Men Anpil, 
Chay pa Lou
Throwing Pwen in Haiti’s Presidential Elections

by Karen E. Richman

The ability to use proverbs as an interpersonal weapon is a valued skill in Haitian communities. Where social norms emphasize the avoidance of direct confrontation, voicing an adage, typically under the transparent veil of non-directed, objectified discourse, serves as a vehicle for persuasive maneuvering, venting hostilities and exercising personal power. The speaker can deny any specific aggressive or partisan intent because responsibility for assigning “meaning” to the message belongs to the unnamed target hearer, or overhearer, rather than the sender. Haitians call this genre of performance “throwing pwen.”

Politics is just one context in which artful verbal competitors exchange pwen and Haiti’s recent presidential election, the first free vote in the history of the republic, has provided especially fertile ground for throwing pwen. Politicians and diplomats alike have been throwing pwen to articulate their conflicting political and foreign policy interests and to advance their individual ranks as eloquent masters of speech. In this paper we will consider how pwen have been manipulated by two nonconformist leaders, the one a charismatic liberation priest-turned-president, the other a hands-on diplomat who also chooses to express himself in the Creole idiom of the people rather than in the French language of the elite.

THROWING PWEN

A pwen can be understood as something that captures or crystallizes relationships. Pwen is a way of perceiving, in the sense of “seizing wholly” or “seeing all the way through” (American Heritage Dictionary 1969:972). Karen McCarthy Brown (1987:151-152), who has provided an astute and subtle interpretation of the concept, describes pwen as “anything that captures the essence or pith of a complex situation” and reformulates it so it can be easily grasped and remembered. Through means of abstraction, intensification and exaggeration, a pwen creates “an elegantly simple image,” simple enough to be instructive. A personal name, a proverb, a song, a cross drawn on the ground, a charm—each of these pwen holds in microcosm worlds of socio-cultural meanings.

The type of pwen concerning us here is a genre of indirect, contentious, interpersonal discourse. A good starting point for capturing this fertile and highly prized way of communicating is to explore its use in naming children. Haitians are extremely fond of creating and giving familiar names, so fond that an individual’s close kin and friends may never learn the person’s “real name” (bon non), which appears on the person’s birth certificate. There are two types of familiar names: “nicknames” (non jwet) and “pwen names” (non pwen).

Nicknames are created from contractions or modifications of the “real name,” often with the addition of such endearments as “little” (ti); President Aristide, for example, has been affectionately known to his parish followers as Pét (Father Titid (Little Titid). Nicknames also derive from caricatures of the child’s behavior or appearance as in the nickname Ti Chini (Little Caterpillar). A nickname, in summary, is a description, interpretation or caricature of a person.

A pwen name, on the other hand, is a condensed commentary about an interpersonal situation whose target audience is wider than the person who bears it. The American Ambassador has earned a pwen name. But let us first consider how my friend Joseph Métélus, an immigrant from La Gonâve, Haiti, explained the origins of his pwen name. Joseph Métélus the first of his parents’ children to survive infancy. His neonatal brush with death, like the losses of their first two babies, was attributed to sorcery. When it appeared that baby Joseph would survive, the shaman who exorcised the affliction pronounced, “Malgre sa, li pa mourri,” meaning “In spite of it, he didn’t die.” The name, Malgre Sa, stuck. Malgre Sa “captured the essence” of the family’s persecution and their perseverance “in spite of it.” The name was an indirect message sent to the suspected malefactor.

PWEN AND TRIANGULAR DISCOURSE

Throwing, “sending” or “shooting” (voye, tire) pwen makes use of what Lawrence Fisher (1976:229), in his insightful analysis of the comparable Barbadian speech
practice of “dropping remarks,” terms the “triangular form” of discourse involving a tacit relationship between sender, sham receiver and target overhearer. The triangle in Malgré Sa’s naming, for instance, included his parents, who chose to keep the shaman’s words as a name, the child who bore it (and anyone else hearing him so addressed) and the unnamed sorcerer. Malgré Sa gave me another example of throwing a three-way pwen:

You are passing by a place where you stole a cow. Two people see you and one says to the other loudly enough for you to hear, “man, this place doesn’t lack for thieves!” (zon sa a pa manke vôlé, papa!)

