Rara as Popular Army: Hierarchy, Militarism, and Warfare

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perspectives on The Caribbean
A Reader in Culture, History, and Representation
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I am arriving with my regiment,
Ossagne Oh [Repeat]
Don’t you hear [about the] the
National Palace
Let it flow
I am arriving with my regiment,
Ossagne Oh

M’ap antre ak tout kô divizyon mwen,
Osanj O [Repeat]
On pa tandé Palé Nasyonal
Lese koul
M’ap antre ak tout kô divizyon mwen,
Osanj O

Rara La Belle Fraîcheur de l’Anglade,
Fermathe, Easter Sunday 1992

The oldest Rara leader I met was well into his hundreds, a retired farmer named Papa Dieubon who lived high in the mountains off the road to Jacmel. Friends presented me to him one hot afternoon so he could bay odyans (literally, “give me an audience”). We sat leaning back in small chairs under his porch roof, sipping kleren laced with sweet spices. Papa Dieubon’s skin had the wizened look of a life lived under the hot sun, his face topped with snowy white hair. For a long time he did not understand what I had come to ask. “I want to talk about the Rara you led,” I kept shouting. I began to have the absurd feeling that I was talking to the wrong old man. “Ah,” he said at last, drawing himself up in his chair. “You mean the Army.”
An overarching ethos of militarism pervades the Rara festival because bands construct themselves as small regiments and go out into the streets in the spirit of battle. Rara bands often conceive of themselves as small state-like entities involved in diplomacy or warfare. Embedded in the social organization of Rara bands and underlying the festival conceptually is the notion of an imaginary state. Furthermore, vestiges of a royal idiom are intertwined with the military and state symbols in Rara. The social organization of Rara, then, is an articulation of power and rank based in military, state, and royal metaphors.

This chapter examines the social organization of Rara bands in historical context, viewing them as a type of militarized traditional peasant organization that has frequently marched across the pages of Haitian history. These groups were (and are) traditional forms of popular organizing that political activists, especially liberation theology advocates, tapped in the recent efforts to gain political enfranchisement. As self-organized peasant groups, they can be viewed as the pre-political forerunners of the contemporary grassroots popular organizations that make up the democratic peasant movement.

Rara hierarchy and organization reveal how the cultural practices of the Haitian popular classes display and draw attention to the local social order. In Rara, individual agents act out an implicitly political theory, asserting their right to participate in a communal endeavor, always ranked in strict hierarchical relationships with compatriots and gwo nég and often united in battle against other local groups. Embedded in the bands’ social relationships and performed in the roles individuals assume during their parades is the system of patronage that has fueled Haitian politics at all levels through the present day.

In the Rara bands, royal imagery has over time been replaced by military idiom. This change may be contextualized historically. Early colonial accounts of Vodou described the existence of a king and queen as the two leaders. After independence in 1804, the north was headed from 1807 to 1820 by King Henri Christophe of the Kingdom of Haiti, and it was probably during or after this time that republican titles replaced royal ranks in ritual. Dolores Yonker remarks that “Royal titles formerly used such as king, queen, princess and prince, dukes, etc., are gradually being displaced by more republican ones: president, various cabinet ministers, and the military.” We can compare this process to the history of other Afro-Caribbean societies like the Cuban cabildos, where the social structure was modeled on republican government but earlier had been borrowed from monarchy.

Raras are organized into elaborate hierarchies, and their members hold specific titles known by everyone in the community. At the head of the band is the president. After the president come kings, queens, colonels, majors, rear guards, prime ministers, and secretaries of state. What follows is a list of possible titles for band members. These bestow upon their bearers the prestige and honor of publicly recognized rank. Linguistically, the titles are derived from French. They invoke multiple imageries borrowed from monarchy, from republican government, and from the French army:

- prezidan: president
- vis prezidan: vice-president
- premye minis: prime minister
- dezyèm minis: second minister
- pòt dropo: flag bearer
- avan gad: front guard
- minis lagè: minister of war
- minis dinfòmasyon: minister of information
- jeneral: general
- kolonèl: colonel
- dezyèm kolonèl: second colonel
- kapitèn: captain
- majd: major
- majd jon: baton major
- wa: king
- premye renn: first queen
- dezyèm renn: second queen
- renn lagè: queen of war
- renn kobèy: queen of the basket
- sekretè: secretary
- trezòrye: treasurer
- minis finans: minister of finance
- minis eneryè: minister of the interior
- laryè gad: rear guard
The order of procession is a performance of military ethos. The piti drapo walks a considerable distance in front of the band to scout for friends and foes. After him is the kolonel, who directs the band with his whistle and whip. Usually he has several officers flanking him, making up the avan gad. Majô jon, dancers, and musicians follow, with the queens and women’s chorus toward the rear of the band, protected from attack.

Sometimes within the orchestra itself there is a hierarchy, with a president who leads the band with the mannau drum, and various vice-presidents who play behind him. Likewise, the women’s chorus may include queens of various ranks, or officers of the band. After the musicians and the chorus come the rank-and-file Rara fans, who walk and sing with the band. Last but not least, individual macham (market women) affiliate themselves with specific Raras and walk with the band, selling liquor, cigarettes, and small foodstuffs. As vendors, these women too hold a recognized rank in the band. They provide service and maintain their loyalty to the group, and in return they are given “security” and protected by the rear guard.

