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 Récoulé 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 help 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 vent-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

*Lead:* Bélia temps Féfé  
Temps Féfé man kontan wé-ou

*Chorus:* Bélia temps Féfé

*Lead:* Temps Féfé man kontan wé-ou  
Temps Féfé man enmen wé-ou  
5 Temps Féfé ou ni bon lage  
Temps Féfé man té mwen dansé  
Temps Féfé man té mwen chanté  
Temps Féfé man kontan wé-ou  
I temps Féfé  
10 La temps Féfé  
?  
?  
Temps Féfé nou kontan wé-ou  
?  
15 ?  
?  
(Temps) pou nou bat tanbou-a  
… an gran chapé  
(Temps) pou mwen dansé bèlè  
20 (Temps) pou mwen dansé bèlè  
(Temps) pou mwen dansé bèlè  
Temps Féfé man kontan wé-ou  
Soixante dix-huit ans  
Soixante dix-huit ans

### Bélia in Féfé’s time

Bélia in Féfé’s time  
In Féfé’s time, I’m happy to see you  
Bélia in Féfé’s time  
In Féfé’s time, I’m happy to see you  
Bélia in Féfé’s time  
In Féfé’s time, I’m glad to see you  
5 In Féfé’s time, you’re very old  
In Féfé’s time, you made me dance  
In Féfé’s time, you made me sing  
In Féfé’s time, I’m happy to see you  
In Féfé’s time  
The time of Féfé  
10 In Féfé’s time, we’re happy to see you  
15 … play the drum for us  
… a big hat  
… so I can dance bèlè  
… so I can dance bèlè  
20 … so I can dance bèlè  
In Féfé’s time, I’m happy to see you  
Seventy-eight years old  
Seventy-eight years old
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
Chorus: Dé
Oh, oh Milo
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 fusses 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**

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

Sè li ki fè mwen wè
Yo di la ni lannè
Yo té di la ni kanno
Yo té di la ni krab
Sè la mwen té daubaut

Mwen wè an bèl plèzi
Mwen wè an bèl tèren
Mwen wè an bèl parking
Chamoiseau mwen emmenw
Paulo mwen kontanw

Ou pa janmen tro gran
Pou wè an bèl bagay
Pou wè an bèl plèzi
Mwen kontan Texaco
An kontan ki évolué y

Mwen kontan péyi-a
Mwen jalou péyi-a
Ay ay ay Texaco
Roy oy oy Texaco
Mwen wè parking taxi

Mwen wè tèren fautball
Mwen wè tèren basket
Manmay la mi an kotè
Manmay la mi an bagay
Man pa ka rigrété

Mwen jalou pou Paulo
Sè li menem mwen
Sè li ki envité mwen
Mwen kontan pou Paulo

Mwen jala Texaco
I like Texaco
I’m happy thanks to Paulo
Paul’s the one who called me
He brought me here
I arrived in Texaco
I saw a beautiful thing
I thought of Chamoiseau

He’s the one who made me see
They told me there was the sea
They told me there were boats
They told me there were crabs
That’s where I stood/found myself
I saw something pleasant
I saw a beautiful field
I saw a nice parking lot
Chamoiseau, I love you
Paul, I like you very much
One is never too old
To see a beautiful thing
To see something agreeable
I like Texaco
I’m happy it has developed
I like my country very much
[vocables]
[vocables]

I saw a soccer field
I saw a basketball court
My friends this is a place
My friends this is something
That I don’t regret
One is never too great
To see beautiful things
One is never too old
To see something pleasant
I saw a beautiful thing

Which reminded me of Chamoiseau
Who called for Paul
He’s the one who brought me
He’s the one who invited me
I’m happy thanks to Paul
I don’t regret it
I had a nice time
I saw a beautiful thing
I saw something pleasant

[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**

**Lead:** Bwaniki bwanika ya
Sé la man ka passé
Bwaniki bwanika ya, sé la ki ni chez mwen
Bwaniki bwanika ya, sé la man lè alé
Bwaniki bwanika ya, sé la man ka passé
Karessé yo

**Chorus:** Médam
Lézyeux dan zyéux
Bouch dan bouch
Nez dan nez
Vant dan vant
Piyé dan piyé
Karessé yo

“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.