

## 8 | Competition, Conflict, and Cooperation

### Haitian *Rara*

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When *Rara* bands in Léogâne, Haiti take to the streets and process through the night playing music, they are followed by a retinue of boisterous – sometimes belligerent – and enthusiastic fans who proclaim their allegiance to their respective bands. Called *fanatik*, these fans have strong attachments to their favourite bands and even stronger feelings about rival organisations who, in their words, ‘they are not good with’ (*yo pa byen ave yo*). These rivalries extend beyond the *Rara* season when members argue over which band has the best music, lyrics, or dancing. Such clashes are so common that they are the subject of *Rara* song lyrics as well as folklore about *Rara* celebrations of the past.

Competition is one of the defining characteristics of Haitian *Rara*, a Lenten religious festival that features marching bands, dancers, feasts, and Vodou rituals. This chapter will examine the role of competition in *Rara* celebrations in the Haitian city of Léogâne, located thirty kilometers west of Haiti’s capital, Port-au-Prince. I will argue that in order to understand the complex role of competition in Haitian *Rara*, it is necessary to take into consideration how competition serves to mediate conflict and to encourage cooperation between rival groups. By looking at conflict and cooperation as dimensions of competition, it is possible to understand how Haitians navigate the complex social terrain of *Rara* using both confrontational and collaborative techniques.

Competition also serves to engage participants in a community activity that encourages group celebration while providing an outlet for disagreements. Relationships between bands are understood by local residents to be volatile, yet community members also plan their celebratory activities around these conflicts, taking pleasure in voicing their unique musical expressions in contrast with their enemies.

In Léogâne during Lent, bands are in musical and rhetorical competition with each other, each band claiming their superiority over their rivals. One

form of competitive activity that has been used in Léogâne is the *Rara* song competition, in which dozens of bands in the area compete for the title of best song for the *Rara* season. These competitions are perhaps better understood as ‘contests’ since they not only feature bands trying to assert their superiority over their rivals, but also include the ‘contested’ nature of such an event; losers often challenge the judges’ decisions informally among their supporters.<sup>1</sup>

For *Rara* bands with a strong local reputation for good music making, conflicts with other bands can span many years and carry high degrees of antipathy. For example, Rara Ti Malis (The *Rara* of the Clever Children in Hiding) has been in a feud with another band for more than half of its 100-year history. Members of Ti Malis claim that in 1954, a rival band called Rara Laflè di Wòz (Rose Flower *Rara* or simply ‘Laflè’) invaded their *lakou* or village compound and carried out a raid that left Ti Malis headquarters in shambles and several members injured; folklore around the event alleges that that members of Laflè were so brutal that they impaled infants on machetes.<sup>2</sup> Ti Malis commemorated the attack with a song titled ‘Senkantkat’ (Fifty-Four) that makes strong accusations against Laflè that serve to fuel the bands’ rivalry. The lyrics to the song enumerate the alleged atrocities Laflè committed and ominously ‘judges’ the members of Laflè.

Sonje en sentkantkat o  
 Yo brile kay mwen  
 Yo voye m Ti Gwav  
 M a jije yo  
 Ou vole kabann mwen  
 Ou vole kochon mwen

Remember in 1954, o  
 They burned my house  
 They sent me to Petit Goâve [a nearby seaside town]  
 I will judge them  
 You stole my bed  
 You stole my pigs

(Largey 2000, 249)

<sup>1</sup> Many of the sources on musical competition focus exclusively on musical contests. One of the most popularly studied musical contests is the Eurovision Song Contest (Fricker and Gluhovic 2013; Raykoff and Tobin 2007; Tragaki 2013). Other works include considerations of musical contests as part of a larger investigation into musical life (Miller 2007, chap. 4; Scales 2012, chap. 1).

<sup>2</sup> There is no evidence that Rara Laflè committed such acts of brutality, but the folklore persists just the same.

The song leaves out the most outrageous accusations of wanton child murder, but the charges of arson, exile, and larceny nevertheless cast the members of Laflè as heartless criminals. The contempt in which members of Ti Malis hold Laflè extends to other bands aligned with Laflè like Rara Modèl d'Haïti (or Modèl) and Rara Wozoli, who express similar levels of disdain for the music, lyrics, and dancing of Ti Malis.

