Siméline Rangon and Oral Tradition

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Siméline Rangon (1925-2008) was one of the great singers of Martinique, and one of the few women lead singers in traditional Martinican music. I had the privilege of knowing and working with her in Martinique, an island in the Caribbean, in 1993-95, when I was a member of her group Bel Alians ("good alliance").

Everyone called Siméline Rangon "Man Sim." "Man" is short for *manman*, the Creole form of Madame, so "Man Sim" is both a respectful address and a nickname. Man Sim was born in 1925 in the rural Rècoulé district near the town of Ste-Marie, where she still lived when I knew her. She had only a few years of schooling, working in the cane fields and on banana plantations from the age of thirteen. When young she and her mother often walked from Sainte-Marie to Fort-de-France to sell produce in the market, carrying their vegetables on their heads, along dirt roads over the mountains, starting at 10 p.m. and arriving the following morning. At about thirteen Man Sim began singing in public. She had no instruction in singing, she told me: "I just make things up. I don't read or write, so I just make things up on the spot." She also had a huge repertoire of traditional songs. Her reputation as a singer was based on several factors: her strong voice, emotional immediacy, and rhythmic subtlety; her invention of lyrics reflecting both social and personal events; her immense knowledge; her wit. (Much of her conversation consisted of sly jokes and double-entendres.) In her youth she was also noted as a dancer, although health problems have kept her from dancing publicly for some years.

Bel Alians performed the music and dance style *bèlè*, a heritage of Martinique's centuries of black slavery. Bèlè songs are in the Creole language, a mixture of (mainly) French vocabulary with elements of African grammar. Music is provided by *tibwa*, a pair of sticks playing a fixed supporting part (this was my job in Bel Alians); and *tanbou*, a drum that plays the rhythm of dancers' steps as well as cueing changes in the choreography. Interestingly, much of the choreography comes from colonial French dances: *quadrille* (square dancing) and *contradanse* (line dancing). So bèlè is itself a creole, or hybrid, art form.

Before we listen to some of Man Sim's music, let's think about how an unlettered singer in an oral tradition sings. How did she remember a huge number of songs? How did she invent new ones? What was the relation between tradition and creativity in her mind?

Obviously, Man Sim's repertoire was too big for her to have completely memorized it. In any case, she never sang the same song twice in exactly the same way. On the other hand, there was a good deal of consistency between one night's version of a song and another's, so memory was involved in some way. The fact that Man Sim could sing for an hour or an hour-and-a-half without repeating songs also suggests that memory was involved: she couldn't possibly have made things up the whole time.

So Man Sim's art included elements of both memorization and invention. It lay in between something entirely fixed and something entirely improvised. This is important, because people who are used to thinking of music as something written down, and played just as it's written, often draw an overly clear distinction between "composed" and "improvised." If it's not completely written down, they imagine, then it must be completely made up on the spot. In fact, most music all over the world falls in between these two extremes, neither entirely precomposed nor entirely improvised. This includes both oral and written styles. (If you're wondering in what sense written music is "open," there are at least

three things to consider: writing never specifies all the details of performance; a good performer brings a personal interpretation to the music; and most professional performers play largely from memory, using the written music only for occasional prompting.)

In the 1930s two British professors, classicist Milman Parry and folklorist Albert Lord, became interested in living Greek and Balkan epic singers. These singers, accompanying themselves on harp or *gusle* one-stringed fiddle, often sang poems of immense length, on the order of ten or twenty thousand lines and taking several evenings to perform. They reasoned that the ancient epics of Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, were probably invented and performed in the same manner, before they eventually were written down in the form we know them. They traveled to Greece and Bulgaria and worked with epic singers, and eventually came up with the "oral formula" theory. (See Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, 1960, for a summary of Parry and Lord's research.) The theory works like this:

The epics are too long to memorize, and anyway singers don't sing them in the same way every time. Instead, they work with "formulas," which you can think of as slots into which any of several related ideas can be inserted. For example, if a singer is about to mention the goddess Athena, he will fill out her name with one of several stock descriptions: "owl-eyed Athena," "dark-haired Athena," "clever Athena." Notice that each description is two syllables long. In Greek and Balkan epic singing this is important, because every line of a poem has to have a certain number of syllables. The poet knows the word "Athena" is coming up, senses that there is a space of two syllables to fill, and his mind provides one of the stock formulas to fill the space. If the upcoming space is three syllables long, he has another set of formulas to fill it: "flashing-eyed Athena" or "sly crafty Athena."