Shooting a pwen does not require the target to be within earshot of the spoken message. A person may throw a pwen with the expectation that a member of the sham audience will directly convey the message to the target or that the target will overhear it through the more caustic means of gossip.

“Social accountability,” Thomas Kochman’s (1986) term for assigning responsibility for interpreting the oblique message, rests with the target receiver, or “perceiver,” not with the sender. Haitians identify the target as the “owner” (mét) of the pwen. I asked Malgré Sa to explain. He said that “you throw the pwen through the air.

It turns true when it falls.” If the pwen “resembles” you, you collect it. You are its owner. (Ou voye pwen an an lè. Lè l vin verite se lè li tonbe. Si pwen an sanble ou, ou ranmase li. Se ou ki mèt pwen an.) Malgré Sa cited two proverbs which communicate “if the pwen resembles you, you collect it, if not, you don’t collect it.”

Hang your hat where your hand can reach.
Kroke chapo ou kote men ou ka rive.
If the shoe fits, wear it.
If it doesn’t fit, don’t put it on.
Si souiyè a bon pou ou mete li.
Si li pa bon pou ou, pa mete li.

The concept of ranmase is crucial to understanding pwen discourse. Ranmase can be translated as “to collect,” “to gather” or “to muster” (as in “muster up your courage”). It can also be used with respect to welcoming into the fold someone who has been absent for a protracted time. Ranmase implies ordering, controlling and containing things, emotions or persons that were disorderly, lost or spread out. Until a pwen is ranmase, it lacks meaning. The “owner” “gathers” it and intends thereby its message. Brown (1987:153) has suggested that pwen are effective means of communication because instead of imposing a particular “meaning” upon the target, which would only alienate him or her, the listener decides what the message means and whether to “collect” it. While a direct accusation forces sender and target to commit to a particular “line,” “sending a pwen” puts neither party in that situation. Pwen keep open the channels of communication. If the target does not collect this pwen, perhaps she or he will choose to gather another.

The “owner” of the message can respond in one of three ways, but the choice is always mediated by context and considerations of the different statuses of the parties involved. First, one can get angry, lose control and start a quarrel, actions which are only likely to mark the owner for the community’s teasing and ridicule. This inappropriately direct response is tantamount to an admission of guilt. One may admit guilt in a socially acceptable way by opting for the second strategy of passivity. Someone of inferior age or status might have no choice other than to “lower your head and walk away.”

The third and best type of response is to return the pwen. The target strategi-
cally removes him or herself from a position of "social accountability" and challenges the new target to take ownership of the message. Sustaining the fictional "frame" of non-provocative discourse is an esteemed option among a "speech and song community" that, like its Creole counterparts elsewhere in the region, value competitions among "men-of-words" (Abrahams 1983).

PWEN IN RECENT POLITICAL RHETORIC

Pwen are well suited to contentious political rhetoric. The prolonged and violent transition from the "uprooting" of the Duvalier dictatorship in February, 1986 to free presidential and legislative elections five years later has occasioned the full range of strategies for throwing, retrieving and returning pwen. Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide's election to the presidency was a confirmation of his awesome mastery of this verbal genre. Even the United States' representative has articulated his country's interests by means of pwen.

In November, 1989, Alvin Adams began his term as United States Ambassador to Haiti, during the reign of General-President Prosper Avril, the third non-elected leader in as many years after the fall of Duvalier. Avril, a former close advisor to Duvalier, rose to power in a coup that toppled the bloody junta run by General Henri Namphy. Once Avril consolidated control over the progressive "little soldiers" (ti solda) who ousted Namphy, he began to reveal that his commitment to lead the country through free presidential elections was no more genuine than the reassuring pledges made by his predecessor when he first assumed power.