In its capacity to instill contempt toward rival bands, *Rara* competition is different from other musical competitions that focus squarely on music sound. In her description of the world of international piano competitions, sociologist Lisa McCormick described international competitions in classical music as attempting to 'bridge music and civility' by engaging artists in a formal challenge with strict rules and expected modes of conduct (McCormick 2015, 5). In contrast, *Rara* competitions are waged on multiple fronts with heated rhetoric, sometimes violent clashes between bands, and furious musical confrontations in street processions during Lent.

*Rara* rivalries reflect local geographic conflicts in the area around Léogâne with bands using music and religious rituals to defend their territory. Religious studies specialist Elizabeth McAlister has analysed the *Rara* band phenomenon as akin to an army in which *Rara* soldiers march in defense of their territory and honour pushing back adversaries with their sonic weapons (McAlister 2002). McAlister notes that historically, 'peasant armies incorporated music into the work of fighting' (McAlister 2002, 140) and that it is likely that as early as the nineteenth century, lower-class Haitians 'organised themselves into armed groups to defend their interests' (141). Such armies – like the *piquets* peasant armies of the 1840s and the *cacos* guerrillas of the 1910s – positioned themselves as defenders of their communities. Rara Ti Malis, for example, was formed in 1916 during the early days of the United States' occupation of Haiti (1915–34) when US troops assumed control of the Haitian legislature, judiciary, and commercial sphere. Since then, Ti Malis has positioned itself as a defender of Haitian sovereignty in general and of the Kansany neighbourhood in Léogâne in particular.

Defense of a band's territory can range from musical contests to outright hostility between groups. As I observed in an earlier study of *Rara*, rival bands may fight with one another using their hands, rocks, or other weapons (Largey 2000, 244). Such battles, however, take place in the context of an outdoor festival that features copious alcohol consumption and tale-telling that emphasises conflict over cooperation. Yet in recent years, this animosity has been expressed in less physical ways. McAlister reported that while she had heard numerous reports of band skirmishes,

she herself had never witnessed a physical confrontation between bands (McAlister 2002, 155). Both McAlister and I have reported that Hôpital Sainte Croix, the main hospital in Léogâne, put extra medical staff on call during *Rara* season to deal with an anticipated surge of injuries among *Rara* participants, but the hospital stopped the practice after a couple of years when the number of injuries turned out to be no higher than usual during the Easter season (Largey 2000, 244; McAlister 2002, 148).

In short, the folklore of conflict tends to emphasise physical violence while the actual experience of band members during *Rara* tends toward rhetorical battles. A member of Rara Ti Malis named Yves Saint-Cyr told me that he thought the degree of fighting had diminished over the years. He thought that that the rise of youth participation in *Rara* had something to do with it; that young people who have a chance to go to school were less interested in getting drunk and fighting and prefer to reconcile with others. Still, Yves said, 'Nou pa goumen, men nou pa byen' (We don't fight, but we don't get along either).<sup>3</sup>

Some of the rhetorical conflict between bands is fuelled by participants' intense identification with their favourite band. Since bands draw most of their participants from their local neighbourhoods, their members are often from the same family or are long-time neighbours whose loyalties to their band go back several generations. People identify themselves, in the case of Rara Ti Malis, as 'moun Ti Malis' or 'Ti Malis people' who profess a love for their band and animosity toward their rival, Laflè. The pressure to align oneself with a specific band extends to visitors to Léogâne as well: in my travels to Léogâne during Lent, I worked exclusively with Rara Ti Malis and, as a result, have been referred to by Léogâne residents as 'blan Ti Malis' or 'foreigner [who follows] Ti Malis'.<sup>4</sup>

Another source of conflict for *Rara* is its relationship with the Catholic Church. *Rara* happens during Lent, so devout Catholics and enthusiastic *Rara* participants each use the streets of Léogâne for their religious processions. For Catholics, the most important day for religious processions is Good Friday (*Vendredi Sen*) when the local church sponsors the *Chemen Kwa*, or Stations of the Cross. Local parishioners process through the streets, tracing Jesus's final steps and contemplating Christ's suffering at each of the fourteen stations set up to chronicle his march to Calvary. Those who choose not to participate in *Rara* for religious reasons usually do so out of fear as much as animosity: for some who reject *Rara*, the

<sup>3</sup> Yves St.-Cyr, interview with the author, Léogâne, Haiti, 12 December 1995.