This is an example of formulas at the level of the poetic line, where they work much like ordinary grammar. The singer doesn't count the syllables in a line; the music and his song are happening too fast for that. Through practice, he senses what's needed, and his mind supplies a formula to fit. In the same way, when you're speaking and you need a verb, your mind supplies the correct form of the verb: "He runs" or "They run." You don't need to slow down to conjugate "to run."

Parry and Lord also explained that formulas work on several levels at once. At the same time the epic singer is constructing line after line, he's also describing events, and these, like word formulas,consist of slots to be filled in. For example, when Odysseus prays to Athena, he must wash his hands, put on a clean tunic, slaughter a sheep, say a prayer, ask for help, receive a sign in response, and have his men cook and distribute the sheep to eat. Meanwhile Athena herself smells the sacrificial smoke, flies to where Odysseus is, perhaps disguises herself as a mortal, considers his request, and gives her answer. There's a rough order to these events, but certain things can be rearranged in different tellings: Athena may give her answer before or after the men eat, for instance. In other words, an event consists of a series of sub-events that are formulaic. Not only that, but the details of each act, such as a description of the beautiful tunic Odysseus puts on, can be stretched out or altered at will: one night the singer might linger over the fine weave and the royal purple color of the cloth, the next night skip it.

In general, you can think of formulas at the level of event as like cues: the singer thinks "praying to Athena" and a number of sub-events pop to mind; he thinks "tunic" and up come ideas for description. He doesn't have to plan everything in advance. In fact, he can't— there's too much. But neither can he invent it all from scratch each time—again, there's too much.

Parry and Lord called the operation of formulas at various levels "constraints," and noted that every type of oral poetry has its own set of constraints. In Greek and Balkan epic,

lines of poetry must be of a certain length, but they don't have to rhyme. In other styles of poetry, they might have to rhyme as well.

Does Parry and Lord's idea of formulas helps us figure out how Man Sim partially memorized, partially improvised songs? Let's look at some examples.

With a few exceptions, when Man Sim made up a song she put new words to an older melody. Other Martinican singers do this as well; it's one way of keeping tradition fresh and alive. For example, one melody for the dance *bélia* is usually sung as "Bélia manmay-la" (Bélia of the people), telling Martinicans to hold on even though life is tough. Variants include "Bélia macedoine" (Bélia mix-up), about troubles during World War II, and "Bélia vènt-dé mé" (Bélia for May 22), celebrating the abolition of slavery. And people make up new words all the time; when Martinican politician Aimé Césaire died in 2008, the crowd at his funeral sang "Bélia pou Césè" (Bélia for Césaire).

Man Sim invented her own words for this song during the filming of an early 1990s TV special on bèlè. The show's producers invited a well-known older drummer, Féfé Maholany, who was in poor health and had stopped performing several years earlier. As members of the small rural bèlè community, Maholany and Man Sim had known each other their entire lives, and she was delighted to see him. As Maholany settled himself on the drum to play, Man Sim began singing. The chorus immediately picked up on her intent, and as Maholany played Man Sim wove a song around him. (The question marks are for lines I can't get.)

Bélia temps Féfé	*Bélia in* Féfé*'s time*
Lead: Bélia temps Féfé	Bélia in Féfé's time
Temps Féfé man kontan wé-ou	In Féfé's time, I'm happy to see you
Chorus: Bélia temps Féfé	Bélia in Féfé's time
Lead: Temps Féfé man kontan wé-ou	In Féfé's time, I'm happy to see you
Temps Féfé man enmen wé-ou	In Féfé's time, I'm glad to see you
5 Temps Féfé ou ni bon lage	In Féfé's time, you're very old
Temps Féfé man té mwen dansé	In Féfé's time, you made me dance
Temps Féfé man té mwen chanté	In Féfé's time, you made me sing
Temps Féfé man kontan wé-ou	In Féfé's time, I'm happy to see you
I temps Féfé	In Féfé's time
10 La temps Féfé	The time of Féfé
?	
?	
Temps Féfé nou kontan wé-ou	In Féfé's time, we're happy to see you
?	
15 ?	
?	
(Temps) pou nou bat tanbou-a	… play the drum for us
… an gran chapé	… a big hat
(Temps) pou mwen dansé bèlè	… so I can dance bèlè
20 (Temps) pou mwen dansé bèlè	… so I can dance bèlè
(Temps) pou mwen dansé bèlè	… so I can dance bèlè
Temps Féfé man kontan wé-ou	In Féfé's time, I'm happy to see you
Soixante dix-huit ans	Seventy-eight years old
Soixante dix-huit ans	Seventy-eight years old

