

# CONQUERED BY A CREOLE

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This is the story of how I fell in love with Papiamentu. It began as a casual interest and curiosity and soon became a journey from which I will never return. Love changes us and there is no going back to who we were before. The process of embracing another language, inviting it to inhabit the innermost spaces of mind and heart, conquers us in a way that leads to an unconscious creolization of self. I recognize the irony of using this metaphor, perhaps inappropriately, when for many cultures, creolization is the result of violent conquest and continuing colonization. Yet there is beauty and strength in the resulting generations and in my case it has been a welcome imposition, a gentle yet powerful process of taking over of a part of my life. I have written a number of songs in Papiamentu that tell this story, and I will include a few of them here.

During my first visit to Curaçao, I was struck by the musical beauty of Papiamentu. Since I am a musician, it was that element that first captured my ear and heart. Many have written about Papiamentu and Curaçaoan culture; its kaleidoscopic identity and polysonic character. Against the backdrop of an impressively multilingual setting, melodies and rhythms from many parts of the world mix in a unique way in all of Curaçao's cultural production and no less in its creole language. Perhaps the most challenging aspect for foreigners trying to learn Papiamentu is the subtle tonal qualities of the language. As I struggled to learn Papiamentu's special music, Nydia Ecury, one of my first teachers, would often ask me if I could feel the African drums as I spoke. "You have to feel the drums," she would repeat, "You have to hear them underneath the words."

## **Kantika Nobo**

Solo di Karibe a drenta  
lusa un huki drumí  
di mi imaginashon.  
Bentana habrí,  
bos di bientu riba laman.  
M'a lanta fo'i soño,

## **New Song**

The Caribbean sun entered  
and lit a sleeping corner  
of my imagination.  
Open window, voice  
of wind on the sea.  
I awoke, stretched my limbs,

rèk mi kurpa, puntra mainta,  
di kon mi ta aki?  
Tende, djis tende, e di.

Lagadishi a para  
mirami un ratu,  
wowo pretu  
di misterio antiguo.  
Di kon? Mi ker a grita  
ora el a kore skonde  
den e matanan trankilo.  
Tende, djis tende, e di.

Kon yamabo?  
M'a puntra  
un palabra desconosí  
di zonidu straño i bashí.  
Ken bo ta?  
Pakiko bo ta eksistí?  
Tende, djis tende, e di.

Mi no sa, m'a pensa,  
pero mi a tende i sinti  
kon ritmo di tumba a nase.  
A nase poko poko  
den mi boka.  
Ta balia nos ta balia!  
Lenga a kanta.

Sonrisa di un mucha chikí,  
- mitar luna riba kara di  
anochi - a kohe mi man  
kariñosamente.  
i m'a entregá mi felismente,  
na dushi enkanto  
di papiamentu.  
Tende, djis tende, e di.  
Tende, djis tende, b'a tende?

and asked the morning,  
Why am I here?  
Listen, just listen, it said.

A lizard stopped  
to watch me awhile,  
dark eyes  
of ancient mystery.  
Why? I wanted to shout  
as he scurried off to hide  
in the quiet undergrowth.  
Listen, just listen, he said.

What is your name?  
I asked an unknown  
word of strange  
and empty sounds.  
Who are you?  
Why do you exist?  
Listen, just listen, it said.

I don't know, I thought  
but I listened  
and I felt the  
rhythm of tumba<sup>1</sup>  
begin to pulse in my mouth.  
"We're dancing, now we're  
dancing!" Language sang.

A child's bright smile  
- half moon on night's face -  
took my hand  
tenderly,  
and I surrendered joyfully,  
to the sweet enchantment  
of Papiamentu.  
Listen, just listen, she said.  
Listen, just listen, you hea?

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<sup>1</sup> Tumba is a rhythmic dance unique to Curaçao.

The first words I spoke to my new granddaughter, Greta, were in Papiamentu. She was two days old when I held her for the first time, and I unconsciously reached for the words that could best express the joy I felt. The word “dushi” (“sweet”) is very versatile in Papiamentu, but it has a special sweetness when used to address another person. From then on, I called Greta “dushi” or “pòpchi dushi” (sweet little doll). I love the Aruban expression “Madushi” for “Grandma” (“sweet mother”) and “Padushi” for “Grandpa,” so we adopted that vocabulary as well. Greta now knows me only as “Madushi” and she and her parents often refer to her grandfather and me together as “The Dushis.” I wrote a song for her when she was eight months old. She would dance to it with all her heart and could sing all the words in Papiamentu before she was two.

