



A Passion for Radio
Radio Waves and Community
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Chapter 16

Radio Asé Pléré An Nou Lité¹: A weapon for liberation

Condensed and adapted from a text by Richard Chateau-Dégat

The French colonisation of Martinique in the 1700s resulted in the genocide of the Indigenous Carib Amerindians and introduced a slave trade which brought tens of thousands of black Africans to Martinique. Caribs who did survive sought refuge in neighbouring islands, in particular Dominica. As a result, Martinique has a forced mix of Amerindian, African and European cultures and the Martiniquan people have been left struggling to find their identity. Slavery was abolished following the anti-slavery revolution of 1848. However, even now the island is subject to French colonial rule.

Since the 1970s, the struggle for independence has been gathering new strength. This movement, which had been marginal for many years, now influences the entire social and political fabric of Martinique. Radio Asé Pléré An Nou Lité is an integral part of this movement, and its creation has been essential to the Martiniquan people's struggle for identity and liberation.

THE NEED TO COMMUNICATE

The second half of the 1970s saw a strongly motivated movement beginning to address social and cultural problems in Martinique. This movement is active at a grassroots level. Workers, peasants and youth have created popular organisations to address their needs in the countryside and in the shantytowns of the capital, Fort de

¹ Asé Pléré An Nou Lité is Creole for "Enough crying, to our struggle."

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France. Literacy campaigns, education and training programmes, improvements in sanitation and roads, and education in politics and history have sharpened people's understanding of their shared experience. Martiniquan culture has been brought to life through open air popular theatre, and the revival of *bélé* (the foundation of Martiniquan music). All this served to turn around the thinking of a community whose identity had been exemplified by the popular saying *Kompla nèg sé kompla chyen* – blacks have no say.

This new momentum in Martiniquan society was completely ignored by the media. Newspapers, radio and television feigned blindness and remained silent about both cultural and social changes that were taking place. They did report on a strike among agricultural workers in 1974, but only after two workers were shot by the authorities. Even then coverage was minimal. Progressive organisations were denied the right to disseminate information about their efforts and activities. As a result, they were being denied a less tangible, but equally important function of the media, because the need to communicate is not simply a need to share knowledge, but also to have others recognise the value of what we accomplish and who we are. It was important that the critical events and experiences that were transforming so many lives be recognised by the media in order to take them from the margins and give them status and a global dimension.

More and more people and organisations understood the necessity of legitimising and representing what appeared to be scattered “marginal” events. There needed to be “a voice for the voiceless.” And so the idea of a popular radio station developed, Radio Asé Pléré An Nou Lité.

FROM IDEAS TO ACTION

Once the decision was made to establish a station, the problem of finances arose. Because these difficulties could only be resolved with the help of people who felt a strong need for a “radio of the people,” the campaign to create the station became a test of the actual support that existed for it.

The project was illegal and therefore dangerous. Furthermore, it would depend on the support of the social class least able to afford it. Despite these barriers there was massive popular involvement on many levels. Everyone wanted to make a contribution, no matter how modest. Aside from financial support, people contributed time and knowledge to recover and recycle the materials used to construct offices and install equipment. A metal pylon was sanded, welded and repainted to carry the antenna. Some farm workers put in two full days of physical labour. The casting of the concrete platform for the pylon was done at night (to avoid detection), with fifty volunteers working until two in the morning. They attributed the success of their unauthorised initiative to the fact that they made use of “French efficiency” and “not having learned good manners in school.”

The people had created a resource through which they could express who they were – real Martiniquans! *Radio pep la*, the people's radio, was born.

DIFFICULT BEGINNINGS

For more than two years, Radio Asé Pléré An Nou Lité led a precarious existence. Programmes lasted three hours daily for the first year, longer on weekends. It wasn't much, but apparently too much for the authorities. They did everything possible, short of using force, to prevent the experiment from succeeding, jamming our signal and repeatedly cutting off our electricity. This, along with technical problems – due to our inexperience, the quality of equipment, installation problems and so on – often caused interruptions that lasted up to several weeks. We had to change frequencies more than once when those we were using were given to new, legal stations. We had to move our office three times and during one period we were forced to physically defend our equipment. People would guard the studio and the transmitters day and night. However, despite the many attempts to defeat us, Radio Asé Pléré An Nou Lité survived and is now firmly established in the Martiniquan media landscape.

A POOR RADIO STATION

Since 1981, several dozen FM radio stations have been established in Martinique. Some struggle along without personnel or finances and with low broadcasting power, while others have the financial support of a municipality or are able to get sizeable advertising contracts because of their connections. At the top end of the scale are two or three large stations linked to French media giants. While Radio Asé Pléré An Nou Lité is a poor station whose existence relies on public support, it is one of the stations authorised to broadcast to the entire island of Martinique.