25 ?	
Temps Féfé man kontan wé-ou	In Féfé's time, I'm happy to see you
Temps Féfé ou sa majô	In Féfé's time, you're a great one
Temps Féfé man kontan wé-ou	In Féfé's time, I'm happy to see you
Woy woy i temps Féfé	Oh, oh, in Féfé's time
30 Woy woy i temps Féfé	Oh, oh, in Féfé's time
Woy woy i temps Féfé	Oh, oh, in Féfé's time
Temps Féfé ou bat tanbou	Féfé's time, you play the drum
Ou ni soixante dix-huit ans	You're seventy-eight years old
Temps Féfé man kontan wé-ou	In Féfé's time, I'm happy to see you
35 I temps Féfé	In Féfé's time
Woy woy i temps Féfé	Oh, oh, in Féfé's time
Woy woy i temps Féfé	Oh, oh, in Féfé's time
Woy woy i temps Féfé	Oh, oh, in Féfé's time
Woy woy i temps Féfé	Oh, oh, in Féfé's time

This song captures Man Sim in the moment of invention. Some elements of Parry and Lord's theory are clear. The formula "temps Féfé" begins lines 3-8, filling up the first part of the melody each time; it's the whole of line 9 as, perhaps, Man Sim ran out of ideas. Lines 6 and 7 end with a variation: dansé/chanté. Line 8, man kontan wé-ou, seems to be a variation of line 4, man enmen wé-ou. See if you can spot other examples.

Themes include "In Féfé's time" and "I'm glad to see you," as well as the idea that Maholany made her dance and sing. Notice how Man Sim cycled away from and back to these themes, which means she kept them in mind as she continued singing. She also mentioned Maholany's age twice (lines 23-4 and 33). Two ideas she doesn't repeat are Maholany's hat (line 18) and his status as a master drummer ("you're a great one," line 27), so these don't yet count as themes. Perhaps if she had sung the song again on other occasions she would have developed these ideas.

Another song, "Texaco Dé," gives us the chance to examine a song that Man Sim sang many times, as it became a standard part of her repertory. This situation is probably close to how ancient Homeric epics worked; the bards worked over their songs repeatedly. By the time Man Sim recorded the version of "Texaco Dé" transcribed below, she had fully developed its ideas.

Like much oral tradition, there's a story behind this song that isn't explained in the song itself, and the song doesn't make a lot of sense until you know the background. In 1992, the Martinican writer Patrick Chamoiseau won a prestigious French literary prize, the Prix Goncourt, for his novel *Texaco*. *Texaco* chronicles the history of a Fort-de-France squatter neighborhood that grew up around a Texaco oil refinery and took on its name. This was one of the first times a Caribbean Francophone author had won such an honor, and literary Martinicans were quite excited. Naturally, they decided to hold the award ceremony in the Texaco neighborhood itself, which is no longer a shantytown but a more developed area, though still working-class. Since the novel is about Martinique's history, and particularly about the island's creole identity— hybrid, Caribbean plus French, local and traditional plus urban and sophisticated—Chamoiseau (the novelist) wanted to have local *bèlè* music at the event. But being a city-bred intellectual, he didn't know any *bèlè* musicians. So he asked a young singer, Paulo Athanase, who is from the city but has also studied *bèlè*, for help. Athanase telephoned Man Sim, drove to her town of Ste-Marie and picked her up, took her to the ceremony, and showed her around the Texaco neighborhood, where she'd never been.

At the ceremony, Man Sim improvised a new version of a traditional *bèlè* song, "Dé." The original "Dé" is a humorous song about sex, and about tension between young people and their parents. In it, a young man goes to the city and has some sort of sexual escapade. The chorus, "dé" ("two"), refers (according to various people I have asked) to Milo's testicles, women's breasts, or to two women that Milo slept with. Here is a version as sung by Ti Emile Casérus (another famous Ste-Marie singer):

Woy woy Milo	Oh, oh Milo
Chorus: Dé	*Two*
Kombyen maman-ou té ba-w?	How many did your mama give you?
Kombyen ti sèw-ou té ba-w?	How many did your little sister give you?
Kombyen ti fré-ou té ba-w?	How many did your little brother give you?
Epi dé ou té ni?	So, you had two?
Kombyen sa ké fè-w?	How many will you do?
Wopa, Milo!	Yeah, Milo!
Milo désann an ville	Milo went down to town
Milo viré monté	Milo came back up
Y viré san kulot	And came back with no underpants
Maman-ou ka babyé-w	Your mother fussed at you
Epi dé ou té ni?	So, you had two?
Kombyen sa ké fè-w?	How many will you do?
Papa-ou ka fè désod	Your father is yelling loudly