<sup>4</sup> The word 'blan' means 'white', but is usually used when referring to a foreigner.

procession and its music represent a threat to their own spiritual well-being. One elderly Haitian I interviewed in Port-au-Prince told me that, as a child, his devout Methodist parents would close the windows and have him and his siblings read aloud from the Bible in order to counter the effect of the music of the *Rara* bands. Today, church-affiliated radio stations do not play music associated with *Rara* and many church-going Léogâne residents avoid the street marches during *Rara*.

Christian and Vodou practitioners do not march together during Lent, but they do cooperate enough to share the streets in the weeks before Easter. The *Chemèn Kwa* is held during the morning hours of Good Friday, before the temperature gets too hot. *Rara* participants take to the streets as the sun sets, taking advantage of the cooler evening hours and avoiding their spiritual competitors from the local Catholic church.

Easter is a spiritually significant time for all Haitians, but for Vodou practitioners, bringing their celebrations outside of the temple and into the street poses extra challenges to band members and their followers. Bands have elaborate rituals to protect themselves from rivals, including magical practices that might impede their rivals' movement through the streets. For example, on Good Friday in 2000, before taking to the streets for their procession, members of Rara Ti Malis gathered at the foot of Mapou Pakwa, a large silk-cottonwood tree in the middle of a sugar cane field for a brief religious ceremony. Cébien Briochet, the *doktè fèy* or 'leaf doctor' for Ti Malis, had prepared a mixture of herbs and *klerin* (sugar cane liquor), which was rubbed on the arms and faces of members of the band for protection from malevolent spiritual forces.

Despite the rhetorical animosity between rival bands, there is a core of cooperative effort in Léogâne *Rara* celebrations that binds bands together. Perhaps the most compelling example of Haitian community solidarity that has had a shaping influence on *Rara* is the practice of cooperative work teams or *konbit*. Rural workers often work together to harvest crops in a *konbit*, coordinating their labour with music provided by the single-note bamboo trumpet known as a *vaksin*; a snare drum called a *kès*; a single-headed animal-skinned covered drum known as a *tanbou*; and a struck piece of metal, such as a hoe-blade, called an *ogan*; these are instruments that are all commonly found in *Rara* bands. The music of the *konbit* encourages the workers to stay focused on their task and alleviates fatigue by making the physical motions of farming feel more enjoyable in much the same way that the music of the *Rara* band sustains participants on their all-night parades in the Léogâne area. While *konbit* and *Rara* are two different activities – *konbit* lacks the religious dimensions of *Rara* – they

both emphasise group solidarity and cooperation, qualities that are essential for any collaborative effort.

*Rara* bands engage in several other cooperative rituals that underscore community values and mutual respect. One such ritual is the practice of *kav* or rotating feasts. During the *Rara* season, bands host each other on their respective feast days – Ti Malis hosts their *kav* on the weekend before Easter. In anticipation of their *kav*, bands prepare large amounts of food and drink to feed bands that visit their headquarters. On the Saturday and Sunday before Easter in 1997, for example, some members of Ti Malis slaughtered a steer and prepared a meal of beef in sauce, *diri ak pwa kole* (rice and beans ‘stuck together’), and a salad of lettuce, tomatoes, and onions, along with plenty of local Prestige beer, bottles of ‘kola’, or soft drinks and Juna-brand juice for their guests. Of the eighteen bands that visited Ti Malis that weekend, most stayed overnight on Saturday, sleeping on the ground and in the *peristil*, the covered dancing area of the Vodou temple.

Mobile bands that want to ‘visit’ a host band on their home territory must ask permission to enter the sacred space of the *lakou* or village compound where the host band is located. According to leaf doctor Cebien Briochet, the behaviour of visiting bands is an extension of the relationship between the visiting band and the spirits of the *lakou* they visit.<sup>5</sup> *Lakou* are small groups of houses that are occupied by members of an extended family and serve as a centre of family activities and spiritual duties. Each *lakou* has its own *demanbre*, or ancestral Vodou dwelling, in which family ancestors are venerated and consulted on matters of spiritual concern.

