REVIEW


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In *La politique des tambours*, Lionel Arnaud gives a detailed historical and ethnographic account of the many and complex ways a group of cultural activists from the marginalized neighborhood of Rive-Droite Levassor in Fort-de-France, Martinique, has managed to deploy once stigmatized popular music and dance as a form of social and political praxis “from below.” Working within a theoretical frame largely influenced by the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, Arnaud asks: How do actors apparently devoid of recognized cultural and political capital organize a form of cultural action largely outside of—if occasionally in dialogue with—official political and cultural institutions? How do these militants cultivate a disposition for this kind of cultural action? How do they sustain a form of cultural resistance in the face of assimilationist pressures?

To answer these questions, Arnaud conducted a year of ethnographic fieldwork in Fort-de-France in 2011–12, followed by multiple shorter visits back to Martinique until 2018. In addition to classic qualitative methods (participant observation, interviews), Arnaud made effective use of quantitative methods, using surveys to paint a broad yet precise sociological portrait of the members of Tanbou Bô Kannal (TBK, spelled Tanbo Bô Kannal throughout the book), the carnival organization at the center of his study.

TBK is a leading *mouvman kiltirél* (cultural movement), carnival association, and important actor in the revival and revalorization of the traditional music and dance forms—*danmyè, kalennda, bèlè*—born on the edges of the colonial plantation from African roots. As Arnaud repeatedly highlights, TBK is also, perhaps first and foremost, a neighborhood association, anchored in Rive-Droite Levassor, on the right bank of the Canal Levassor, a neighborhood that its inhabitants have militantly renamed Bô Kannal (canal front) in Creole. Bô Kannal is a geographically and socially marginalized neighborhood, as can be found at the periphery of French Antillean urban centers. As Arnaud explains in chapter 2, the neighborhood emerged in the nineteenth century, as many newly emancipated Martinicans moved toward Fort-de-France and settled haphazardly on land that the local bourgeoisie had deemed unfit for development, in this case, a swampy area that had first been home to fishermen. Because of this double social and geographic exclusion, TBK and its neighborhood form, according to Arnaud, a “privileged observatory for the processes by which what is traditionally perceived as obstacles to collective action and, beyond, to cultural action (*agir culturel*) of individuals and groups ... can be revealed to be vectors or even incentives to mobilization” (p. 14).1

Chapter 1 offers a relatively short but rich social and political history of the bèlè, Martinique’s own drum-based secular dance, from its emergence on the plantation, through its denigration by the local bourgeoisie, its revival at the hands of folkloric groups, and its conscription by various...
political actors, including both Aimé Césaire and the separatist activists of the 1960s–70s. From this historical foundation, Arnaud insists that the actions of contemporary cultural activists, such as TBK, should not be confused with a form of revivalism but rather as an effort to reconstruct a resistant culture that speaks to contemporary conditions from the cultural heritage of the Martinican peasantry.

Chapter 2 focuses on the history of the Rive-Droite Levassor neighborhood to demonstrate that its habitants’ cultural action is anchored in its social fabric. By producing a social and geographic enclave, this history has made of the neighborhood a cultural conservatory, which has contributed to preserve cultural practices inherited from rural lifeways. Through this history, Arnaud highlights the strong relationship that the otherwise marginalized inhabitants of Bô Kannal have enjoyed with Césaire and his Parti Progressiste Martiniquais (PPM). But more importantly, Arnaud emphasizes the strong solidarity that characterizes life in the neighborhood, a neighborhood that many describe as family. The neighborhood’s marginalization has also encouraged a culture of resourcefulness (débrouillardise), bricolage, and resistance that pervades TBK. More than working to preserve traditional rural music and culture (like the martial art danmyé), the group’s founding members have worked to create a new carnival culture, specific to the neighborhood, free from Guadeloupean influences, and rooted in the rhythms of traditional Martinican music, like the chwal bwa and the kalennda.

Chapter 3 is perhaps the most directly concerned with the politics of the drum. The chapter opens with a rapid overview of carnival in Martinique, its politics, and its main opposition between an official—staid—carnival and the bawdy vidé. From there, Arnaud exposes how TBK has opened a “third space” between these two types of performances, one that affirms pride in the neighborhood and its Afro-Martinican culture. Arnaud extends the idea of the third space to discuss how TBK and its members negotiate the tension between political action (associated with a party, an ideology, or a slogan) and strictly cultural activism. Arnaud depicts TBK’s ability to work within the political and cultural fields of Martinique, for example, to channel public funds to their association, in order to assert its culture and create a space for “alternative possibilities between the neighborhood and society” (p. 167).