In spite of the religious and magical practices of Rara, and even the participation of entire religious houses, the grad (ranks) in Rara are military and official in nature and do not indicate religious authority. Raras are modeled not on an imagined theocracy, but rather on an imagined military government. In some cases there is more at stake in Rara leadership than merely the band. I came across one Rara that owns land. Members of the family cultivate it and give a portion of the harvest to the Rara president. These kinds of Raras exist as an imagined state with a territory and a population, and thus possess the means to produce and reproduce.

In order to analyze the royal, military, and state titles in Rara, we must understand the Raras as historically and structurally related to other popular societies also ranked into military hierarchies. These groups include Chantwé, Carnival bands, and various kinds of sossye travay (work cooperatives): konbit, eskwad, kidon, kowre (in the south), mazinga (in the northwest), ranpono (in the north), and kouahe (in the Petit-Goâve region). These various work cooperatives often organize themselves into guards, squads, battalions, and so on.6

In some cases, the Rara is conceived as the army for a higher governing body such as a Chamewé society. According to Michel Laguerre, “The societies, comprised of mountain dwellers, retain a governmental structure with a military parallel with the structure of the army and the civil government of the country.”7 Rara band names are created to inspire fear, with groups like Ti Rayè (from tirailleurs, the artillery in the French army) and Chien Mechant (Angry Dog).

Rara ranks may correspond with, or may be distinct from, a sponsoring Vodou, Chamewé, or work society. In 1961 Paul Moral observed that work societies sometimes turn into Rara bands or engage in mass demonstrations to create political agitation.8 In 1987 Rachel Beauvoir and Didier Dominique noted a similar line of transformation: “[B]etween January and April, many work societies transform into Rara bands; these groups dress in colored costumes and dance during the day, and punish people at night. The Society’s money pays for the costumes, drinks and all the other necessary expenses.”9 Thus the president of a Chamewé may also be the president of a Rara band, or an oungan might be a kolonel who leads the Rara. Often the Rara queens are women who have attained the rank of queen in a Chamewé society. However, Rara is its own enterprise, and those involved jockey for positions using their roles in other areas to obtain positions of power or prestige in the band, and vice versa. A Rara member who attains the rank of general is addressed as such, and as a decision-maker for several hundred people, he is in a true position of leadership.10

Rara’s symbols and social organization reveal it to be one of the most militarized arenas of popular religious culture. At the absolute top of its hierarchies one finds the hwa, along with any zonbi that may have been captured and mete sou bann man (put on the band). Together these form an invisible military force that helps the band vanquish its competitors. The true owner of the Rara called Mande Gran Moun, I was told, was the hwa Kouzen Azaka. Azaka “walked with” the band under the title of prime minister, and it was
he who was ultimately in charge. Laguerre writes about the militarizing of the lwa in Afro-Haitian Vodou:

Since the colonial era, Voodooists have developed their own theological view of the supernatural world, which they see in terms of a complex politico-military structure that operates on a spiritual as well as a human level. The major spirits are known to have a specific function in this government, and each one has a military or political title. General Clermeil is believed to be in charge of springs and rivers, General Brisé is supposed to protect the trees of Chardette, Baron Samedi is a senator and a diplomat. Zaka is minister of agriculture and Loko is minister of public health while Danbala is minister of finance.

The militarization of Haitian culture in general and of these local societies in particular is the result of a long-standing historical process: colonial Haiti was controlled and maintained by the French army, and the nation won its independence only after the bloody armed resistance that Haitians launched in the late eighteenth century. Haitian political history since that time has been a long series of military coups d’état; the last one at this writing was the ousting of President Aristide in 1991. In their study on militarism in Haitian music, Gage Averill and David Yih argue that the Haitian war of independence was the pivotal moment that crystallized Haitian identity and that Haitians responded by “embracing a deep cultural metaphor of the people as an army.” When the indigenous army won its independence from the French, the idea of the army came to have a positive value and an association with victory.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the country was regionalized into diverse centers of power, and each region created its own army, capable of defending its own territory. Militarism thus became a generative scheme of social organization in the peasantry, each social group always reserving the potential to become an actual fighting force. Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes that in the nineteenth century, “Retired or ousted officers, political leaders and local landlords ... put together small armed bands that were effective in their limited regional spheres and that sometimes gave critical support to rebelling regular troops.”

There is historical evidence that peasant armies incorporated music into the work of fighting. Haiti’s former rulers, the colonists of Saint-Domingue, had maintained regimental music corps called corps de musique, which were attached to various divisions such as the chasseurs (light infantrymen), grenadiers (grenade-throwers), tirailleurs (artillery), and garde du palais (palace guard). At one point there were sixteen corps de musique in Port-au-Prince and more in the provinces. The colonial army also established various drum corps called batteries sonores, which the Independent Haitian armies maintained. Averill and Yih argue convincingly that the musical style of Rara ochau musical salutes derives from French military drumming. The word ochau probably derives from the French aux champs (to forward march; literally, “to the fields”). It is likely that postcolonial popular armies also made use of drums and other instruments as communication tools in symbolic displays, maneuvers, and possibly battle.

It is probable that processional activity like Rara even had its origins in the colonial era. Thomas Madiou writes of maroon armies throughout the colony. He notes that a man named Halacou was a leader in the Port-au-Prince region who walked with drums, trumpets, and sorcerers: "The Cul-de-Sac insurgents (an army of two thousand maroons) had at their head an African priest of great height and Herculean strength. He ... always [carried] under his arm a large white cock which, he pretended, transmitted to him orders from heaven. He marched preceded by the music of drums, tambis [conch shells], trumpets and sorcerers" (emphasis added).

