public were my musical influences. By the time I was starting my slam poetry journey, a significant part of Black American music had made its way into my deeper self. Hip-hop music, of course, has been a

3 Lenny Kravitz. "Are You Gonna Go My Way." *Are You Gonna Go My Way*, Virgin Records, 1993. CD.
4 Like in "Timal, la vi," *Pawol Funk-Kè*, 2008.

web of several connections for me. Busta Rhymes and the Fu-Schnickens were in a text dedicated to hip-hop, along with Creole hip-hop pioneers Neg Ki Pa Ka Fè Lafèt and Karukera Crew.

The liner notes of the albums had let me grow from one artist to another. I heard Doug Wimbish for the first time on a Bomb the Bass album. Vernon Reid was the one reprising The Meters' "Just Kissed My Baby" riff on Public Enemy's "Timebomb." I got myself almost all the Living Colour albums. I heard Don Byron in a Vernon Reid and The Masque concert. A few years later, he came back to Paris to present *The Nu Blaxploitation* which allowed me to discover the funk of Mandrill and the poetry of Sadiq Bey.

As the hype for slam was fading and the slams sessions were no longer the place to be, I refused to die off with the movement. With the help of their MC, who had become a friend, I wrote a one-hour show called "Le TiMalo Show." The last quarter of this show was backed up with music; the songs had been written by the late Charlie Chovino, a tremendously talented guitarist, who had had huge success with Y'Fix, a band he had formed with zouk singer Jacques d'Arbaud in the year 1990.

Charlie's versatility, along with his knowledge of our music, led us to create an interesting fusion of funk, biguine and heavy metal. The project, entitled *Pawòl Funk-Kè*[5] was as much a business card for my poetry as a guitar-oriented voyage through our influences. At the time, poets who used music were either very subtle and light when it came to drums, or they were digging into gwoka music. The most prominent spoken word artist of Guadeloupe at the time was, probably, Lukuber Séjor. His music, deeply rooted in gwoka music, sounded more like what The Last Poets were creating. The album, and the collection I had published before it, *Pawòl a lòm vo lòm,*[6] along with the show, were supposed to be a palette of what I could do as an artist. Strategically, I had

5 The title is a wordplay as "Funk-Kè" refers to "Funky" and to "Fonn kè" (bottom of the heart). Therefore "Pawòl fonn kè," means poetry in Creole.
6 A saying that means "a man worth is his word worth."

chosen not to showcase my most controversial pieces, and thus get a broader audience to know me, my poetry, my style, and my music, before releasing my craziness upon them.

But then another strike changed everything.

Movie for your ears

As the world was witnessing the inauguration of the first African American president of the United States of America, on January 20th, 2009, Guadeloupe was starting a strike. Answering the call of forty-nine organizations united by the LKP (Lyannaj Kont Pwofitasyon, or Union Against Outrageous Exploitation), thousands of people gathered in the streets of Pointe-à-Pitre. Among the 146 demands, LKP was asking to lower the prices of food and other basic products and 200 euros worth of raise for the lower salaries.

Naïvely, I believed, given the scale of the mobilization, the prefect and the local authorities agreed to negotiate. The general population has done its part by forcing all the stakeholders to the negotiation table, on the following Saturday. I was convinced the leaders would responsibly take over and do theirs.

The first days of the negotiations were broadcast live on local television networks. Everyone could witness firsthand the dynamics between the all the stakeholders (workers, institutions appointees, and elected representatives) and the balance of power displayed. At that time, it seemed everybody was talking about politics. Friends and families were discussing the economy, gathering information about the role and duties of each local authority, and questioning the purpose of the deputies.

Forty-four days of strike ended up being required alongside marches and protests.

Even though the mobilization was successful, and conventions were signed, it took less than a year for the prices to go back up. Even more, not only no institutional changes were obtained, but

there were also no governance-related ones either, as the President of the Guadeloupe Region, the local institution in charge of economic development among other affairs, was reelected on the first turn of the election, the following year.

