

# OPEN FORUM

---

## **"With Many Hands, the Burden Isn't Heavy": Creole Proverbs and Political Rhetoric in Haiti's Presidential Elections**

*Karen E. Richman  
University of Virginia*

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* or *pwent*."

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. This paper considers how *pwen* have been manipulated by two non-conformist leaders, 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. A 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 social and 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 jwèt*) and "pwen names" (*non pwen*).<sup>1</sup> Nicknames are created from contractions or modifications of the "real name," often with the addition of such endearments as "little" (*ti*); President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, for example, has been affectionately known to his parish followers as *Pè Titid* (Little Father Tid). 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 such a pwen name. But first consider how my friend Joseph Métélus, an immigrant from La Gonâve, Haiti, explained the origins of his pwen name. Joseph Métélus was 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 mouri*," 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" pwen makes use of what Lawrence Fisher (1976:229) terms the "triangular form" of discourse involving a tacit relationship between sender, sham receiver, and target overhearer.<sup>2</sup> The triangle in Malgre 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. Malgre 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!'" Shooting 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.

Fisher's observations regarding the sham audience are especially important to understanding the pwen's triangularity. Sham hearers will recognize the onset of a "ritualized"—but indirect—confrontation and assume the role of passive audience. The target may perceive, probably correctly, that they are aligning themselves with the sender merely by "maintaining the fiction of non-aggressive discourse" (Fisher 1976:235).

"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" (*mèt*) of the pwen. I asked Malgre Sa to explain this concept; he explained, "You throw the pwen into the air. It turns true when it falls. If the pwen 'resembles' you, you pick it up. You are its owner." Malgre 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.*), and "If the shoe fits, wear it. If it doesn't fit, don't put it on" (*Si soulye a bon pou ou, mete li. Si li pa bon pou ou, pa mete li.*).

The concept of *ranmase*, meaning "to pick up," "to collect," or "to gather" merits further explication. An adult woman, for example, having determined that the coffee beans she spread out under the sun are fully dried, may direct a child to pick up the coffee beans (*ranmase*

*greenn kafe yo*) and place them in a container. *Ranmase* can also be used in the sense of welcoming or receiving into the fold someone who has been absent or lost for a protracted time. *Ranmase* thus implies ordering, controlling, and containing in one place things or persons that were disorderly, lost, or spread out. Thus, until a *pwen* is "collected," it lacks definition. The owner "gathers" it and thereby intends its meaning.

Brown (1987:153) has suggested that throwing *pwen* is an 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.

Indeed, when I suggested the analogy between shooting a *pwen* and shooting an arrow to Malgre Sa, he insisted that the verbal target's volition made the two incomparable.<sup>3</sup> The overhearer of the *pwen* actively chooses how to gather the message while the target of an arrow is a passive victim: "It's not like an arrow because it's your own will that makes you gather it."

Malgre Sa continued to explain that the "owner" 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. According to Malgre Sa, someone of inferior age or status might have no choice other than to "lower your head and walk away." A third and highly-valued type of response is to return the *pwen*. The target strategically removes himself 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 members of a "speech and song community" who, like their 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's 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 Prospér Avril, the third non-elected leader in as many years after the fall of Duvalier. Avril, a 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 vengeful dictators who preceded him, Adams's accessible, zealous style and his preference to speak in the low-brow language of the illiterate masses set him apart from the diplomats who held the post before him. When Adams arrived in Haiti, he delivered a speech identifying the United States's objectives for Haiti: a rapid transfer of power from the junta to a freely elected civilian government (*Haiti Observateur*, November 6-13, 1989). At the end of the statement, delivered in English, Adams recited a Creole adage, "Bourik chaje pa kanpe," meaning "The loaded donkey does not stand still."

General-President Avril apparently understood himself to be the target of these pwen. Incensed, he refused to receive the new American ambassador, revealing his 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.<sup>5</sup>

The opposition press in Haiti 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.<sup>6</sup> Bourik Chaje has entirely supplanted Adams's 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).

Avril was forced out of power in the spring of 1990. 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 and the president, as well as and the army, did

steward the electoral process that resulted in Father Aristide's landslide victory in December 1990.

Aristide, or Pè Titid, was the outspoken leader of a small parish in a Port-au-Prince slum. The Catholic Church repeatedly disciplined Aristide and ultimately removed him from his pulpit for preaching revolutionary politics. Pè 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 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 a Creole proverb, "*apre bal, tanbou lou,*" or "after the dance, the drum is heavy" (*Haiti Insight* November-December, 1990:2).

Politicians on the right and left offered their contradictory interpretations of the ambassador's message to the front-running candidate, Aristide. 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 would not attract the foreign aid necessary to solve 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.<sup>7</sup>

As for the opposing political perspective, one newspaper sympathetic to Titid denounced Bourik Chaje's message as consistent with "the Machiavelian agendas of some of the great powers . . ." one more example of "the caustic criticisms emanating from all over" to discredit Father Aristide's candidacy (*Opération La valas: La Dernière Chance, Haïti Progrès*, December 12-18, 1990). Another weekly publication condemned the "interfering affront to Haitian nationalism" (7 Février: *Le Discourse de la Liberté, Haïti en Marche*, February 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. The emotional call-and-response dialogue with the audience was widely heard as a metaphor of popular empowerment. ("7 Février," *Haiti en Marche*). Repetitive unison chanting of "*Men anpil, chay pa lou*" by the crowd realized the solidarity portrayed by the proverb. Aristide topped the refrain with a rhyming flourish reinforcing the same message of unity: "*Yon sèl dwèt pa manje kalalou,*" or "You can't eat okra with just one finger."