But militarism in Haiti was consolidated and bolstered throughout the country’s history, as peasants organized themselves into armed groups to defend their interests. In the south these were known as Piquets du Sud and in the north as Cacos du Nord. Throughout the nineteenth century, generals would march with these “armies” to overthrow the Port-au-Prince state, promising peasants they would effect their demands. A few years later, another peasant army would overthrow the state. The first piquets mobilized
under a peasant leader known as Goman, claiming their right to cultivate land. Another southern peasant rebel, Jean-Jacques Accau, led the same piquets against President Jean-Pierre Boyer (1822–44) because of his abandonment of peasant interests. In the late 1860s, the cacos helped Sylvain Salnave overthrow Nicolas Geffrard. When he did not move to change their conditions, they overthrew Salnave himself.

In January 1915, General Vilbrun Guillaume Sam led a cacos army to Port-au-Prince and named himself president. Six months later that same army killed Sam after he ordered the execution of political prisoners allied to the cacos. This incident was the catalyst for the US invasion of that year. The killing of Sam, who was “ripped apart” by a “mob,” has stayed in the middle-class and foreign imagination as the shadow side of popular gatherings, including Rara.

The United States Marines, during their 1915–34 occupation of the country, centralized, trained, equipped, and funded the Haitian military. According to one source, the title of kolonel became the highest rank in Rara during the American occupation: “The title le kolonel refers to the chief of the rural police. In the past, he was called ‘general’ because that was the highest grade in the army. Since the time of the American occupation of Haiti (1915–34), he has been known as kolonel, since this was the highest rank in the American Army represented in Haiti.” It was during the marine occupation that one of the best-known Rara bands in Haiti was formed, making it eighty years old at the present writing. Peasant communities during the US occupation transformed themselves into armed fighting cacos units and launched a guerrilla resistance against the marines. In 1957 Duvalier rose, and there was increased US support to the Haitian army during the Cold War. (Until the Duvalier era, Rara bands were not allowed into Port-au-Prince; they were held at bay in the outskirts of the city.)

After the fall of Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986, six military juntas forced successive coups d’état, increasing the power of the army to an extreme. In 1995, for the first time in Haitian history, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide dissolved the army and replaced it with a police force. This move was engineered, however, under the greater supervision of the occupying United Nations troops after a 1995 US military “intervention.”

Haitian militarism on the national and the local level has thus been the idiom through which hierarchies channel power to the absolute leadership of one man. Trouillot has outlined the historical pattern through which the executive branch effects the total usurping of state power. The logical culmination of this process was the totalitarianism of François Duvalier’s presidency. In this politics of “big man-ism,” all citizens were forced to identify their position in relation to the president, either proclaiming themselves pro-Duvalier or anti-Duvalier. Polarized and terrorized, each person learned to construct relationships of patronage and subservience with pro-Duvalierists in order to dodge the brutal repression that was sure to follow resistance or even ambivalence. “In the course of daily life anyone could claim a relationship, even fictitious, to the sole center and source of power in order to ensure a place on the side of the survivors.”

With the construction of this shape of power relations, political patronage became the only way to survive and succeed.

Local “big man-ism” is a mirror image of the national model in Haitian politics and is possibly derived in part from African roots. As Karin Barber reports of the Yoruba, “[T]he dynamic impulse in political life is the rise of self-made men. Individuals compete to make a position for themselves by recruiting supporters willing to acknowledge their greatness.” In Haiti, the powerful man who carries political weight is called a gwo né. The status of a “big man” derives to some extent from his performance abilities as a man-of-words. More than that, it is his everyday style and charisma, his personal power, that attracts followers. Writing on the Kono in Africa, Kris Hardin ties leadership to style, raising interesting questions about the relationship of aesthetics to power. “These aspects of social life also rely on questions of charisma, personal style, and the ability to demonstrate power, authority, and knowledge in credible ways.”

The ethos of gwo né leadership in Haiti is permeated with the imagery of ownership, evidenced in the phrase moun pa’m (my person).
The Rara presidents are local *gwo nèg* who actively attract *moun pa’l* (literally, "their people") into relationships of reciprocity wherein they offer protection from other powerful people, potential access to resources, and relationships with other *moun pa’l*. The follower in return offers up his or her loyalty and services. In extreme cases, to resist alliance with the *gwo nèg* threatens one’s very survival. Thus the power of the *gwo nèg* in Haiti operates through his many dependents. Again, this is parallel to the situation among the Yoruba, where "in a fairly flexible social structure where individuals could make their own position for themselves, attendant people were the index of how much support and acknowledgement the man commanded, and thus how important he was."  

Heading up a Rara in the Haitian political context confers on the president the multidirectional power of the *gwo nèg*. By bankrolling and organizing the band, he signals his power in the community. The *fanatik* that he attracts enhances his power as they perform their allegiance through their bodily presence and their singing. The Rara in turn performs for even "bigger men" through *ohan* and augments its collective association with these other powerful figures. Heading a Rara increases the sphere of one’s local political reputation, and by the same token, receiving a Rara is a mark of power and wealth.  