What struck me though was the reluctance of many people to even talk about LKP anymore afterwards. Those who were opposed to the coercive methods used by LKP accused the others of crippling the economy and killing local businesses. Resentment was all over the place. Many times, as I was trying to start a discussion on the topic, people stopped me, silenced me.

I had a feeling of repetition. It was not the first time Guadeloupean people had struggled to tell their own stories. These were not so much the historical facts, but the feelings and emotions, men and women told each other to convey empathy and shape people in a way a historical account could never do. The events of 1967, the agricultural workers' strike of 1975, the blue nights, the Faisans case[7] — if our youth have little knowledge of these events, it is not so much that we lack works relating the historical facts; what we lack are the traces of the singular feelings that crossed the hearts of the men and women of those times.

And this is precisely where the artist must intervene. He must shake up his society with the aim of contributing to its progress. In this case, I wanted to break our unfortunate habit of ignoring painful events. To do this, it was necessary not only to return to the mobilization of the first quarter of 2009, but to do so with greater force, in an ambitious project to make this part of our history an adventure that can be told.

Dé Moun (two people) is a concept-album, "a movie for your ears" as I promoted it, that tells the story of a young woman returning to Guadeloupe to live with her boyfriend while the events of 2009 unfold. Because they don't have the same perspective on the country, they disagree about the

7 The blue nights refer to a series of bomb attacks carried out by the GLA (Armed Liberation Group) from 1980 to 1981 on Guadeloupe and France soil. In 1984, Georges Faisans, an independence activist, stoke a white teacher because he kicked a black kid in the back. To protest against Faisans sentencing to four years, the nationalist movement organized blockades in several cities of Guadeloupe.

LKP movement. This discussion affects their love story and, ultimately, their ability to conceive a future together.

While still very guitar-driven, this project used our musical heritage more purposefully. The gwoka rhythms were chosen in accordance with their symbolic meaning to match the tone of the story sequence they were included in. I used zouk music for the lovers' longing for each other before their reunion, for example, and toumblak, a joyful and vivid gwoka rhythm, when they get back together.

This project was rooted in intertextuality. My main idea was that Elie Domota, leader of the LKP, was answering the call made in 1976 by Gerard Lockel. This artist, a guitar player and composer, published an album entitled *Guakamo* that year. This was the epitome of the Gwo-ka Modèn (Modern Gwo-Ka), a new way of making music, rooted in traditional gwoka. As a former member of JOC (Christian Working Youth Organisation), having been used in the making of the Guadeloupean anthem and with Gérard Lockel dedicating a spoken word song to call on the youth based on this album, Elie Domota couldn't have avoided it.

I was about to finish the creation process when the Minister of Overseas Territories at the time, Yves Jego, in charge of the negotiations with the LKP, therefore one of the main protagonists of the events, published a book. That's when I realized I had forgotten about him. Maybe because I had this feeling of completion, the text and music I wrote about Yves Jego were more relaxed. The lyrics involved code switching between Creole, French and English. It was also one of my creations with the most references to pop culture. From the music of the *Zorro* TV series to the radio show of a local star, Japanese animated series *Goldorak*, and Chirac's famous stance in Jerusalem in 1996, "Jégo" is like a media-related bombing, a collage with a purpose. It is the most renowned song on the album. Yves Jégo reacted to the song and acknowledged the relevance of humor to address

important political issues.

My family has many books about the massacre of May 1967. On the 26th, a construction workers' strike was met with guns. The number of victims is not really known but it is believed to be around a hundred. Some people were killed on the spot, others were murdered the day after while they were mourning a brother, a son, a husband, or a father. And long after that, it was forbidden for people to gather in public.

My family also possess a musical album made by the Guadeloupean Students Association. It was the latter that introduced me to this historical moment and drove me to the books. My hope was merely to do the same.

As I am taking the time to reflect on my creative process, I see how much I truly connect with my audience when I focus on expressing myself instead of conveying a message, since the message is a part of me anyway. I am more impactful with my musical and textual idiolect. For this is what it means to be truly Creole: having the unique, unpredictable product of African roots mixed with Western culture on a Caribbean island.