### **Greta**

Greta, Gretita,  
 mi nieta bunita,  
 nos ta hopi kontentu  
 ku bo ta aki.  
 Bo tata i mama,  
 padushi i tante  
 stimabu, mi pòpchi,  
 mes tantu ku mi.

Bo no solamente ta lif,  
 ta inteligente i dushi bo ta!  
 I ku bo sonrisa  
 Shon Shelu ta bisa  
 ku solo a hasi  
 tur hende felis.

Greta, little Greta,  
 my beautiful granddaughter,  
 we are so happy  
 that you are here.  
 Your papa and mama,  
 your grandpa and auntie  
 all love you, my *pòpchi*,  
 as much as I do.

And you are not only dear,  
 but you are sweet and intelligent,  
 too! And when you smile  
 Mister Sky tells us all  
 that the sun has come out  
 to bring everyone cheer.

My husband and I are both academics and we work in different states. We spend a lot of time apart. On one occasion I felt a bit melancholy and wanted to write a love song. When I write songs, the seeds often start to germinate on their own before I realize that the idea was even planted. In this case, by the time I had begun to think about a song, I found that the setting was already there, waiting for the story. Although it was winter in Indiana; cold and gray, with the seeming disconnection from all that is vibrant, passionate and intimate, the song began to take form against an Antillean backdrop. It would probably seem overly romantic, the stuff of movies, to anyone who has not lived there.

**Soledat**

Mi gusta muzik  
 di áwaseru  
 ora mi pensa riba ousensia  
 di mi amor;  
 Sinfonia sin palabra  
 kada gota ta un nota  
 ku ta laba, e ta laba  
 mi doló.

Solo sali i baha  
 tur dia  
 riba nostalgia lehano  
 di laman;  
 kada ola riba santu  
 ta kita pena mientrastantu  
 i tristesa ta lagami  
 te mañan.

Mi ta sinti melodia  
 di bo falta,  
 un serenata privá  
 den skuridat;  
 Mi ta warda un otro dia  
 sin mas kompania  
 ku mi kantika solitario  
 di soledat.

**Loneliness**

I like the music  
 of the rain  
 when I think of  
 the absence of my love;  
 A wordless symphony,  
 every drop is a note  
 that cleanses, cleanses  
 my pain.

The sun rises and sets  
 every day  
 over the distant nostalgia  
 of the sea;  
 Every wave on the sand  
 washes away a little pain  
 and the sadness leaves me  
 until tomorrow.

I can hear the melody  
 of missing you,  
 a private serenade  
 in the dark;  
 I wait for another day  
 and my only company  
 is my solitary song  
 of loneliness.

During my first visit to Curaçao, I met Ange Jessurun, a *yu 'i Kòrsou* (Curaçaoan – literally ‘child of Curaçao’) who has since become one of my closest friends. We call each other “*ruman*” (sister) and I always stay with her now during my visits. Soon after my granddaughter was born, she also became a grandmother, so I wrote a song for her granddaughter as well. The verses are in Papiamentu, but the chorus is in English. The girl’s name is Quiyomi, and I couldn’t imagine finding a rhyme for that in Papiamentu and the mixture of languages is part of Curaçaoan daily life. The English translation follows each verse.

## Quiyomi

Un beibi a nase pa mi ruman bira wela  
milaguer di bida e ta chispa di kandela.  
El a trese alegria na mundu awe  
i mi ta bai Kòrsou pa mi por kumind' é.

*A baby was born, and my sister became a grandmother.  
Miracle of life, she is a spark of fire.  
She has brought joy to the world today  
and I'm going to Curaçao so that I can greet her.*

Quiyomi, oh won't you show me  
the smile in your eyes and the sweetness in your heart?  
You don't know me, little Quiyomi  
but I already love you even though we're far apart.

Tempu lo pasa pa bo sigui ta krese  
i siña hopi kos ku futuro lo trese.  
No tin nada mas importante ku amor  
i rondoná di dje, hopi otro kos bo por.

*Time will pass, as you continue to grow  
and learn many things that the future will bring.  
There is nothing more important than love,  
and surrounded by it, you can do so much more.*

Quiyomi ...

Mi ta kanta pa bisabo ku bo tin un otro tia  
ku lo bin bishitabo for di Merka un dia.  
E ta wela tambe di un nietu masha dushi  
i e ke konosebo pa dunabo un gran sunchi.