The president may not be involved with the weekly *sòt* of the group, but his identity is known in the community, and often the Rara will gather in his *lakou* for a weekly *balanse Rara* (playing without walking). It is the president who is held accountable for the security of the group. In the case of accidents or deaths in the Rara, the president can be brought before a tribunal (in the Chaṗwèl system) or to district court.  

A band may also be financed and governed by committee, as is the case often in Léogâne, where the Raras are particularly lavish and costly. More often, the president pays the costs of the band, which can include the purchase of instruments, costumes, food, and musicians’ salaries. The religious costs of Rara can also be high, and the *lwa* can demand all-night religious services, protective baths, animal sacrifices, or *manga* made for the occasion. Also there are payments made to the police in the form of parade fees or bribes.  

In more elaborate bands, each committee member has a title describing exactly what his position is to his comrades. Rara Mande Gran Moun (Ask the Elders) in Léogâne had a president, prime minister, second minister, and minister of information. In true bureaucratic style, none ever stepped the bounds of another, and when I interviewed them, each carefully sent me to the next to answer questions which he deemed "out of his jurisdiction." The leadership committees in Léogâne often include absentee members of the Haitian diaspora living in Miami or New York, who send money to the group and join them during Holy Week. Financial patrons like these are sometimes given the honorary titles *pareyu* (godfather) or *mareyu* (godmother) in return for their support.  

Rara members broadcast the reputation of the Rara leader *gwo nèg* and restate their political allegiances to him by performing praise songs in his honor. Many Rara songs are drawn from the vast repertoire of Afro-Haitian religious prayer songs, but each Rara usually has a few original songs created by its own *sanba* and *simidò*, and many of these are advertisements for the leader. In 1992 La Belle Frâcheur de l’Anglade sang that their president, Dieuvè, had all the money he needed and did not need to borrow from anybody.  

*Dieuvè isn’t asking to borrow*  
This year, Oh, They will need him  
*Dieuvè isn’t asking to borrow*  
This year, Oh, They will need him, Papa  
He possesses all that he wants  

*Dieuvè p’ap mande prete*  
*Anè icti O, y’ap bezmen li*  
*Dieuvè p’ap mande prete*  
*Anè icti O, y’ap bezmen’l Papa*  
*Li posede sa’l wle*  

Delen, in contrast, was a Chaṗwèl leader nearby with a notorious reputation for meanness, an ability and inclination to do sorcery against people, and ties with the *tonton makoutas*. La Belle Frâcheur de l’Anglade made the decision to turn down a mountain path and avoid this Rara
altogether. Staying behind to see them, I recorded their praise song to Delen.

Let me go, Delen, Let me go, Let me go
Delen has a Chanpwêl band
I won’t do that work anymore
Let me go

Voye’m ale, voye’m ale Delen, Voye’m ale
Delen gen on bann chanpwêl
M’ pa sa travay ankd
Voye’m ale

A very clear example of Rara patronage was evidenced in the Rara called Ya Sezi. They named their band “They’ll Be Surprised” as a pwen (point), a message against all of their detractors who spread malicious gossip that they were too poor to form a Rara. When a local gwo nég named Papa Dieupê heard them, he adopted them as his personal band. A Chanpwêl leader holding the highest rank of emperor, Papa Dieupê is rumored to be a multimillionaire with hundreds of acres under cultivation. He calls the Rara whenever he wants to augment celebrations at his compound for birthdays, weddings, and religious ceremonies. They made a special trip on Easter of 1993 to sing at his compound for him and his five wives:

We’re arriving in Our Father’s lakou, Oh
[Repeat]
Ring the sacred rattle for me

Nan lakou lepê-a nou rive Wo [Repeat]
Sonnen ason an pou mwen29

In addition to promoting individual gwo nég, Rara songs often boast about the Rara band itself. We encountered Bann Bourgeois de la Lwa outside of Saint Marc in 1993. They were a charyio-pye, a band without instruments that uses their stomping feet as percussion. Their trademark song was about singing itself. It was a rhythmic masterpiece, a fast call and response between the sanba and the chorus.

S: Oh, Look at a song     C: Yal
S: Children, I’m going to sing     C: Yal
S: Children, I’m going to talk     C: Yal

S: Oh, sanba, I’m going to roll out a song     C: Yal
S: Children, I’m going to sing     C: Yal
S: Children, I’m going to talk     C: Yal
S: Oh, sanba, I’m going to roll out a song     C: Yal
S: Children, I’m going to talk     C: Yal
S: O gade on konpa     C: Yal
S: Ti moun yo m’pral chante     C: Yal
S: Ti moun yo m’pral pale     C: Yal
S: O sanba m pral pale     C: Yal
S: Sanba m pral chante     C: Yal
S: Ti moun yo m’pral pale     C: Yal
S: O sanba m pral pale     C: Yal
S: Ti moun yo m’pral pale     C: Yal

This following boasting song by Rara Mande Gran Moun in Lègòâne brags that the sanba are so good people want to kill them.