If Avril fit comfortably into the shoes worn by the paranoid, vengeful dictators who preceded him, Adams' accessible, zealous style and his preference to speak in the low-brow language of the illiterate masses set him apart from diplomats who held the post before him and who delegated conferences with the press to spokesmen from the United States Information Service. When Adams arrived in Haiti, before even leaving the airport, he delivered a speech identifying the United States' objectives for Haiti: a rapid transfer of power from the junta to a freely elected civilian government (Haiti Observer, Nov. 1989). At the end of the statement, delivered in English, Adams recited the Creole adage, "bourik chaje pa kanpe," meaning "the loaded burro does not stop."

General-President Avril apparently understood himself to be the target of the pwen. Incensed, he refused to receive the new American Ambassador, revealing his true antipathy toward a democratic transition. From the standpoint of rhetorical strategy, the General-President disgraced himself by his choleric tantrum. By failing immediately to remit a pwen putting the (original) sender on the defensive, Avril ennobled Adams. In fact, the Haitian government newspaper, L'Union, decrying what it identified as the Ambassador's "diplomatic gaffe," responded with the proverb "Chay tro lou, bourik kouche" or, "The donkey's load is too heavy; it lies down." The pwen implied that Adams would fail in his urgent mission because it was too "heavy" for him. Few regarded this message as an effective return-pwen as evidenced by its failure to attract attention in the Haitian media. Haiti Observateur, for example, only cited the retort in passing in an editorial (Dec. 6-13, 1989).

The Haitian press instantly sent a hostile message to Avril and an approving notice to Adams by assigning the latter the pwen name of Bourik Chaje, or Loaded Donkey. Bourik Chaje has entirely supplanted Adams' formal name in both the Haitian media and in popular discourse (as evidenced by its mention in the rude songs surging from the crowds during the Carnival of 1991).

In the spring of 1990, Bourik Chaje persuaded Avril to be escorted out of Haiti to a luxurious life in a Miami suburb. The new civilian ruling council appointed Ertha Pascal Trouillot, a supreme court judge, as interim president. Though bitterly divided, largely over President Trouillot's inability and/or unwillingness to control the military, the council, the president and the army did steward the electoral process that resulted in the landslide victory in December, 1990, of Father Aristide.

Aristide, or Titid, was the outspoken leader of a small parish in a Port-au-Prince slum. The Catholic Church repeatedly disciplined and ultimately removed him from his pulpit for preaching revolutionary politics. Titid's growing reputation as a champion of the urban poor swelled after September, 1988, when General-President Namphy's thugs sadistically slaughtered worshippers attending his Sunday mass and then appeared on national television to brag about it. Repulsion to the massacre was said to have been the catalyst for the "little soldiers'" coup that sent Namphy into exile.

Aristide's last-minute entrance into the presidential race raised fears about Washington's commitment to the country should the anti-imperialist "red priest" win. In mid-November, Bourik Chaje convened a press conference to allay these apprehensions, stating that the United States would support the electoral choice of the Haitian people. Bourik Chaje then shifted his attention to the "real problems" facing Haiti once the post-election euphoria waned. He concluded with the Creole proverb, "apre bal, tanbou lou," or "after the ball, the drum is heavy" (Haiti Insight Nov.-Dec.1990:2).

Politicians on the right and the left offered their contradictory interpretations of the Ambassador's message to the front-running candidate. Supporters of Marc Bazin, the former World Bank economist, interpreted Bourik Chaje's message to mean that if Aristide were to win the election, he could not attract the foreign aid necessary to
solved the country’s onerous problems. Bazin was widely perceived as “Washington’s candidate” and they implied that electing Bazin was a virtual assurance of massive foreign aid to the depleted economy.

As for the opposing political perspective, one newspaper sympathetic to Titid denounced Bourik Chaje’s message as consistent with “les plans machiavéliques de certaines grandes capitales du monde,” one example among many “critiques acerbes fusent de toutes parts” to discredit Father Aristide’s candidacy (Salvant, Haití Progrès Dec. 12-18, 1990). Another weekly publication condemned the “interfering” affront to “le nationalisme haitien” (Hérard, Haiti en Marche, Feb. 13-19, 1991).