*I am singing to tell that you have another aunt,  
who will come to visit you soon from America.  
She is a grandma, too, of a very sweet granddaughter,  
and I want to meet you so I can give you a big kiss.*

Quiyomi ...

As I spent more time in Curaçao, I became intrigued by and impressed with the great efforts to establish Papiamentu as a fully recognized and standardized language. The story is long and complex and involves the efforts of wise and dedicated linguists. There are many obstacles to overcome, not the least of which is the attitude of the native speakers themselves towards the language. During the years since I first came to Curaçao, I have seen much progress in many areas, and Papiamentu's growing status of prestige has become a model and inspiration for many other Creole languages. And yet, the road ahead is still long and hard and the doubts and discrimination still linger.

#### **Mosa Papiamentu**

Un dia di bishita riba un isla spesial  
un mosa bunita ku stèm musikal  
su manera di papia a toka mi kurason  
kara inteligente, lenga di rason.

M'a puntr'é kon yama e dushi lenga di dje  
su kontesta a sorprendemi ora mi a tend'é  
“mi lenga no ta lenga, dialekto só e ta  
i ounke nos ta papi'é, e no ta respetá.”

Mosa, kerido mosa Papiamentu,  
di kon bo ta keda den kushina te ainda?  
Hopi kos a – a pasabo den bo bida  
i bo meresé mas ku sirbi kuminda.

E dianan a pasa, m'a tende hopi kos,  
diskurso profundo i serio den su bos  
poesia i arte, m'a keda impreshoná  
ku tur e bunitesa ku e por a ekspresá.

Bokabulario diverso, struktura lógiko  
historia fasinante, skritura fonétiko  
orguyo kresiente pa brasa identidat  
i bira konsiente di su propio dignidat.

#### **Mosa Papiamentu**

One day when visiting a special island  
a beautiful girl with a musical voice –  
her way of speaking touched my heart,  
intelligent face, tongue of reason.

I asked her the name of her sweet language, and  
her reply surprised me when I heard it. “My  
language is not a language – it's just a dialect and  
even though we speak it, it is not respected.”

Mosa (girl), dear Mosa Papiamentu  
why do you stay in the kitchen still?  
Many things have happened to you in your life  
and you deserve more than just serving food.

The days passed and I heard many things,  
profound and serious speeches in her voice,  
poetry and art – I was very impressed  
by all the beauty that she could express.

A diverse vocabulary, logical structure,  
fascinating history, phonetic writing,  
a growing pride in embracing identity  
and becoming aware of her own dignity.

Mosa, kerido Mosa Papiamentu...

Awor ku e ta traha ku enseñansa di skol  
tin hende ku no tin konfiansa ètòl.  
Ku pasenshi pedagógiko, un tiki di amor,  
i apoyo filosófiko, tur lenga tambe por.

Esaki ta un reto pa tur lenga krioyo  
di defend' é su kurpa, fomentá su desaroyo.  
I manera den kushina, diversidat ta di balor  
i kada idioma ta duna mundu mas sabor.

Mosa, dear Mosa Papiamentu ...

Now that she works with teaching in school  
some people have no confidence at all.  
But with pedagogical patience, a bit of love  
and philosophical support, any language can do  
it..

This is the challenge for all creole languages: to  
defend themselves and promote their  
development. And just as in the kitchen, diversity  
is of value and each language gives the world a  
little more flavor.

By 2003 I had become proficient enough in Papiamentu to teach a basic class in the language. I developed my own materials with the help of a number of people from Curaçao. There has been a lot of interest in Papiamentu among my students and it is a joy to teach the class. Most already have background in at least one Romance language and often another one or more other than English. One gray day in February, when the students seemed tired and depressed by the depths of winter, I said jokingly in Papiamentu class, that if they spoke lots of Papiamentu, the sun would shine and they would cheer up, since the language has sunshine in it. It works for me! Soon another song was born.

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### **Tin solo den dje**

Si shelu ta tur shinishi ora bo lanta un dia,  
speransa no por a wanta i el a bai ku alegria,  
tin un remedi hopi sano i natural pa bo fia;  
e ta un lenga antiano pa rekargá bo bateria.

Si bo bida ta tristu i tur kos a bira bieu,  
mundu ta konhelá i derá bou di sneu,  
ta soña bo ta soña ku un playa ku ta leu,  
awèl djis kanta i papia papiamentu pareu.