Gonaïves, I’m not going to stop in Gonaïves
People want to kill us for our song [Repeat]
That’s the maestro standing in front; he’s the leader
He’s the leader [Sing four times]
Let them talk
Mande Gran Moun is Number One
It cannot be stopped
That’s why people want to kill me
People want to eat me for my song
That’s the maestro standing in front; he’s the leader

Gonaïves, mweu pa’p sa rete Gonaïves
Se pou Konpa sa moun yo ole touye non [Repeat]
Se maestro sa ki kanpe devan, se li ka’p kòmanda
Se Li k’ap kòmanda [Sing four times]

Kite yo pale
Mande Gran Moun ki Numbé One
Li p’ap ka rete
Se pou Konpa sa moun yo ole touye mwen
Pou Konpa sa moun yo ole manje mwen
Se maestro sa ki kanpe devan, se li ka’p kòmanda31

Rara bands usually pay annual visits to selected patrons that they know will receive them, in addition to spontaneously performing for new people. In these relationships between local gwo nég, diplomacy is an important activity. Yonker reports a ritualized invitation process: “In a custom
known as ‘bois drapeau’ poles are distributed to potential patrons. If they agree to be patrons, they return the poles with a patterned cloth banner, such as those preceding this band in the Artibonite Valley. The number of such banners proclaims the popularity of the group.32

In Port-au-Prince, a word-of-mouth system lets oungan in the area know that a visit is planned to their oungò so they can be prepared with a contribution. If they intend to be generous with their support, perhaps offering a meal to the musicians, or even a place to spend the night, they will arrange this ahead of time with the Rara leaders. For an oungan who serves a lwa who likes Rara, this is one way to please the lwa. Receiving an entire Rara band is also a way to broadcast one’s wealth and enhance one’s reputation. Gerard reported, “We mostly dance at oungan and manbo’s places. We don’t dance for poor people.”33 In Port-au-Prince’s cemetery neighborhood, one Rara band sent a series of typewritten letters of invitation, asking local oungan and manbo to receive the band. For a festival in which the majority of participants are non-literate, this display of literacy and formal diplomacy was a dramatic event.

Contrary to upper-class and American assumptions that Rara bands are unruly, undisciplined mobs, all bands have rules and regulations that members are penalized for breaking. One such set of rules and regulations for the Bizoton band Vapeur Vin Pou Wè was collected by Gerson Alexis in 1958. Among the stipulations are these:

Article 1: The members of the Association must assemble on the proper days for processions before 8:00 at night, except Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday, when the meetings will be in the mornings: The first day before 8:00, the second day before 9:00, and the last days before 10:00. After these times, late members will pay a fine of 2 gourdes, except in case of illness or by previous arrangement.

Article 6: All members of the band must wear a high hat with blue pants and a yellow shirt, or must pay a fine of 3 gourdes.34

Rara bands are organized local groups with formal ranks, costumes, and rituals, and they conceive of themselves as armies connected to imaginary states that move through territory, carry out armed maneuvers, and conduct diplomatic relations with other groups in the process of their musical celebrations. As local groups under the leadership of “big men,” Rara bands mirror the politics of patronage that have characterized Haiti’s national government. In their performances of maneuvers, diplomacy, and tribute to local notables, Rara bands distribute and redistribute prestige, reputation, and local resources.

The Army Fights: Musical Competition, Mystical Weapons, and Armed Warfare

Haiti is a populous country, so no Rara band is ever the sole performer in its locality. The wider an arc that a kolonel decides to make with his Rara, the more likely it is that it will cross paths with other bands. Rara bands are always aware of each other and constantly compete to have a reputation for the “hottest” music, the best dancers, and the most fanatik. Each Rara band tries in different ways to destroy the others — to krase Rara (literally, “crash the Rara”). Kraze Rara is signaled when a band’s musicians stop playing and cannot get started again, or by a group disbanding altogether. The ultimate victory of one band over another is when the aggressors are able to capture the flag of the band they have “crashed.”

Competition promotes virtuosity and inventiveness, though it is also potentially vicious. The public face of this competitive antagonism takes the form of performed polemics and rivalries. The most famous rivalry in the entire country is perhaps that between Ti-Malis and La Fleur de Rose in Léogâne, where to walk with one means you cannot safely walk in the other, and even Haitians living abroad form opinions about which band is best.35 There are hidden competitions between bands as well, and these entail setting magical traps for one another in an elaborate series of war-game maneuvers. Occasionally the competition takes the form of sabotage such as kidnapping, stealing instruments, and jailing opponents. At the extrême, Rara bands enter into all-out physical battle, in which the strongest of the men fight one another with fists, rocks, clubs, and machetes. The Hôpital St. Croix in Léogâne
assigns extra staff to treat the Rara wounded each year on Easter Week.36

Rara leaders may conduct spiritual or physical warfare for several reasons. They may be settling long-standing feuds, competing for followers, or be involved in complex local political dramas. The downward spiraling of the Haitian economy has pushed increasing numbers of people from the countryside into the capital city’s slums. Many Rara bands come out of these slum neighborhoods and compete for resources, fans, and sheer reputation. Some of the most famous Raras come from Bel Air, a notorious slum that was historically the site of a maroon colony. Known for its fierce practice of the Kongo-based Petwo rites, these Raras are said to keep the slum-dwellers who are not members inside their homes at night.37

The goal of the Rara president, besides fulfilling his obligations to the lwa, is to attract the most followers. To be known as a Rara president is one way to perform one’s status as a gwo nèg and garner its material benefits — more power and therefore more money — as well the religious benefit of being ritually remembered after one’s death.

