

—The Konbit: Working Together—

In West Africa, most people live by farming the land. But clearing a field, planting a crop, or bringing in a harvest is often too much work for one family. As a result, many African societies have forms of cooperative labor. When a member of the community needs help with a task, he or she calls for volunteers. Neighbors come together to do the job, and the host, for whom the work is performed, provides food and drink for all. There is plenty of singing, joking and feasting, as well as hard work.

After slavery ended in the Caribbean, many Afro-Caribbean people became farmers. They continued the African tradition of work exchange, which goes by different names in different parts of the Caribbean. In Jamaica it is called “day work,” “work sport” or “digging match.” In Tobago it is “lend-hand,” and in Trinidad “gayap.” In Grenada it is a “maroon.”

*In Haiti the tradition is called a “konbit.” It is so important to Haitian rural life that it is even featured in folktales and literature, such as the following excerpt from Haiti’s classic novel, *Masters of the Dew* by J. Roumain. Here we see how the konbit tradition has been a source of strength and unity for Haitian rural communities.*

Masters of the Dew

(excerpt)

In those days when they all had lived in harmony, united as the fingers of the hand, they had assembled all the neighborhood in collective coumbites for the harvest or the clearing.

Ah, what coumbites! Bienaimé mused.

At break of day he was there, an earnest leader with his group of men, all hard-working farmers: Dufontain, Beauséjour, cousin Aristhène, Pierrilis, Dieudonné, brother-in-law Mérilien, Fortuné Jean, wise old Boirond, and the work-song leader, Simidor Antoine, a man with a gift for singing...

Into the field of wild grass they went, bare feet in the dew. Pale sky, cool, the chant of wild guinea hens in the distance. Little by little the shadowy trees, still laden with shreds of darkness, regained their color. An oily light bathed them. A kerchief of sulphur-colored clouds bound the summits of the



mountains. The countryside emerged from sleep. In Rosanna’s yard the tamarind tree suddenly let fly a noisy swirl of crows like a handful of gravel.

Casamajor Beaubrun with his wife, Rosanna, and their two sons would greet them. They would start out with “Thank you very much brothers” since a favor is willingly done: today I work your field, tomorrow you work mine. Cooperation is the friendship of the poor.

A moment later Siméon and Dorisca, with some twenty husky men, would join the group. Then they would all leave Rosanna bustling around in the shade of the tamarind tree among her boilers and big tin pots whence the voluble sputtering of boiling water would already be rising. Later Délira and other women neighbors would come to lend her a hand.

Off would go the men with hoes on shoulder... Lowering the fence poles at the entrance to a plot of land where an ox skull for a scarecrow blanchied on a pole, they measured their job at a glance--a tangle

of wild weeds intertwined with creepers. But the soil was good and they would make it as clean as a table top. This year Beaubrun wanted to try eggplant.

"Line up!" the squadron chiefs would yell.

Then Simidor Antoine would throw the strap of his drum over his shoulder. Bienaimé would take his commanding position in front of his men. Simidor would beat a brief prelude, and the rhythm would crackle under his fingers. In a single movement, they would lift their hoes high in the air. A beam of light would strike each blade. For a second they would be holding a rainbow.

Simidor's voice rose, husky and strong...The hoes fell with a single dull thud, attacking the rough hide of the earth...

The men went forward in a straight line. They felt Antoine's song in their arms and, like blood hotter than their own, the rapid beat of his drum.

Suddenly the sun was up. It sparkled like a dewy foam across the field of weeds. Master Sun! Honor and respect, Master Sun! We black men greet you with a swirl of hoes snatching bright sparks of fire from the sky. There are the breadfruit trees patched with blue, and the flame of the flamboyant tree long smoldering under the ashes of night, but now bursting into a flare of petals on the edge of the thorn acacias...

There sprang up a rhythmic circulation between the beating heart of the drum and the movements of the men. The rhythm became a powerful flux penetrating deep into their arteries and nourishing their muscles with a new vigor...

The high-class people in the city derisively called these peasants "...barefooted vagabonds..." (They are too poor to buy shoes.) But never mind and to hell with them! Some day we will take our big flat feet out of the soil and plant them on their behinds.