Radio Asé Pléré An Nou Lité has survived its ten-year existence without any government subsidies. Membership fees from the “Association for the Development of Grassroots Communication” (ADECOPA) make up one-third of our resources. This organisation was created in 1989 to develop support for the radio. Other resources come through donations from supporters. These are both financial and material (office supplies, studio equipment, etc.). Advertising was introduced in 1990, coinciding with the hiring of our first salaried worker. Advertising revenue still makes up only a modest part of our budget, falling below our objectives. This is in part due to our lack of experience in the area, but the very nature of Radio Asé Pléré An Nou Lité, which never hesitates to go against the grain of dominant ideas, does offend some advertisers. Although our financial situation makes the need for some advertising inevitable, we will not accept advertising from simply anyone. Instead, we actively promote small local businesses and producers and steer clear of the big advertisers. This has obviously kept us poor.

GRASSROOTS COMMUNICATION

The fundamental reason for the creation of Radio Asé Pléré An Nou Lité was the need for communication at the grassroots level. Consequently, we have always made listener access to the airwaves a top priority. Radio Asé Pléré An Nou Lité is a kind of permanent, popular forum. Major issues are introduced on the air and debated by the listeners themselves. The discussions go on for as long as there are ideas and arguments.

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As station administrators, we find this very satisfying because we know who our listeners are. But it is even more satisfying for the listener who can use the station to actively participate in public life. Of course, we are happiest when the telephone becomes inadequate and we hear the front doorbell ring. At that point, the listeners create the programming, with the “official host” playing a facilitating role for the “de facto hosts” in the audience. The ultimate stage is when a listener becomes a volunteer host. For example, Man Sicot, a listener who phoned in regularly, is now hosting a new show that she proposed and developed: *Si jénés té sav..., si gran moun té pé* (“If the young only knew, if the old only could”). Public participation is the best way to ensure that the station deals with topics relevant to our audience. When listeners speak on the radio, they establish an equal rather than hierarchical relationship with it. They demystify the medium for themselves and for other listeners by taking advantage of the opportunity to disagree with an analysis or commentary, or to add to a news report, or to hear this being done by others.

Because Radio Asé Pléré An Nou Lité’s ultimate objective is the national liberation of the Martiniquan people, part of our struggle involves informing, educating and training our people. For this reason we have emphasised studying history and understanding economic conditions, devoted time to union training and information on workers’ rights, and have developed shows on education, ecology and international news.

Radio Asé Pléré An Nou Lité has worked steadily for the democratisation of the airwaves and the right to freedom of expression. This work is based on open and democratic debate. We encourage the expression of opposing points of view without censorship, and offer everyone the opportunity to fully explain and argue their positions. For example, even though we did not share the same views as the CSTM (Martiniquan Workers Trade Union Association) we offered them a daily one-hour show with no obligations, financial or otherwise. We did the same for the Association for the Protection of the Martiniquan Patrimony (ASSAUPAMAR) despite our differences of opinion.

PROMOTING INDIGENOUS MARTINIQUAN CULTURE

The dominance of French culture in Martinique has repeatedly denied the existence of an indigenous culture. We have been raised in a society that believes that real culture is learned at school and must come from elsewhere. Radio Asé Pléré An Nou Lité has challenged this attitude by promoting two integral elements of our culture: the Creole language and *bélé* – the foundation of Martiniquan music.

Broadcasting that is done exclusively in French (as is the case with many Martiniquan radio stations) has served to ensure that access to the airwaves is restricted to educated elites who are comfortable with the language. Anyone who uses Creole or anything less than “perfect” French on the radio is ridiculed. By using Creole on air we overthrow the usual order of things and allow the majority to control communication. We believe that everyone should be able to communicate without constraint or repression. Our linguistic policy is that those who do not master French should be allowed to speak Creole, and those who do not speak Creole well should be able to express themselves in French.

Open-mindedness has also informed our policies on music. While an important effort has been made to rehabilitate and promote “bélé,” Radio Asé Pléré An Nou Lité also continues to be the station most open to both local music and music from all over the world. We do however, strictly avoid promoting commercial music even though we have come under a lot of pressure to change this policy. No doubt, the absence of big hits, both local and international, has cost us listeners. But as a result we have a unique identity; we are the radio station for those who are fed up with the sameness of all the others.

The inevitable challenges and setbacks that we have experienced in the last ten years have strengthened us and reaffirmed the raison d’être of Radio Asé Pléré An Nou Lité. We must continue to learn in order that our people may move forward, and that Radio Asé Pléré An Nou Lité and the spirit of community radio may live on and develop.

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