A very common Rara theme (and indeed a common theme in many Vodou songs) has to do with plots, conspiracies, and enemies waiting to entrap the singer. Rara Modèl in Léogâne sang about this plot against them:

Plot, they’re mounting a plot [Repeat]
Danbala Wedo, they’re mounting a plot
They’re mounting a plot, What will I say to them
We can’t see the people who crash a party
Get away, Get away from them

Konplo, Yo monte konplo [Repeat]
Danbala Wèdo, yo monte konplò-a
Yo monte konplò sa m’a di avè yo
Nou pa vè daso
Dekolo, Dekole sou yo

David Yih perceptively relates these themes of mistrust to the history of Haitian slavery and exploitation:

In the themes, attitudes, and emotional content of the songtexts we can read the response of Vodou to the circumstances under which it came forth. References to bondage, conflict, mistrust, betrayal, persecution, oppression, and war are frequent. These themes are often reflected in recurrent formulas — phrases encountered in several songs in the same or almost the same form.38

In the following Rara song, the threat of kidnaping and bondage is offset by the “talking bad” and bravado of the sanba who would lend his own rope to the kidnappers only to later escape:

They say they’ll tie me up [Sing three times]
Here’s the cord to tie me [Repeat]
When you hear midday ring, I’ll throw down the cord and go

Yo di y’ap mare mwen [Sing three times]
Moun kòd pou mare’m [Repeat]
Kan ou we nidi sone, m’ap lage kòd-la pou’m ale

In his work on the cultural patterns that inform the expressive talent and public performances of African-American men throughout the Caribbean, Roger D. Abrahams has found that verbal dexterity is a much cultivated and prized value and that men-of-words trade on oratory talent as a form of cultural capital as they compete to build reputations. Abrahams describes a multiplicity of West Indian performance troupes, often organized around a captain, who is usually the best performer. They put their talents in full view of the community during events such as Christmas serenading, Christmas mumming plays, Carnival, and Jonkonnu. “In those troupes that involve dancing, acrobatics, or fighting, [the man-of-words] has his equivalent, one we might call the man-of-action, the physically adept one who brings focus to the proceedings by his leadership and performance abilities.”39 Consider this description of the Trinidad Carnival Devil Band in 1956:

There was a reigning beast, a man so dexterous and inventive in his dancing and portrayal of the beast as to be proclaimed best. Each year aspirants for his crown would “challenge him to combat.” The challenge to combat occurred
automatically when the two bands met for the first time. The combat took the form of the execution by the reigning beast of various dance steps which the challenger had to imitate. If he succeeded in imitating them he then executed steps of his own for the reigning beast to imitate. The beast who first failed to imitate the other’s steps lost the contest.40

Similar competitions can be seen in African-American traditions in the United States today. The “Black Indians” of New Orleans Mardi Gras confront one another publicly each year and enter into intense symbolic battles, each man or woman ritually showing parts of their elaborately beaded costume, thereby challenging the opposing “Indian” to “go them one better.” The winner is immediately apparent, judged on the spot by the reactions of onlookers and the demeanor of the two “Indians” themselves. It is not unheard of for the “Black Indian” gangs to fight one another with fists, knives, and guns, and more than one man has lost his life in these intensely competitive processions.41 Breakdancing, capoeira, drag balls, and jazz improvisation are performed challenges within US Black masculine cultures, just as graffiti writing is a visually performed challenge for urban “crews” or gangs.

Rara shares with all these practices a competitive spirit of artistic decoration and performance, but it is perhaps extreme in the way it spiritualizes landscape and uses mystical weapons (including poisons) and in the frequency with which bands fight one another, escalating the competition into violent and dangerous battles. Although it is a form of Black West Indian all-night reputation-enhancing performance associated with “play” values of “foolishness” and “nonsense,” Rara bands are also committed to a level of battle over reputation and territory that marks it as a deadly serious event.

Poisons, powders, and magical weapons
While the musicians and fanatik in Rara are singing their boasting and bragging songs, playing catchy melodies on the banbou, and drumming as hard as they can to create a carnivalesque atmosphere, the leaders are often competing against other bands in an inside world of secret politics. They hold nocturnal meetings and stage elaborate schemes involving espionage and magical warfare against other bands. The fears of Rara leaders about conspiracies against them are well-founded, because the magicians associated with Rara—bokò and secret society leaders—perform rituals meant to weaken and kware other Raras. In the first meeting of the Rara band of the season, the leaders of Rara La Belle Fraicheur de l’Anglade got together and magically “tied up” an enemy Rara general and put him under a rock, weighing him down by magic to drain his power. General Kanep showed me a rock and a whip, explaining:

K: You call the names of all the Rara presidents that you are going up against, and you tie them up so they can’t assault you. You put them underneath you. I named another general, I put him under this rock.
Q: How do you do that ceremony?
K: You name him, and you place him there, and he’s now underneath you. You say, “All those who live, get beneath my feet.”42

A similar practice was reported in the colonial period. In 1758 M. Courtain, judge at the Royal Seat in Cap Français, wrote that “They place the makandal, loaded with curses, under a large stone, and it is indubitable that this brings misfortune to whomever they wish it.”43 “Makandal” was also the name of a slave resistance leader who carried out mass poisonings and magical warfare against slaveowners in the late eighteenth century. His name became the designation for a sort of magic object.