In the song ‘Demanbre’, members of Ti Malis draw attention to this theme of mutual respect by linking the conflicts of the present with the historical Haitian struggle for freedom in the war for independence. By calling on the heroes of the Haitian Revolution – the first Haitian president, Jean Jacques Dessalines; the Haitian general Toussaint Louverture; and the enslaved Vodou priest Boukman Dutty who allegedly signalled the start of the revolution in 1791 with a Vodou ceremony at Bwa Kayiman – Ti Malis takes historical figures who did not initially work together and casts them in a mythical effort to put the needs of Haiti before all else.

Nan domi, mwen te ale nan demanbre  
Mwen jwenn Desalin, Touden, Boukman o

<sup>5</sup> Cebien Briochet, interview with the author, Léogâne, Haiti, 24 March 1997.

Ape mande, sa kab sove peyi a  
 Yo di m se tèt kole, men nan la men, way o  
 Ki ka sove peyi a

In my sleep, I went into the Vodou dwelling devoted to the ancestors  
 I found Dessalines, Toussaint, Boukman  
 I was asking them, 'What can save the country?'  
 They said it's putting our heads together, hand in hand,  
 That will save the country

(Largey 2000, 250)

By calling for people to put their 'heads together, hand in hand', the heroes of the Haitian Revolution legitimise the efforts of contemporary Haitians to put aside their differences and cooperate with one another for the good of the nation. Using Dessalines, Toussaint, and Boukman in their *Rara* song, the members of Ti Malis also draw listeners' attention to their shared duties as participants in Haiti's ongoing struggle in a global environment that has not respected Haiti's sovereignty.

*Rara* 'armies' not only symbolically defend the nation, they also engage in the formal rituals associated with military honour and respect. One such ritual is the practice of *ochan*, or the field salute. Taking its name from the French '*aux champs*' or 'to the battlefield', the *ochan* enacts what Elizabeth McAlister calls the 'patron-client relationship' in which band members pay their respects to important people with a musical salute that draws its style from European military drumming style (McAlister 2002, 51). In 1996, I witnessed an *ochan* performed by Rara Ti Malis at the home of the band's *prezidan* or president, Maurice Moriset. Followers of the band waved their hats in the air to join the salute while the *majò jon* or baton twirlers blessed members of the band and the audience by passing their batons around people's necks. When *majò jon* bless people in the crowd, they draw upon the spiritual energy infused in their batons through a *batèm jon* (baton baptism). From the *ochan* to the *batèm jon*, *Rara* bands cooperate with each other through rituals that show their mutually friendly positions.

Even bands that do not get along with each other have public, performative ways to work out their differences. Local radio stations provide opportunities for members of rival bands to sit down and talk with one another about their shared concerns for the upcoming *Rara* season. For example, on 5 April 1996, local station Radio Anacaona hosted a panel discussion with leaders from several established bands, including Calixte Bonheur of

Rara Chen Mechan (Bad Dog *Rara*), George Gilles of Rara Lafè di Woz, Reynolds Paraison of Rara Ti Malis, and Kesner 'Nene' Roumain of Rara Sacre Coeur (Sacred Heart *Rara*). All of the *Rara* representatives agreed that bands should endeavour not to fight with one another, that they should treat each other with respect, and that they should not carry weapons. Reynolds Paraison added that 'tout *Rara* se sè' (all *Rara* [bands] are sisters), thus demonstrating that, despite their disagreements, *Rara* members had a responsibility to keep their conflicts with each other under control during the celebration (Largey 2014, 109). Their mutual agreement was all the more noteworthy considering the intractable feud between Lafè and Ti Malis. The two bands could not encounter each other on the streets of Léogâne without conflict, yet they were able to join forces over the radio to send a message of unity and collaboration to their fellow citizens.

Despite *Rara's* reputation for violent clashes, even Léogâne residents who do not participate in *Rara* recognise its power to bring people together. In 2000, a group of about fifteen young men formed an acapella singing group called 'Anwo' (or 'Above', which the group translated into English as 'Upstairs'). They sang a song titled 'Place Anacaona' about the entryway to the city of Léogâne where the *defile* or *Rara* procession takes place every year. In the song's refrain, the members of Anwo list several activities that promote the values of all Léogâne citizens.