They had done a tough job, scratched, scraped, and shaved the hairy face of the field. The injurious brambles were scattered on the ground. Beaubrun and his sons would gather them up and set fire to them. What had been useless weeds, prickles, bushes entangled with tropical creepers, would change

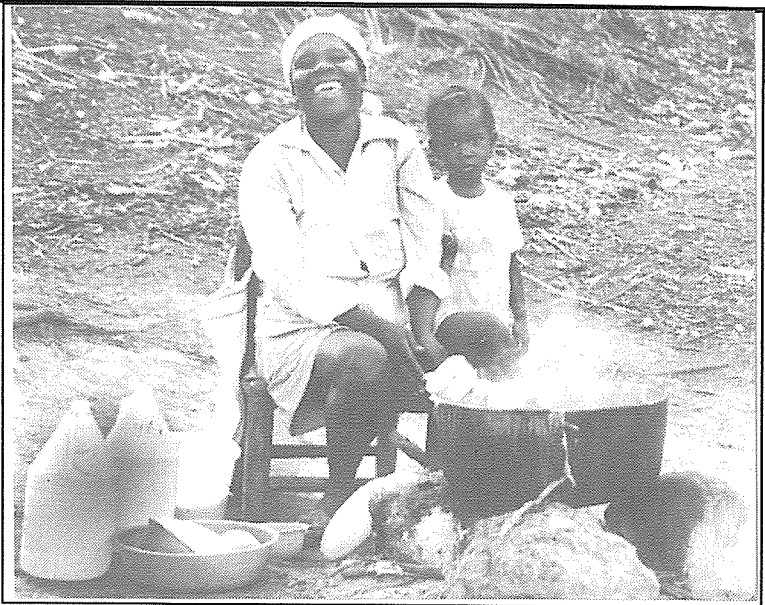


Photo: Merv Puleo/Impact Visuals

now to fertilizing ashes in the tilled soil. Beaubrun was overjoyed.

"Thanks, neighbors!" he kept repeating.

"You're welcome, neighbor!" we replied, but hurriedly, for dinner was ready. And what a dinner!...In the cauldrons, the casseroles, and the bowls were stacked with barbecued pig seasoned hot enough to take your breath away, ground corn with codfish, and rice, too, sun rice with red beans and salt pork, bananas, sweet potatoes, and yams to throw away!

Abridged from: Roumain, J. (1944). *Masters of the Dew*. NH: Heinemann, Inc.

Konbit's West African Roots

The Haitian cooperative work group has much in common with European and American husking and barn-building parties, but also has many non-European characteristics. The rhythmic, synchronized use of the hoe, the singing leader and the musicians who stand to one side to "encourage" the workers, the calling of the workers by drum rappels, the special consideration for the sick, and the concept of long-term community endeavor are all of West African origin. The konbit is the legitimate descendant of the Dahomean dokpwe, the kurum of the Mambila (Cameroons), the Ku of the Kpelle (Liberia) and other West African cooperative systems.

From: Courlander, H. (1960.) *The Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People*. University of California Press.

Poetry

The Grand Guignol of Countries or Country of The Grand Guignol Paul Laraque

the circus and its clowns
the theatre and its marionettes
the carnival and its masks
the zoo and its monkeys
the arena and its bulls
the slaughterhouse and its black beef
the yankee and the money wheel
the native and the wheel of blood
voodoo and its grand Dons
the holy family and its demons
the people and their misery
exile and its saviors
without faith without law
Haiti and its cross
Haiti in hell
in the name of the father
and of the son
and of the zombi

•translated by Rosemary Manno

Le grand guignol du pays ou Le pays du grand guignol Paul Laraque

le cirque et ses clowns
le théâtre et ses marionnettes
le carnaval et ses masques
le zoo et ses singes
l'arène et ses taureaux
l'abattoir et ses boeufs noirs
le yankee et la roue de l'argent
le indigène et la roue du sang
le vodou et ses grands *Dons*
la sainte famille et ses démons
le peuple et ses malheurs
l'exil et ses sauveurs
sans foi ni loi
Haïti et sa croix
Haïti en enfer
au nom du père
du fils
et du zombi

Born in Haiti in 1920, **Paul Laraque** lived in exile in New York from 1961 to 1986. In 1964, he was deprived of his Haitian citizenship. He won the Casa de las Américas Prize for poetry in 1979. Former secretary general of the Association of Haitian Writers Abroad, he is the author of several books in French and Creole, some of which have been translated into Spanish and French. His book *Camourade* was published by Curbstone in 1988.

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Haitian Folktales

In West Africa, storytelling was a richly developed art. Villagers would gather around a fire at night to hear one of their neighbors—perhaps an old woman or man—tell favorite tales. Many of these involved animal characters, such as the spider Anansi. Stories often told of a practical joke or trick, or sought to explain how a certain thing began.