During Rara season, band leaders send scouts to learn the plans of other kolonèl and may decide to avoid or encounter neighboring bands in their weekly ekésis. There are always possibilities for spontaneous encounters as well, because each band will stop and perform at such unplanned opportunities as approaching cars, in addition to performing for patrons scheduled in advance. Even in an unplanned encounter, the music has heralded a band’s approach, and flag bearers who are vigilant have spotted the oncoming flag of the competitor.
The moment when two bands encounter and pass one another is called marij Rara (literally, “Rara marriage”) and is an extremely dangerous and crucial point. Each band faces the challenge of continuing its musical beat and hopes to attract the fans of the other band. When relations are very good between groups, each will stop and perform an ochau, the musical salute reserved for patrons and contributors. If they are enemies, the bands use the moment as an opportunity to try to krase one another and force the other band to stop playing and stop their walk.

Many Rara kolonel are also oungan and bokò, knowledgeable in zam kongo (Kongo weapons) that include wanga, botanical curatives, and toxins. They commonly manufacture pwazon (poisons) and poum (powders) and leave them in crossroads for other Raras to step on. These packages are meant to create “bad air” and confuse the other band, or else lead to sickness. In a skirmish, they administer the poum face-to-face, with a kou’d poum (literally, “hit of powder”) when two bands meet. The aggressor will lift the powder to his lips and blow it into the faces of the men in the opposing Rara. Poum are made of diverse toxins: a variety of poison ivy called pwa grate (itching bean), piman (hot pepper), and other poisonous plants and herbs. It is to the advantage of the Rara leader to boast of having poum, to create a sense of awe in the community about his powers and his willingness to use them. General Gerard enjoyed talking “bad” about his ability to krase other Raras and attract their fanatatik:

Wherever it comes from, wherever it is, if there’s a Rara in Bel Air I’ll “crash” it. I’ll make them carry their drums on their backs and go home. Any Rara I face. My Rara is the biggest Rara here.

As soon as I give them a kou’d poum, they’ll go home. Everybody will run. I’ll turn that band around and everybody in it will follow me. My Rara will become the biggest Rara.44

Poum can reportedly cause burning and rashes on the skin, shortness of breath, blindness, paralysis, and even death. It is considered a serious weapon, and using it has historically been judged a crime.45 The following account, reported to me by a schoolteacher in Beaufort in the Artibonite Valley, ascribes the death of a young man to powder, but a powder that was marked magically only for him:

A: A young man fell in the Rara, and his parents said he had gotten hit with powder. He died. This was in 1981 in Beaufort, in section Jean Denis. The guy who got the kou’d poum was named Lucien. He went to an oungan, and the oungan analyzed it. He said it was powder that killed him.

Q: How long did it take?
A: It was very quick. The same day the guy got sick, he died. After about three hours.

Q: How come only one person got hit?
A: Well, it was a specific guy. He blew the powder in the name of that guy. You know powder is a magical thing. When you blow it in one person’s name, other people aren’t affected.46

To be known as a someone who can manufacture poum and use it in the Rara is to augment one’s reputation as a magician and as a feared member of the community. Karin Barber notes that among the Yoruba, “The Big Man was pictured as rising above the malicious attacks of jealous rivals and at the same time getting away with any attacks he made on them.”47 Surviving these attacks requires each Rara leader to carry antidotes to the powders of others. The members of Rara Brilliant Soleil in Léogâne explained:

It’s the kolonel who knows what to do to go forward or to set traps. There are some Rara that go through a crossroads, and they put some “funny stuff” in the crossroads, to “crash” other Raras who come behind them. The colonel has to have a series of things with him, and he has to be smart enough to smash anything they leave for him, so he can get through.48

Rara leaders boasted about their ability to repair damage done by other Raras’ powders. Gérard says, “If you encounter another Rara, they might blow [powder] on you. In order that
your Rara doesn’t ‘crash,’ you have to walk with your own equipment. Before you even face that Rara, if they know where you’re going to pass, you can lift off anything [traps] they put down for you with your whip. So your Rara doesn’t ‘crash.’”

In 1993 I was able to spend a few nights walking with La Belle Fraîcheur de l’Anglade, with whom I had spent two weeks in 1992. On the route from Tomasini to Kenskoff, high in the mountains above Port-au-Prince, the generals drew up elaborate battle plans, strategizing maneuvers with both friends and foes. Camping for a while with an allied band called Rara La Reine (The Queen’s Rara) I heard them discussing an event that had taken place the night before. It seems that a spy sent from another Rara had walked with us and thrown powder on General Silvera’s horse, trying to kill it. The horse had become sick with fever, but it had recovered, because, they said, the horse was actually mystically dedicated to a lwa.

**Physical fighting**

In both Carnival and Rara, there is always the potential for violence that exists in large public crowds where young men are drinking. In Carnival a fairly serious physical competition called gagann finds two men hurling themselves at each other like roosters, bashing their upper chests together in an effort to knock each other down. Gagann can lead to voszet (strangling; literally, “bow-tie”) and end in outright fights. Other small-scale warfare goes on during Carnival; Mirville reports the use of slingshots as a weapon, and rocks are thrown from time to time. Rara bands sometimes perform at the site of formal physical fighting. In the south of Haiti there are wrestling matches, and onlookers bet on the young men who fight while the Raras play. This goes on presently in Port-au-Prince in the neighborhood of Delmas 31, now called “Cité Jérémie” because five hundred migrants from Jérémie have settled there in the years since 1981.