Sa kab sove Yogann, se lekòl  
 Sa kab sove Yogann, se futbòl  
 Sa kab sove Yogann, se Rara  
 Sa kab sove Yogann, plante pye bwa

What can save Léogâne, it's school  
 What can save Léogâne, it's soccer  
 What can save Léogâne, it's *Rara*  
 What can save Léogâne, planting trees

Calling Léogâne by its local name 'Yogann', the song enumerates those activities that all citizens agree benefit everyone equally in the community: education, sports, reforestation, and *Rara*. The young men in Anwo were not *Rara* musicians themselves, but they saw *Rara* as an example of local culture that was in line with the improvements they were advocating in their uplifting music.<sup>6</sup>

One of the best examples of musical collaboration between bands came in 2000 when several groups, including Rara Sainte Thèrese, Rara Wozoli,

<sup>6</sup> See Dirksen (2013) for examples of how local Haitian activism is accompanied by music.



Rara Chenn Tomarin, Rara Ti Raye de Boursan, and Rara Modèl d'Haïti collectively recorded a CD titled *Rara Léogâne*. Previously, bands had relied on their fans to record *Rara* road marches using portable boomboxes carried on participants' shoulders. Called 'souvenirs', these recordings picked up the ambient sounds of the procession including shouting voices and traffic noise. When *Rara Léogâne* was released, it was the first time that rival bands had worked together to produce a professionally mastered recording free from the incidental sounds of the street. Unfortunately, the collaboration that produced *Rara Léogâne* was short-lived: in 2002, Rara Modèl d'Haïti released their own recording titled *Rasin'n San Bout't* (Haitian Roots) and suddenly, *Rara* bands' earlier collaboration transformed into a furious competition to see which band could release its own recordings first. In 2005, Rara Ti Malis released their own CD titled *Pasyon Malis* (*The Passion of Malis*) which referenced Ti Malis's passion for *Rara* as well as the Passion of Christ. Other bands have since made their own recordings, so the likelihood of a collaborative CD project like *Rara Léogâne* happening again is small. Still, bands find other ways to collaborate, especially when the goals for cooperation are for the good of the entire community.

In Haitian electoral politics, *Rara* serves as the soundtrack of political competition. During election seasons, Léogâne politicians often hire *Rara* bands to sing songs in support of their candidacies. In 1995, for example, Leon Jeune was a candidate for the Clef (or 'Key') Party and was interested in hiring Rara Ti Malis to perform in support of his campaign: Jeune paid \$3,000 for the band's services. While *Rara* bands will play in support of presidential candidates for a hefty price, they are more willing to play for local candidates for a reduced fee (and sometimes for free, depending on the candidate's relationship with the band's leadership). Members of Rara Ti Malis told me in 1995 that money was not the only motivation for *Rara* band participation in political rallies: political candidates had to be well liked by the leadership of the band.

Even though *Rara* bands are active in the promotion of political candidates, tensions between bands and their elected officials can flare suddenly, especially when the support of *Rara* is at stake. One common point of contention between local politicians and *Rara* participants is the fear of violence during the *Rara* season: frequently, rumours circulate in Léogâne that the local government will crack down on fighting between bands. In the 1998 *Rara* season, for example, there was a rumour that the mayor of Léogâne had forbidden fighting between bands, that the *kolonèl* and *prezidan* of each respective band would be held responsible for any fighting

that emerged in spite of the injunction, resulting in prison and lost *Rara* privileges for a period of ten years.<sup>7</sup> Although the threat of punishment was just a rumour, it was so widely circulated that many individuals I spoke to in 1998 thought that it was actually in force. Local folklore about jailed individuals turned out not to be true, but the ubiquity of such tales was an indicator of Léogâne citizens' willingness to see their local politicians as adversaries of *Rara*.

Despite this particular incident, the relationships between most local politicians and *Rara* bands range from the cordial to the fanatical. Local officials understand the importance of maintaining friendly relationships with all of the bands in the Léogâne area and go out of their way to foster goodwill with *Rara* bands. The mayor of Léogâne, for example, is responsible for organising the contests for best reviewing stand decorations, best bands, and best *majo jòn*. Prize money for the 1998 season totaled 80,000 gourdes (about \$16,000), so bands are deeply invested in recovering some of their expenses in the form of cash prizes.