Africans transported to the Caribbean, including Haiti, brought their folk traditions with them. These blended with elements of European folklore to become part of the cultural heritage of Caribbean peoples.

Many Haitian folktales center on two characters, Uncle Bouki and Ti Malice. Uncle Bouki is a laughable bumpkin—foolish, boastful and greedy. Ti Malice is his opposite, a smart character full of tricks. These same qualities are found combined in Anansi the spider, the hero of many Caribbean folktales. In Haiti, they are divided between the two characters of Uncle Bouki and Ti Malice.

Haiti's oral tradition also includes many other types of stories, proverbs, riddles, songs and games. Storytelling in Haiti is a performance art. The storyteller uses different voices for each character in the story, and often sings a song as part of the narrative.

UNCLE BOUKI GETS WHEE-AI

Uncle Bouki went down to the city to market, to sell some yams, and while he was there he got hungry. He saw an old man squatting by the side of the road, eating something. The old man was enjoying his food tremendously, and Bouki's mouth watered. Bouki tipped his hat and said to the old man, "Where can I get some of whatever you are eating?" But the old man was deaf. He didn't hear a word Bouki said. Bouki asked him then, "What do you call that food?" Just then the old man bit into a hot pepper, and he said loudly, "Whee-ai!" Bouki

thanked him and went into the market. He went everywhere asking for five centimes worth of whee-ai. The people only laughed. Nobody had any whee-ai.

He went home thinking about whee-ai. He met Ti Malice on the way. Ti Malice listened to him and said, "I will get you some whee-ai."

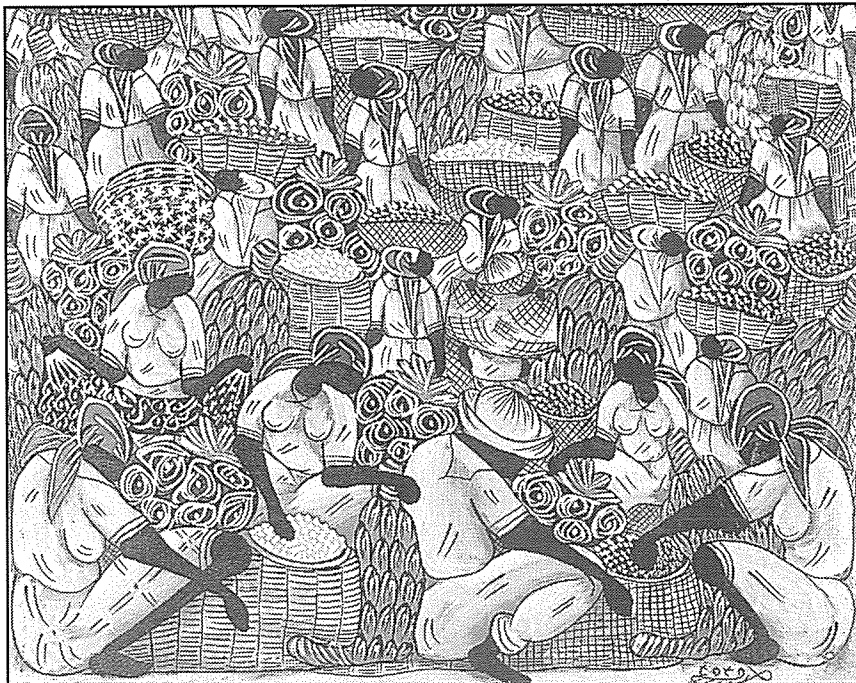
Malice went down and got some cactus leaves. He put them in a sack. He put some oranges on top of the cactus leaves. He put a pineapple on top.

Then a potato. Then he brought the sack to Bouki.

Bouki reached in and took out a potato. "That's no whee-ai," he said. He reached in and took out a pineapple. "That's no whee-ai," Bouki said. He reached in and took out oranges. "That's no whee-ai," he said. Then he reached way to the bottom and grabbed cactus leaves. The needles stuck into his hand. He jumped into the air. He shouted, "Whee-ai!"

"That's your whee-ai," Malice said.

Reprinted from Courlander, H. (1960). *The Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People*. University of California Press.