Bourik Chaje held a meeting with election observers one month after he sent the "after the dance" *pwen*.<sup>8</sup> He pleaded that "people kept misinterpreting his proverbs and taking them out of context." With this defensive statement, the American ambassador eliminated himself as a formidable verbal contender. He had already removed himself from a position of social accountability when he threw the "after the dance" *pwen*. Now he was accepting responsibility for the very thing the thrower of *pwen* strategically avoids. The sender leaves it to the hearers to interpret 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*.

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

### Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to Joseph Métélus, an eloquent but unlettered "man-of-words," who contributed generously to my endeavor to understand *pwen* discourse. I am also grateful to Raymond Joseph, publisher and former Haitian Chargé D'Affaires, and Edwin Dimitri Stephen, an observer for National Coalition for Haitian Refugees and Americas Watch, for providing valuable reports of diplomatic and political rhetoric concerning the recent Haitian elections.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Because naming figures importantly in Brown's (1976:255-260) analysis of *pwen*, it is worthwhile to point out where our interpretations differ. I have pursued the distinction between a "nickname" (a caricature, a pithy description) and "*pwen* name," a succinct comment about an interpersonal situation whose target is someone other than the person bearing the name.

<sup>2</sup> As Fisher notes in his paper on the Barbadian speech practice of "dropping remarks," Afro-American counterparts include the "passed remark" in Antigua (Reisman 1970), the "thrown word" in Jamaica (Fisher 1976) and "loud talking" and "signifying" in the United States (Mitchel-Kernan 1972). Fisher offers a valuable critique of views of meaning postulated by language philosophers and sociolinguists and he suggests that discourse analysts consider "communication as a relationship between individuals rather than a response in an individual" (1976:232-33). Kochman's (1986) "receiver-based" analysis of African-American styles of hostile discourse pursues a similar approach.

<sup>3</sup> Kochman (1981:90) employs the arrow metaphor to contrast white and black understandings of who assigns meaning to a message: "Expressed metaphorically, the white perspective holds that the person shooting the arrow . . . assume(s) full responsibility for all the targets that are hit . . . In the black perspective the person shooting the arrow is responsible only for its general direction, not for the target the arrow hits, *since it is the target that actually guides the arrow home*" (emphasis mine).

<sup>4</sup> According to *Haiti Observateur*, December 13-20, 1989: "Ambassador Adams's stand on democracy marks a new departure for a U.S. envoy to Port-au-Prince. His predecessors have repeatedly frustrated Haitians's hopes . . . allying themselves with repressive Haitian governments." Adams also enjoys unusually broad support from the U.S. Congress and the State Department. He was well-known to both, having held a high-profile post in the State Department's anti-terrorist unit. He lobbied for the ambassadorship to Haiti and, once appointed to the post, studied Creole at the State Department (*Haiti Observateur*, December 6-13, 1989, and Raymond Joseph, personal communication).

<sup>5</sup> The Haitian government newspaper, *L'Union*, decrying what it identified as the Ambassador's "diplomatic gaffe," responded with "Chaj tro lou, bourik kouche" or, "If the donkey's load is too heavy, it lies down" (*Haiti Observateur* Dec. 6-13, 1989). 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 news.

<sup>6</sup> *Haiti Observateur* (November 22-29, 1990) immediately reported the incident under a lead headline, "Bourik Chaje pa Kanpe" Dit le Nouvel Ambassadeur U.S. en Haiti" ("The Loaded Donkey doesn't stand still" says the New U.S. Ambassador to Haiti."). According to publisher Raymond Joseph, the readers soon started referring to Adams as Bourik Chaje (personal communication).

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Joseph and Dimitri Stephen, personal communications.

<sup>8</sup> Dimitri Stephen, personal communication.

### References Cited

- Abrahams, Roger. 1983. *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies: Performance and the Emergence of Creole Culture*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- American Heritage. 1969. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: American Heritage Publishing Co.
- Bauman, Richard. 1984. *Verbal Art as Performance*. Prospect Heights, Il.: Waveland Press.

- Brown, Karen M. 1976. Alourdes: A Case Study in Moral Leadership in Haitian Vodou. In *Saints and Virtues*, ed., J. Hawley, pp. 144-167. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 1987. *The Vèvè of Haitian Vodou: A Structural Analysis of Visual Imagery*. Ph.D. dissertation. Department of Religion, Temple University.
- Courlander, Harold. 1960. *The Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fisher, Lawrence. 1976. "Dropping Remarks" and the Barbadian Audience. *American Ethnologist* 3:227-242.
- Haiti en Marche*. February 13-19, 1990.
- Haiti Insight. A Bulletin of Refugee and Human Rights Affairs*, November-December 1990.
- Haiti Observateur*. November 22-29, December 6-13, 1989.
- Haiti Progres*. December 12-18, 1990.
- Kochman, Thomas. 1981. *Black and White Styles in Conflict*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1986. Strategic Ambiguity in Black Speech Genres: The Reality of Social Accountability. *Text* 6:153-170.
- Mitchell-Kernan, Claudia. 1972. Signifying, Loud-Talking and Marking. In *Rappin' and Stylin' Out*, ed. T. Kochman, pp. 315-335. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Reisman, Karl. 1970. Culture and Linguistic Ambiguity in a West Indian Village. In *Afro-American Anthropology*, eds. N. Whitten and J. Szwed, pp. 129-144. New York: Free Press.