Aristide did indeed take ownership of the “after the dance, the drum is heavy” pwen. He soon responded by remitting a pwen that deflected the focus away from himself and toward the nation, shifting the burden of uplifting Haiti’s onerous “drum” from the limited capacity of one man to the unlimited power of a unified people. Aristide’s answer: “men anpil, chay pa lou.” (with many hands, the burden is not heavy).

Aristide reiterated this pwen throughout the remainder of his campaign until riveting it in memory during his rousing inaugural address. He delivered his speech in emotional call-and-response dialogue with the audience—a metaphor of his new leadership style encouraging popular participation in the political process (Hérard 1991). Repetitive unison chanting of “men anpil, chay pa lou” by the crowd realized the solidarity exhorted in the proverb. Aristide topped the refrain with a rhyming flourish reinforcing the same message of unity: “yon sèl dwa fi manje kalalou,” or “you can’t eat okra with just one finger.”

Bourik Chaje held a meeting with several elections observers one month after he sent the “after the dance” pwen. The American Ambassador pleaded that “people kept misinterpreting his proverbs and taking them out of context.” With this defensive statement, Bourik Chaje diminished himself as a verbal contender. He had already removed himself from a position of social accountability when he threw the “after the ball” pwen. Now he was accepting responsibility for the very thing the thrower of pwen strategically avoids. The sender leaves it to the hearers to decide the meaning of the pwen—whether it “resembles” them and whether to “collect” it. If Bourik Chaje had wanted to stay in the competition, he should not have explained anything. He should have thrown Aristide another pwen.

Bourik Chaje ultimately missed the pwen of this discourse genre. Despite his enthusiasm for Creole rhetoric, the United States Ambassador revealed that he has yet to grasp the receiver-based theory of meaning guiding the strategies of throwing and retrieving pwen.

NOTES

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The land, how it is being used, how should it be used? What kind of crops will prosper, or should be planted in particular terrain? Some scholars have published research on these issues in the past. We need to have more and new information on land use and planting habits. We need to gather information on prices, the development of prices, not only in general, but also in specific places. As you can see, this kind of information supports the bureaucratic apparatus if it is kept solely in the hands of the government.

Fortunately, I must say, the kind of resources required to undertake such censuses and surveys do exist, because Haiti belongs to a family of individual nations and receives support from international agencies, within the United Nations — U.N. agencies, the likes of ILO, FAO, and others. They offer the possibility of obtaining training and funding to upgrade our current status. International, institutional support is in place, but it does not work. Organizations such as OAS, IDB, the World Bank, are users of Haitian statistics. They have a role and an interest in helping us build an infrastructure. I wanted to draw your attention to the fact that bureaucratic apparatus is important. That same international, bureaucratic apparatus also commissions studies to reveal the needs for infrastructure development. You go nowhere without a plan for infrastructure development in these times.

The second point with respect to external trade: more work needs to be done on what should be the role of foreign trade in the economy of Haiti. Foreign trade has always been important since the slave era in St. Domingue. During that period, the slaves were producing sugar and rum for export to France — and the United States at that time also. But you see, there’s a problem. We were brought from Africa to do just that, and the enterprise turned out to be very sour for us, because, in essence, we were working for free and for a dominant minority. This economic fact is important. I think that the memory of this history has perhaps predisposed us against foreign trade activities. If one studies the history of nationalist forces in Haiti, there is a tendency to avoid the international marketplace, precisely because over the centuries international markets have not remunerated our efforts to the extent that they should have. Consequently, we have distanced ourselves from that market, turned inward to ourselves believing thereby that we were going to produce a prosperous economy. If that is what we want, we should know that no small country has ever been able to accomplish such a feat, because, simply, the smaller you are, the higher the probability that you will never find within your territory all the resources you will need to develop a full-scale economy. The smaller you are, the higher the need to be a participant in foreign trade so that you derive from foreign trade the commodities that you need. No company or country is going to supply what you need.
unless you export. The only way you can pay for an import is to export. Conversely, we do not want foreign trade agreements to extract all the juice from us, all the juice we are capable of delivering. And, the present structure of the international market does just that. So, what is the appropriate mix? What should be the importance of the foreign trade sector in Haiti’s economy? What kind of products should we export and import? What kind of markets should we be looking for, and so forth? These are legitimate topics to be researched. Moreover, research on the international transmission of business cycles is another important issue, that is, collaboration with our neighbors. Our neighbors in the region have been trying to get together and create processes of economic integration. They have not been all that successful. No matter the degree of success, they are forging alliances and speaking to each other, Haiti, too, should be part of that process.