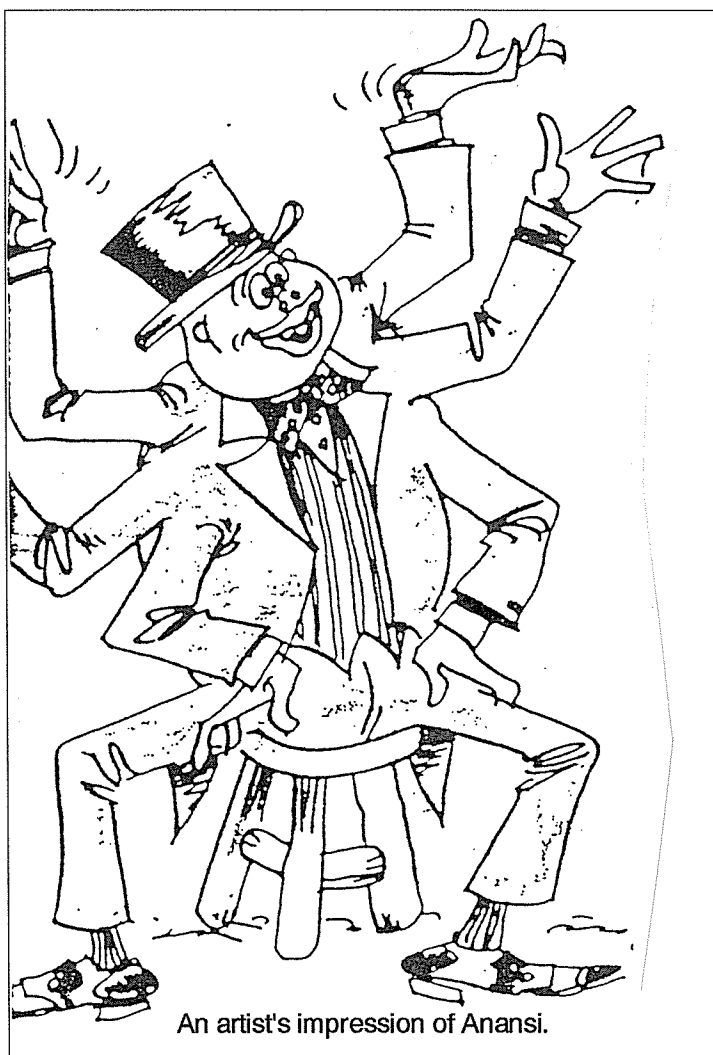


Vendors at the provincial market place in Port-au-Prince. The artist is studying architecture at the University of Port-au-Prince.

The President Wants No More of Anansi

Anansi and all his smart ways irritated the President so much that the President told him one day: "Anansi, I'm tired of your foolishness. Don't you ever let me see your face again." So Anansi went away from the palace. And a few days later he saw the President coming down the street, so he quickly stuck his head into the open door of a limekiln.

Everyone on the street took off their hats when the President passed. When he came to the limekiln, he saw Anansi's behind sticking out.



An artist's impression of Anansi.

He became angry and said, "*Ki bounda sa ki pa salye mwen?*" (Whose behind is it that doesn't salute me?)

Anansi took his head out of the limekiln and said, "*Se bounda 'Nansi ki pa salye ou.*" (It's

Anansi's behind which didn't salute you.)

The President said angrily, "Anansi, you don't respect me."

Anansi said: "President, I was just doing what you told me to do. You told me never to let you see my face."

The President said, "Anansi, I've had enough of your foolishness. I don't ever want to see you again, clothed or naked."

So Anansi went away. But the next day when he saw the President coming down the street he took his clothes off and put a fishnet over his head.

When the president saw him he shouted, "Anansi, didn't I tell you I never wanted to see you again clothed or naked?"

And Anansi said, "My President, I respect what you tell me. I'm not clothed and I'm not naked."

This time the President told him, "Anansi, if I ever catch you again on Haitian soil I'll have you shot."

So Anansi boarded a boat and sailed to Jamaica. He bought a pair of heavy shoes and put sand in them. Then he put the shoes on his feet and took another boat back to Haiti. When he arrived at Port-au-Prince he found the President standing on the pier.

"Anansi," the President said sternly, "Didn't I tell you that if I ever caught you on Haitian soil again I'd have you shot?"

"You told me that, Papa, and I respected what you said. I went to Jamaica and filled my shoes with sand. So I didn't disobey you because I'm now walking on English soil."

limekiln: furnace for making lime by burning limestone or shells

Port-au-Prince: capital of Haiti

English soil: Jamaica was still a colony of England when the story was told

Reprinted from: Courlander, H. (1960.) *The Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People*. University of California Press. Graphic courtesy of P. Hyacinth Galloway.