Bands may have rivalries with other local bands, but all *Rara* bands are united in their defense of the city of Léogâne, especially in the face of criticism from outsiders and from the Haitian government. Such criticism usually centres around the use of brass instruments in Léogâne *Rara*, which is seen by those outside the city as a non-traditional practice. In other parts of Haiti, music for *Rara* processions is provided by the animal-skin covered drums, bamboo trumpets, shakers, scrapers, and snare drums, the same instruments used in the *konbit* cooperative labour team. In Léogâne, bands use these instruments, but add not only a handmade tin horn called a *konè*, but also trumpets, trombones, baritone horns, and sousaphones – instruments usually associated with band traditions that end before Lent. For some non-Léogâne *Rara* enthusiasts, the use of brass instruments has prompted criticism of Léogâne *Rara* as being inauthentic and 'non-traditional'.

Some local politicians have used this accusation of Léogâne *Rara* as non-traditional as a point of criticism and have paid a price with voters as a result. For example, on 27 March 1997 Max Vaillant, a local politician gave an interview on a call-in talk program on Léogâne's Radio Anacaona saying '*Rara pèdi rasin ni*' (*Rara* has lost its roots) by using brass instruments that are usually associated with carnival

<sup>7</sup> The *kolonèl* in a *Rara* band leads the procession with a whip and a whistle; the *prezidan* is the 'president' of the band and is responsible for donating and raising money for the band's expenses.

traditions. Reactions to Vaillant's criticism of *Rara* was swift and vociferous: callers severely criticised Vaillant for his comments and called for his removal from office.

Vaillant's comments helped crystallise a prevailing sentiment in Léogâne that the city's *Rara* bands were a unique art form and that to question their authenticity was to raise doubts about the city's most important symbol of identity. As a result, politicians who dared criticise Léogâne's legacy of *Rara* found themselves battling with a united front of *Rara* bands, each of which put aside their competitive disputes and came together to push back against criticism of their traditions.

Perhaps the best example of politicians instigating a conflict with *Rara* bands came on 23 March 2002 the Saturday before Palm Sunday, when Marie Antoinette Gauthier, a delegate from Haiti's Department of the West, said in a radio interview on Radio Anacaona that Léogâne did not have 'real' *Rara* because it used brass instruments in addition to the drums and bamboo instruments. The host of the programme lost his temper and said to Mme Gauthier that the people of Léogâne would defend *Rara* 'to the death' if necessary (Largey 2012, 169).

On 29 March 2002 – Good Friday – members from many Léogâne *Rara* bands met at the mayor's office to discuss how to respond to Mme Gauthier's affront to their traditions. The mayor began the meeting by telling the assembled band representatives that the government in Port-au-Prince had not yet given a 'single gourde' to support the efforts his office was making to clean up Léogâne and to decorate Place Anacaona for the *defile*, or procession, scheduled for Easter Sunday evening.<sup>8</sup> The mayor also explained that the new prime minister of Haiti, Yves Neptune, was unfamiliar with *Rara* and that his office was closed until Monday after Easter, so any discussions of government payments for *Rara* festivities would have to wait until after the holiday was over.

Once he had explained the situation to the bands' representatives, the mayor asked for questions. Willy Laurent, the secretary general for Rara Ti Malis, was the first to speak: he suggested that the *Rara* bands refuse to participate in the procession until the government agreed to pay. Representatives of Rara Wozoli, Rara Sacre Coeur, and Rara Sainte Thèrese disagreed – they thought since the mayor had already built the reviewing stand, the rest of the bands should participate. The

<sup>8</sup> The gourde is the official currency in Haiti. The official exchange rate for one gourde is about \$0.20, but rampant inflation and black-market currency exchanges lower the value of the gourde to much less than \$0.20.

representative of Laffè disagreed with their assessment and said, 'We're not *klerin*-drinking, banana-tree planting peasants, we should have the respect of the government'.<sup>9</sup> At that point, a member of Rara Mande Granmoun (Ask the Elders *Rara*) complained that the conflict was simply political and asked rhetorically, 'Eske nou fò, ou fèb?' (Are we strong, or weak?) and pressed for a boycott of the festivities. After a protracted and noisy exchange among all of the participants, the Rara Mande Granmoun representative reminded the crowd, 'We have weapons – our voting ballots'.

On Easter Sunday 2002, the *Rara* bands made good on their pledge to boycott the procession on Place Anacaona. With the exception of a few children's *Rara* bands, the area in front of the mayor's reviewing stand was empty for the entire Easter Sunday procession. The riotous sounds of *Rara* bands in other parts of the city echoed in front of the government's reviewing stand with only a few lost stragglers standing in the street.