Whatever economic integration has occurred so far in Haiti has taken place in an unplanned and sometimes in a very undesirable manner. I shall mention briefly what is happening now between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. The Dominican peso was officially devalued a few years back; unofficially, devaluation commenced at the beginning of the decade. Haiti, however, has not devalued its currency thereby creating an imbalance between the two exchange rates. As a result, you find a process of arbitrage taking place leading to unplanned, economic integration — unplanned and unwanted. If the Dominican Republic devalues its peso and Haiti does not devalue the gourde, automatically all Dominican goods — we are on the same island — will be cheaper to Haitians. We might reach a point where Dominicans accept the Haitian gourde as a means of payment, but they don’t have much to get back from Haiti by paying in gourdes to buy Haitian products. If a more equitable arrangement could have been reached, some problems might have been avoided, but Haiti is a high-cost economy today. That’s right, low income but high cost. I think this situation remains a major problem.

Migration is an economic phenomenon about which we need to know more. I mentioned earlier the need to know more about land use and crop production. Moreover, we need to do more work on finding out the optimum size of farms. Certainly farms in Haiti are too small. When we look at the statistics, we see that the productivity of the land in Haiti is only one-third of what is produced elsewhere in the Caribbean. Take a product such as rice, and consider production in a very fertile Haitian valley; you learn that we produce only one third the amount yielded in Cuba. Haitian rice fields produce only one-third of what the Dominicans get, and I don’t think the Cubans nor the Dominicans are the world’s most efficient producers of rice. By comparing our output to that of our neighbors, we see that the situation is very bad, indeed. If only one-third of the land is producing rice in Haiti, that means that the land is feeding one Haitian, and at the same time is providing food for three Cubans and three Dominicans. Automatically, therefore, your country becomes a poorer nation. Something must be done to increase the levels of productivity. A good-looking guy serving as President of the Republic is not going to do this alone; rather hard work at all levels is mandated. It’s not simply a question of what type of rice to plant and market; the problem also has to do with the size of farms, with credit. Economics is not limited to the academic discipline of economics per se; every aspect of economics touches a given society.

I should like to mention two additional points — one minute on each, because I think they are important. Taxation. Taxation is important to study in Haiti. Taxation has been a way to transfer wealth from the poor to the rich. Taxation is not a means in Haiti to collect revenues for the public good; it’s a device to tax the poor and, as a result, the people who control the government become rich. You now know why some people want to become President-For-Life! We need to know more about taxation — the case of production and export of coffee has been well documented; unfortunately, there is no time to provide further details here. I have arrived at the last point I want to make, last but not least. Following the Haitian Revolution of the nineteenth century, we turned inward implying that we no longer wanted to produce sugar cane for European markets, rather we sought to produce food for our own consumption. Essentially, former slaves wanted a piece of land to develop. Some influential owners of property were not willing to concede. They lost. Those who suggested to suggest the initiation of land reform did not do so. Those revolutionary leaders who did promise land reform knew that they did not really believe in such a process as their actions demonstrated. They distributed to emancipated slaves marginal lands on marginal hills. And then what? Yes, in the beginnings of our post-revolutionary history, we created our own little paradise; we grew our own bananas or whatever believing that such an enterprise was surely better than producing sugar cane. At the same time, our revolutionary leaders of the nineteenth century set in motion a situation that over time would create misery. Why? Erosion. You cannot plant and produce on high-sloped hills unless important measures are taken to stop erosion. So today, after five to seven generations, we have eroded soils up in the mountains where people are still living. How are you going to change life without changing the production methodology — without changing what people ought to be planting on hills whose ecology responds positively to the growth of forests and trees — only? In search of economic survival, peasants
HAITIAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION THIRD ANNUAL CONFERENCE
OCTOBER 18 AND 19, 1991
TUFTS UNIVERSITY

