

# A Note on Canoe Names in Martinique<sup>1</sup>

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MARTINIQUEAN OFFSHORE FISHERMEN PRACTICE varied and complex rituals to catch fish and to protect themselves against evil.<sup>2</sup> The hand-painted names of their sail or gasoline-powered canoes (*gommiers*) are often brought into this extensive system of magical beliefs. These are chosen a) by conferring with a professional ritual consultant, b) by selecting religious phrases – often misunderstood – from the Roman Catholic missal, or c) simply by personal inventiveness. Even when names are not explicitly magico-religious, they can strongly influence the fisherman's luck. The fisherman who believes himself "bewitched" often changes the name of his craft to confuse the forces of evil, usually with the assistance of a professional consultant, and when a second hand canoe is purchased, its name is almost always changed.

During recent research on local fishing magic, a complete census of canoe names was gathered for two villages on the southern coast of the island. The one-hundred-five canoe names are grouped for convenience below. Spelling and punctuation have been strictly respected.

These names were collected incidentally, but we have no doubt that a closer study of the significance of such canoe names, reported throughout the Antilles, would reap rich ethnographic rewards.

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<sup>2</sup> For details on fishing ritual and the life of local fishermen, see R. Price, "Magie et Pêche à la Martinique," *L'Homme*, IV, 2, pp. 84–113, Mai–Août 1964; and R. Price, "Fishing Rites and Recipes in a Martiniquan Village," *Caribbean Studies*, 6, 1 (1966).

## Saints' Names

Most Martiniquan fishermen pray to their patron saints in front of household chromolithographs before going to sea each morning. Saints are frequently invoked also in the many magical formulae used in fishing. St. Michel is locally recognized as the vanquisher of demons and is pictured on chromolithographs stamping out red devils. Far more than St. Pierre – ostensibly the fisherman's patron – St. Michel is invoked for protection and a bountiful catch. With eight local canoes named for him, he is the only figure whose name graces more than two craft. (Frequency of names is indicated in parentheses, when greater than one.) [No attempt has been made to alter or correct certain ungrammatical entries – ed. note.]

St Antoine	St. Joseph
St Benoit	Sainte Madelaine
St Cyprien	St Michel (5)
St Expedie	St. Michel (3)
St. Geneviev	St. Pierre
St. Henri	Saint Pierre Nolas
St Jeanne d'Arc	St. Simon (2)
St Jieanne d'Arc	

## Other Religious Names

Après Dieu	La Salette
Bénédictra	La Vierge
Confiance en Dieu (2)	L'Enfant Dieu
Dieu Commande	Les 7 Dons du St Esprit
Dieu Qui Ma Donn�	L'Imaculee conception
Dieu Vengeur de Ma Justice	L'Imaculee Conception
Dieu Seul qui Parfait	Me Voici Seigneur
Dieu Seul Sait	Notre Dm de BOULOGNNE
Ecce Homo	Reconnaissance � Dieu
Esprit Saint	Reine de Prophete
Gloire a Dieu	Remerciement A St Michel
Grace a Dieu	Revanche a Dieu
La Delivrance	Seigneur de l'Univers
“La Delivrance”	Volonte de Dieu (3)
La Priere de 5 Passions	

Proper Names

Alice	Marie
BIILL	Mécanie et Macsimin
Charlotte et Eleoncia	Mili
Clémence	Octavie et Anthemise
Denathaire	Sahra
Eulalie	Sylvina
Fatuma	Yvonne

Ship Names

South-coast fishermen must navigate the harbor of Fort-de-France to sell their catch at the central fish market. Both French merchant and war ships have lent their names to local canoes.

Georges Leygues	Marie Antoinette
La France	Reine de France
L'Aigle	V. de Marseille
La Seine	Vielle France
L'Empire Français	

Other Secular Names

Attention Myo	LAISSES YO DIT
Avec Patience	La Jeunesse Belle Messieu
Avec la Patience	La Patience
Bonheur	Le Jour est Arrive
Calida (meaning unknown)	M. Bien Faire Laissez Dire
Coiffeur	Mes Enfants
ELCETRA	Minoterie
Espoir	Monreve
Espoir Dans la Vie	Patience
Etoile de Mer	1 <sup>er</sup> Amour
Gadepocor <sup>3</sup>	Providence
Go Brave <sup>4</sup>	Quand Meme
La Fleur Sans Rivale	Reine sans Peine

<sup>3</sup> Compare with "Gadé pour cor ou" in J. Morice, "Les Gommiers," *Revue des Travaux de l'Institut de Pêches Maritimes*, 22 (1), 1958.

<sup>4</sup> This craft originally came from the neighboring British island of St. Lucia.

Revanche a Mes Parents	Tantot
Revanche aux Traîtres	Ti Cane
Revenu de Mes Enfants	Tic Toc
Sens Unique	Union des AMIS

#### Initial Names

Canoe names are not always spelled out in full; their meaning may be known only to the owner, sometimes only to the men of his hamlet. Initial names can be merely word games, but frequently reflect witchcraft fears. The ritual of disguise (e.g., turning one's clothes inside out, reversing canoe seats, changing canoe names) is a common defense against evil doers. The meanings of these names were particularly difficult to elicit, and "S.V.G." remains a mystery.

Ç A. Q. F. C A Ç. D. LAR D . . .

(according to owner: "Ça qui fait ça a cent dollars.")

E. de M. B. P.

("enfant de malheur, bonne prospérité")

MPS ("ma passion")

S.V.G.

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