During the 2003 *Rara* season, the government learned from the mistakes they made in 2002 and aggressively courted locals with a campaign of engagement. Mme Gauthier, who in 2002 was conspicuously absent from the celebration in Léogâne, made numerous visits to *Rara* reviewing stands in the area. On Saturday, 19 April 2003 I encountered Mme Gauthier community of Trouin, located about an hour south of Léogâne. She had come to distribute gifts to the visiting *Rara* bands in the role of patron in the patron–client exchange. She had kerosene lanterns, calendars with images of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and large posters promoting the government's literacy campaign. Mme Gauthier held a megaphone and shouted to the crowd that the lanterns were supposed to light the way in the darkness as well as provide light for those who were learning to read.

It was clear from the demeanour of the government officials that they considered this to be a routine political rally, but the members of the visiting *Rara* bands took the opportunity to let Mme Gauthier and her colleagues know that they were the government's political rivals in some respects. One of the band leaders asked Mme Gauthier for her bullhorn and she obliged him, likely believing that the *Rara* leader would praise the government for the token gifts Mme Gauthier had brought. Instead, the band leader excoriated the government, saying among other things that the government promises much but delivers little. He shouted, 'Pa gen wout, pa gen lekòl, pa genyen!' ([We] don't have roads, [we] don't have

<sup>9</sup> *Klerin* is unrefined rum that is popular among less affluent Haitians.

schools, [we] don't have [anything]!). Mme Gauthier quickly regained control of the bullhorn and assured the man (and the crowd) that the government 'ap chita ave nou pou nou pale' ([The government] is going to sit down with you so we can talk).

The exchange between Mme Gauthier and the disgruntled *Rara* leader was the first time that I had ever witnessed a direct confrontation of someone in political power in Haiti by someone who was an ordinary citizen. Normally, a person of the *Rara* leader's modest social position would never have the opportunity to challenge someone in power, especially in a public forum. Mme Gauthier's measured response to the man's challenge, coupled with her assurance that she would 'sit down and talk' in order to understand his grievances, signalled some recognition on her part that her own political authority was being confronted by an equally formidable opponent: the power of the *Rara* community.

From the *Rara* 'contests' in which bands compete for bragging rights for best song to the political confrontations that are made possible between ordinary citizens and the Haitian federal government, *Rara* provides an outlet for people to assert themselves as full participants in local life. Competition – with its twin strategies of conflict and collaboration – empowers participants to negotiate their relative positions with each other and with those in political power. At its best, *Rara* competition allows people to challenge their subordinated status in Haitian society by evoking a religious practice that is recognised as a powerful symbol of Haitian culture.

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- Raykoff, Ivan, and Robert Tobin, eds. 2007. *A Song for Europe: Popular Music and the Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing.
- Scales, Christopher A. 2012. *Recording Culture: Powwow Music and the Aboriginal Recording Industry on the Northern Plains*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Tragaki, Dafni, ed. 2013. *Empire of Song: Europe and Nation in the Eurovision Song Contest*. Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press.

### Further Reading and Listening

- Angels in the Mirror: Vodou Music of Haiti*. 1997. Produced by Holly Nicolas, Yuen-Mind David Yih, and Elizabeth McAlister. Ellipsis Arts, CD 4120. CD with fifty-six pages of notes in English (with Haitian Kreyol song text and glossary) and two b/w and thirty-four colour photographs of performers, ritual art, and Haitian life by Chantal Regnault. Bibliography (five entries) and discography (five entries). Thirteen tracks recorded in the field. 66'45.
- Landies, Maurea E. 2009. *The Band Carries Medicine: Music, Healing, and Community in Haitian/Dominican Rara/Gagá*. PhD dissertation, Columbia University.
- Rhythms of Rapture: Sacred Musics of Haitian Vodou*. 1995. Produced by Elizabeth McAlister. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, SF CD 40464. CD with twenty pages of notes in English (with song texts in Haitian Kreyol) and four b/w photographs of performers. Bibliography (six entries) and discography (eighteen entries). Twenty tracks recorded in the field and studio, plus excerpts from commercial recordings. 57'52.
- Robins, Jeremy and Magali Damas. 2010. *The Other Side of the Water: The Journey of a Haitian Rara Band in Brooklyn*. Ibis Productions, Inc. DVD. 72 minutes. Color.