Chapter 4 turns its attention to the period following the election of the socialist François Mitterrand to the French presidency in 1981 and the decline of Césaire’s influence on the cultural politics and associative life in Martinique. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first exposes how the transformation of the Martinican economy, in conjunction with new urbanization policies, have unmoored TBK from its stable and privileged anchor in the neighborhood. The second focuses on the effects of new cultural policies in the 1990s. This era saw the end of the clientelism of the Césaire era and the rise of a new regime of cultural subventions, in which the region, the French state, and the European Union displaced the city as a source of financing. As Arnaud explains, this new regime effectively separated social from cultural action (the two had been understood as conjoined by the Césaire administration), operated under an entrepreneurial logic, and fostered the rise of a new artistic elite. Destabilized and having lost its social and financial foundation, TBK found ways to adapt to the new regime. Arnaud describes these new strategies in the third and final section.
Finally, chapter 5 details three contemporary approaches to the transmission and diffusion of danmyé, kalennda, and bèlè, and their associated dance and music forms. Arnaud names the first a “familialist” approach in which entrepreneurial militants attempt to capitalize on the community resources associated with the old popular lifeways. The second, didactic, approach consists of transposing the pedagogical ideology associated with republican education to defend what its proponents see as a rigorous—that is to say, codified and depersonalized—vision of music and dance education and performance. With the third approach, cultural actors seek to combine modern and traditional aesthetics to “gather the Martinican people around renewed sensibilities.” Throughout the chapter, Arnaud exposes how these approaches allow Martinican cultural actors to promote a certain understanding of society and, by extension, their own “beliefs and principles of government, the good life, and justice” (p. 226). However, Arnaud underscores as well that all three approaches contribute to delinking traditional music and dance from their original social environments and, therefore, participate in the emergence of what he describes as a new moral economy.

Overall, La politique des tambours is a solid work of sociology. Those already familiar with Arnaud’s work on l’agir culturel will find here a great ethnographic illustration and extension of the theses introduced in his 2018 book, Agir par la culture: Acteurs, enjeux et mutations des mouvements culturels. The strength of this latest book perhaps contributes to what I see as its main shortcoming. It is a work that effectively uses the tools of French sociology, those developed in the metropole, to analyze social life at its periphery, in the Caribbean. This introduces a particular epistemological bias that could have been countered if Arnaud had engaged with scholarship from and about the Caribbean. In his introduction, Arnaud describes the members of TBK as actors “doubly dispossessed of their capacity for cultural action” and “deprived of their means of action and lacking the cultural and social capital associated with cultural mobilizations” (p. 20). He asks: “How are dispositions to mobilization for and through cultural action created among actors who were a priori deprived of such dispositions?” (p. 15). Unfortunately, this a priori is never really questioned. Approached from a Caribbean(ist) perspective, the cultural and political achievements of TBK appear far from anomalous but rather as a modern-day extension of the work of cultural resistance and social transformation initiated by those enslaved on the edges of Caribbean plantations, a space where those apparently stripped of social, cultural, and political capital gave rise to new languages, religions, music, and dances and came to shape the cultural world of their masters and of a continent. This process, often associated with the concept of creolization, has been explored at length by Caribbean intellectuals as well as Caribbeanist anthropologists and cultural theorists. But perhaps it is the work of Edouard Glissant, the Martinican philosopher, that is most critically missing from Arnaud’s work. If, in addition to the classic class categories of European sociology, Arnaud had incorporated Glissant’s distinction, introduced in Le discours antillais (1981), between a classe dominante (dominating class) and a classe déterminante (influential, or decisive, class), he may have found TBK’s cultural influence and political reach less puzzling. There is truly a missed opportunity here because Arnaud’s mastery of the tools of European sociology would have enabled him to propose a social scientific counterpoint to Glissant’s poetics, offering—as the book already does without naming it—an empirical illustration of Glissantian concepts, such as the détour.
Arnaud’s work in Martinique demonstrates the portability of his previous analyses of l’agir culturel and, therefore, contributes to our understanding of French Antillean politics. Yet it also raises questions that cannot be ignored at a time when anthropology faces increasingly urgent calls to decolonize: Who has the authority to theorize? Who is treated as an object of study? Who benefits from the research and in what ways? Arnaud confronts some of these questions in an important appendix, but it would have been good to see matters of positionality, reflexivity, and epistemological authority further woven into the research. In a postcolonial context, the politics of research should not be treated as separate from the analysis, as Arnaud’s interlocutors seemed to have reminded him on several occasions. Nonetheless, the book remains a useful tool for those seeking a deeper understanding of cultural movements and cultural politics in France as well as for those interested in a precise analysis of Martinican cultural policies and cultural life.
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Jerome Camal is associate professor of anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His research focuses on music, dance, and postcoloniality across the French Atlantic world. He is the author of *Creolized Aurality: Guadeloupean Gwoka and Postcolonial Politics*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 2019. He holds a PhD in musicology from Washington University in Saint Louis.

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