HAITI TWO HUNDRED YEARS LATER: PROSPECTS FOR THE YEAR 2004

Preliminary Program

Friday October 18, 1991

☐ Morning
10:30—12:30 Registration
Light Luncheon

☐ Afternoon
12:30—1:00 Introductory: HSA
Welcome: Tufts University

☐ 1:05—2:45 Reconstructing Histories
Maximilien Laroche, Université Laval, “Images of the Haitian Revolution”
Jean-Claude Martinau, Poet, “The Revolution that History Forgot”
Commentator: TBA

☐ 2:45—3:00 Refreshment Break

☐ 3:05—4:45 The Politics of Revolution
Panelists: Robert Corbett, Webster University, “Haiti and the Napoleon Plot to Invade the U.S.A.”
Frank Etienne, Author and Painter, “Les Trois Mouvements qui ont Bouleversé la Colonie de St. Domingue”
Dessima Williams, Williams College
Commentator: TBA

☐ Evening
6:30—9:00 Haitian Musicology (Discussions and Performances)
Participants: Gerdes Fleurant, Salem State College; David Locke, Tufts University; Others TBA

Saturday, October 19, 1991

☐ Morning
9:00—10:30 Vodoun, Creole and Social Change
Panelists: Carole B. Joseph, CUNY, City College
Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee
Commentator: TBA

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PRELIMINARY PROGRAM CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

☐ 10:45—12:15 Representation of Revolution
Panelists: VéVé A. Clark, University of California, Berkeley, “The Revolution in Drama: 1796-1917”
Carrol F. Coates, SUNY, Binghamton, “Dessalines: History in the Theater”
Marie-José N’Zengou-Tayo, University of the West Indies, “The Literary Representation of the Haitian Revolution in some Caribbean Writings”
Commentator: TBA

☐ Afternoon
12:30—2:00 Luncheon

☐ 2:15—3:45 Economy and the Ecology
Panelists: Alex Dupuy, Wesleyan University
Gerald F. Murray, University of Florida, “Haitianizing Environmental Programs”
Commentator: TBA

☐ 3:50—4:15 Refreshment Break

AGENDA FOR ECONOMIC RESEARCH CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

want to plant corn in the hills. Development agendas notwithstanding, people will tell you corn or another product is not the issue. These are subsistence farmers who, no matter the crop, would likely be dead long before harvest. They are quite right; they would have been dead already. No matter what research indicates that farmers ought to be doing differently, the bureaucracy must provide them with an alternative in order to generate income.

One of the alternatives could well be *artisanat*: woodwork, wood-carving, painting and the like. Haiti still has that resource. I think the possibilities of other, non-agrarian, income-making possibilities on the hills represent an alternative to agricultural production. If we do not want to increase the import of food, we must explore means by which productivity might be increased on flat lands and in rural areas.

In the Spring of 1991, the Haitian Studies Association launched a series of roundtable discussions, three of which have been held to date.

On March 12, Professor Alex Dupuy, Wesleyan University, spoke on proposed programs for change and development in Haiti, focussing particularly on plans outlined by the Aristide administration during the electoral campaign.

On April 2, John Koering, a USAID official who is a visiting fellow at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy of Tufts University and Jocelyn McCalla, of the National Coalition for Haitian Refugees discussed the impact of U.S. Economic Assistance on Development in Haiti.

And on May 7, Gerdes Fleurant and Marc Prou assessed the social and educational programs of the new Haitian government. Members will be kept informed of new series to begin in the fall.

NOTES

RECENT PUBLICATIONS


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☐ Production
Alix Cantave
Jocelyn McCalla

☐ Contributors to this issue
Alix Cantave
Karen E. Richman
Paul Lovutu