Violence in Rara can be devastating, especially if two groups plan to fight. Wade Davis describes meeting Andres Celestin, a tonton makout and Bizango president near Saint Marc. “Now he seemed a broken man, lying prostrate on a cot with much of his face swollen and distorted by a sharp blow received, as we would learn later, when two Rara bands had met and clashed several nights previously.” To avoid such violence, Raras’ ministers of war will engage in diplomacy, as Beauvoir and Dominique note: “Often, for example, the groups enter a state of war when they encounter one another. They throw rocks, draw their machetes and fight. To avoid this, they must send a blue flag in front and the ‘Minister of War’ must go ahead and make peace.”

I never witnessed a violent encounter between two Rara bands, but rumors of aggressive incidents were common. On 25 January 1993, the newspaper *Le Nouvelliste* ran this headline: “Confrontation between 2 Foot Bands; Shots Fired in the Air.” Apparently one Carnival band held hostage a musician from another band called Konbit Lakay. The incident was reported in the newspaper only because the military arrived and fired into the air to diffuse the situation. Later that season, two Raras in Pont Sonde came to blows and a man was decapitated by a machete. Someone had died in Rara Saint Rose in a fight in the mountains between Léogâne and Jacmel the year before I arrived. Over the months of my research, I was told many stories of legendary battles between bands involving death, jailings, and ongoing feuds. In 1986, for example, it seems that Rara Rosalie and Rara Rosignol planned a fight; as a result of the battle, two men died, one son of each president. They crossed the two bodies over one another in the street. Five years later the two bands reconciled and invited one another to feasts. Myths spring up about people dying in Rara; more than one man swore to me that he had seen a man decapitated, then saw the body continue to dance as the head, fallen to the ground, kept blowing its trumpet.

This chapter has explored the overarching ethos of militarism that pervades the Rara festival, as bands construct themselves as popular armies and move into public space like battalions prepared for war. Rara bands imagine themselves to be self-organized popular armies, which may be ritualized performances of the peasant armies that played a central role in Haitian political history.
Rara hierarchy and organization reveal how the cultural practices of the Haitian popular classes display and draw attention to the local social order. Like many other popular groups, Raras are ranked in strict hierarchical relationships, displaying and performing the system of patronage that has fueled Haitian politics at all levels through the present day. As traditional peasant groups, Raras can be viewed as the prepolitical forerunners of the contemporary grassroots popular organizations that make up the democratic peasant movement.

Notes
1 Contemporary grassroots peasant organizations include Têt Kole (Heads Together) founded in 1986, MPP (Peasant Movement of Papay) founded in the 1970s, and Soley Leve (The Sun Is Rising) founded in 1990. These organizations represent powerful blocs on the national stage and regularly make headlines in the Haitian Press.
2 Moreau de Saint Mery, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'île S. Dominique.*
5 Roman, "Recherche Sur Un Rara Appele La Meprise a L'arcahaie (Merlotte)."
10 In contrast, as in the *soyete travay*, a member may possess an honorific title without participating in the band at all; in this case the member may be a financial supporter or a landowner who wishes to have a rank but no duties. This sometimes meets the resentment of other band members, who may have lower titles and perform more of the work of the band.
11 President of Mande Gran Moun, interview, March 1993.
19 For this brief outline I owe thanks to my colleague at Yale, René Clerisme, who shared with me his knowledge of traditional culture history and his experience with peasant organizations. This synopsis is borrowed from his article, Clerisme, "Organization," p. 8.
20 Verna Gillis, "Rara in Haiti, Gaga in the Dominican Republic," liner notes to the album of the same name, Folksways Records Album No. FE 4531, 1978, p. 4.
21 At the present writing, the public living-room area in the headquarters of the US Embassy marine guard displays a series of photographs of Americans leading captive Cacos out of the bush, thus visually reinscribing for newly arrived marines their roles as dominators of the Haitian popular classes. I saw the photos at one of their Friday “open-house” gatherings for expatriate Americans in 1993, before the 1995 US inter-vision.


29 Recorded 11 April 1993, Verettes. Another song by Ya Seizi is on a recording compiled by this author; see Artists, Rhythms of Rapture.


32 Yonker, “Haiti after the Fall.”

33 President Gerard of Rara Etoile Salomon, interview, Port-au-Prince, 7 April 1992.


35 Videotapes of Rara in Légâne circulate throughout New York City and Miami, giving Haitians in those two US cities the annual opportunity to hear the songs. Légâne is the town best known for Rara in Haiti; each band sponsors a feast, called car, during Lent and invites others. Then on Easter weekend bands all over the south converge between Carrefour du Fort and Légâne for competition. Many Port-au-Prince youth and returning diaspora members go to Légâne specially for Rara; it has become one of the cyclical tourist spots for the mobile Port-

au-Prince dweller. The Rara scene in Légâne is complex and populous and deserves a monograph on its own in the future.


39 Abrahams, The Man-of-Words in the West Indies, p. xvi.

40 Cited in ibid. See also Nunley and Bettelheim, Caribbean Festival Arts.


44 President of Rara Etoile Salomon, interview, Port-au-Prince, 7 April 1992.

45 Moreau de Saint Mery, Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l’île S. Dominique.

46 Beaufort schoolteacher, interview, 27 March 1993.


49 President of Rara Etoile Salomon, interview, Port-au-Prince, 7 April 1992.


51 Wilfred, interview, Rue Xaragua, April 1993.


54 Father Jean-Yves Urfie, editor of Newspaper Libéte, personal communication, Pont-Sonde, April 1993.

55 President of Rara Saint Rose, interview, February 1993.

References