Man Sim's new words had nothing to do with the original, although she didn't bother changing the chorus. Instead, the new words are of an ancient African and Diasporic type: a praise song, sung to honor important people. However, "Texaco Dé" does not praise the novelist Patrick Chamoiseau; his award ceremony is not even mentioned, and when I asked Man Sim about him, she was rather vague. The song really exists outside Chamoiseau's intellectual, literary world. It is highly personal, and its main theme is the relationship between Man Sim and Paulo Athanase. Man Sim was somewhat insecure about her lack of education, heightened in her case by the fact that many Martinicans disrespect *bèlè* musicians. She was quick to take offense if she felt slighted. She was also quick to respond to respect, and in this song she honors Athanase for honoring her. Athanase's telephone invitation and his bringing her to visit Texaco are key images. Another theme in the song is modernity, which appears in the list of sights: taxi stands, basketball courts, soccer fields, boats.

As you listen to "Texaco Dé" and read the words, put yourself in Man Sim's head. If you were standing on a stage and inventing this song, how would your mind be working? Look for oral formulas are at work. Are there "slots" in lines that get filled in by different words? Phrases that repeat with small changes are probably formulaic.

Look also for repeating themes, ideas sustained over a few lines that Man Sim cycles away from and returns to. Mark formulas at the level of both line and theme in the text below, and be prepared to share this in class.

Can you figure out what constraints guide Man Sim's poetry? Does she use rhyme? Poetic meter? Melody? (You can tell some of this by saying the Creole out loud to yourself, even if you're not sure of the pronunciation.) Also, notice that sometimes Man Sim repeats lines verbatim: why do you suppose she does this? What role might vocables (non-word sounds such as "woy woy") play?

Texaco dé
Transcription Jeannine Lafontaine; translation Jeannine Lafontaine, Karin Vinant and Julian Gerstin. From *Bel Alians*, 1993.

Mwen enmen Texaco	I like Texaco
Chorus: Dé	*Two*
Mwen kontan Texaco	I'm happy with Texaco
Mwen jalou Chamoiseau	I love Chamoiseau
Mwen kontan Texaco	I'm happy with Texaco
5 Mwen jalou Chamoiseau	I love Chamoiseau
Sè li ki mété sa	It's he who's done this
Sè li ki fè sa byen	It's he who's done well
Mwen kontan pou Paulo	I'm happy thanks to Paul [Athanase]
Mwen jalou pou Paulo	I'm very happy thanks to Paul
10 Sè li ki kriyé mwen	It's he who called me
I mennen mwen désann	He brought me here
Man rivé Texaco	I arrived in Texaco
Mwen daubaut à Texaco	I came to Texaco for the first time
Mwen wè an bèl bagay	I saw a beautiful thing
15 Mwen wè an bèl bagay	I saw a beautiful thing
An bèl tèren fautball	A nice soccer field
An bèl tèren basket	A nice basketball court
Ay ay ay Texaco	[vocables]
Ray ay ay Texaco	[vocables]
20 Mwen wè parking taxi	I saw a taxi stand
Mwen wè an bèl plaj	I saw a nice beach
An bagay ki ka fè byen	Something pleasant/well done
Yo di mwen té ni lanmè	They told me there was the sea
Yo di mwen té ni sirik	They told me there were *sirik* [small marine crabs]
25 Yo di mwen té ni kanno	They told me there were boats
Sè la mwen té daubaut	That's where I stood/found myself
Sè la mwen té chanté	That's where I sang
Sè la mwen té gadé	It's this place that I admired
Mwen enmen wè bèl bagay	I like to see beautiful things
30 Koté a èvolué	This place has developed
Koté a inviolé	This place is unviolated
Man kontan pou Paulo	I'm happy thanks to Paul
Sè Paulo ki kriyé mwen	Paul's the one who called me
Ou na janmen tro gran	One is never too old
30 Pou wè an bèl bagay	To see beautiful things
Ou na janmen tro gran	One is never too great
Pou wè an bèl bagay	To see beautiful things
Mwen pa té konnèt la	I did not know this place
Yo di mwen té ni pwoblèm	They told me there were problems
40 Pa té konnèt tant pwoblèm-la	I didn't know [there were] so many problems
Mwen kontan Texaco	I love Texaco
Mwen ka kriyé Chamoiseau	I invoke/cry Chamoiseau

Mwen enmen Texaco	I like Texaco
Mwen jalou pou Paulo	I'm happy thanks to Paulo
45 Sè Paulo ki kriyé mwen	Paul's the one who called me
I mennem mwen dèsann	He brought me here
Mwen rivé Texaco	I arrived in Texaco
Mwen wè an bèl bagay	I saw a beautiful thing
Mwen kriyé Chamoiseau	I thought of Chamoiseau
50 Sè li ki fè mwen wè	He's the one who made me see
Yo di la ni lanmè	They told me there was the sea
Yo té di la ni kanno	They told me there were boats
Yo té di la ni krab	They told me there were crabs
Sè la mwen té daubaut	That's where I stood/found myself
55 Mwen wè an bèl plèzi	I saw something pleasant
Mwen wè an bèl tèren	I saw a beautiful field
Mwen wè an bèl parking	I saw a nice parking lot
Chamoiseau mwen emmenw	Chamoiseau, I love you
Paulo mwen kontanw	Paul, I like you very much
60 Ou pa janmen tro gran	One is never too old
Pou wè an bèl bagay	To see a beautiful thing
Pou wè an bèl plèzi	To see something agreeable
Mwen kontan Texaco	I like Texaco
An kontan ki èvolué y	I'm happy it has developed
65 Mwen kontan pèyi-a	I like my country very much
Mwen jalou pèyi-a	I appreciate my country
Ay ay ay Texaco	[vocables]
Roy oy oy Texaco	[vocables]
Mwen wè parking taxi	I saw a taxi stand
70 Mwen wè tèren fautball	I saw a soccer field
Mwen wè tèren basket	I saw a basketball court
Manmay la mi an koté	My friends this is a place
Manmay la mi an bagay	My friends this is something
Man pa ka rigrété	That I don't regret
75 Ou pa jannen tro gran	One is never too great
Pou wè an bèl bagay	To see beautiful things
Ou pa janmen tro vyé	One is never too old
Pou wè an bèl plèzi	To see something pleasant
Mwen wè an bèl bagay	I saw a beautiful thing
80 Ka kriyé Chamoiseau	Which reminded me of Chamoiseau
Ka kriyé pou Paulo	Who called for Paul
Sè li menem mwen	He's the one who brought me
Sè li ki envité mwen	He's the one who invited me
Mwen kontan pou Paulo	I'm happy thanks to Paul
85 Mwen jalou pou Paulo	I'm very happy thanks to Paul
Man pa rigrété	I don't regret it
Mwen pa sè an bèl moman	I had a nice time
Mwen gadé an bèl bagay	I saw a beautiful thing
Mwen wè an bèl plèzi	I saw something pleasant
90 Ay ay ay Chamoiseau	[vocables]

In "Bélia temps Féfé" and "Texaco Dé," Man Sim put new words to traditional melodies, the usual practice. However, I know of one song that Man Sim composed in full—words, melody, and dance. This is "Karessé yo" ("Caress them"). The words tell dance partners to caress parts of one another's body. Man Sim told me, "I made this up when I was a teenager so I could dance it with my boyfriend."

Karessé yo	Caress Them
Lead: Bwaniki bwanika ya	[children's rhyme/tongue twister]
Sé la man ka passé	That's what happens to me
Bwaniki bwanika ya, sé la ki ni chez mwen	That's what happens at my house
Bwaniki bwanika ya, sé la man lé alé	That's where I will go
Bwaniki bwanika ya, sé la man ka passé	That's what happens to me
Karessé yo	Caress them
Chorus: Médam	Madam
Lézyeux dan zyéux	Eye to eye
Bouch dan bouch	Mouth to mouth
Nez dan nez	Nose to nose
Vant dan vant	Belly to belly
Piyé dan piyé	Foot to foot
Karessé yo	Caress them

"Karessé yo" is an interesting amalgam of styles. Telling the dancers what to do is typical of a group of Martinican dances, *lalin klé*, that descends from French *contredanse* (line dances) of the 17th and 18th centuries. (The same thing happens in American square and contra dances.) But the dance is for couples, a later, 19th-century choreography. Nonetheless, Georges Dru, leader of the renewalist group AM4 and a stickler about preservation, mentioned this song to me as an example of creativity within authentic tradition. In her own way, Man Sim, whom everyone looked to as a representative of tradition, participated as much in Martinique's very contemporary créolité as do the famous créolité novelists.