Tin solo den dje, tin solo den dje  
shelu ta bira kla, para ta kanta kuné.  
Laman ta tuma man di Shon Brisa un be'  
i henter mundu ta balia huntu, ku lagadishi tambe.

Si bo sinti deprimí ku e friu den momentu,  
e rekompensa di pensa di siña papiamentu  
ta un mundu profundo di kalor i sentimentu,  
i lagadishi su fishi ta hasibo ta kontentu.

Pa koló tin hopi flor i bista spesial,  
tin kabritu chikitu ku otro animal,  
un bida ku ta move ku muzik di trupial,  
i su hende, kende ta amabel i genial.

Tin solo den dje...

### **There's Sunshine in it**

If the sky is all gray when you get up one day,  
Hope has given up and run off with Joy,  
there's a healthy and natural remedy you can borrow:  
it's an Antillean language to recharge your battery!

If your life is sad and everything's gotten old,  
the world is frozen and covered with snow,  
And you can't stop dreaming of a beach far away,  
well, just start singing and speaking Papiamentu.

There's sunshine it, there's sunshine in it,  
the sky will clear up and the birds begin to sing,  
The Sea takes Mrs. Breeze by the hand  
and the whole world dances, even the little lizard.

If you feel depressed by the cold of the moment,  
the reward for deciding to learn Papiamentu  
is a world of profound warmth and sentiment,  
and it's the lizard's job to make you happy.

For color there are many flowers and beautiful views,  
there are little goats and other animals, too.  
A life that moves to the music of the trupial bird,  
and a people who are both friendly and kind.

There's sunshine it...



Every other year, after teaching a semester of Basic Papiamentu, I take a group of students to Curaçao for an intensive three-week course of immersion in the language and culture. They live with a host family and we explore many aspects of life in Curaçao. It is a marvelous experience and I continue to learn a lot alongside the students. Last year the group was very small, only four girls, so it made for an intimate shared experience traveling around together. There were many jokes, including “Teng Li”, the Chinese restaurant where I was supposed to turn to go to the place where we stayed during the first days of the program. I would often miss it and the girls had to remind me. I wrote a song to include many of those moments.

### **Tutu ku Funchi**

Un merikano a bin Kòrsou  
konosé henter isla te Banda Bou  
namorá di dje i tur kos ku tin  
kasi bira antiyano di tantu baibin.

El a trese studiante pa nan konos’é  
siña papiamentu i apresié’  
“Kon ta bai?” “Bon dia” nan a kuminsá  
“Tur kos ta bon, masha danki, no wòri, sè sua.”

Tutu ku funchi, duna tres sunchi  
baila mazurka, un tiki tumba i tambú  
skucha hende pa “Si” i hende pa “Nò”  
or’e dia a pasa nan tur ta yu’i Kòrsou.

Di Emily tin dos, e ta un nòmber konosí  
nos ta yama unu ‘Emi’ i e otro ‘EB’  
ku Mandi i Katie ta kuater nan ta,  
un grupo masha úniko i hopi stimá.

Nan a siña papiamentu, nan ta masha lif  
nan palabra faborito mester ta “ablif?”  
“Mi ta hasi mi bèst” “Unda nos ta bai?”  
Tin biaha e ta difísil pero nan tin kai kai.

Tutu ku funchi...

Nos a keiru nos a kore, “Kathy, Teng Li!”  
“Tur kos na papiamentu, m’n sa kiko e di”

Nan ta yama nos makamba, tambe ‘rubiano  
nos kurason ta di aki, ku pasport merikano.

Den masha tiki tempu nan por papia bon bon  
tur hende ta puntra nan “Pakiko?” i “dikon?”  
E kontesta ta bunita i e por sirbi pa bo  
“Pasobra—e ta dushi i ademas dikon nò?”

Tutu ku funchi...

### **Tutu and Funchi<sup>2</sup>**

An American came to Curaçao,  
got to know the whole island,  
fell in love in love with it all and  
came so often she almost became Antillean.

She brought students to know the island,  
to learn Papiamentu and appreciate it.  
“How are you? Good morning.” they began,  
“I am fine, thank you, don’t worry, be cool.”

*Tutu and funchi*, give three kisses,  
dance Mazurka, a little Tumba and Tambú<sup>3</sup>,  
listen to those who vote ‘yes’ and those who say ‘no,’<sup>4</sup>  
when the day is over, they are all Curaçaoans.

There are two Emily’s, a well known name,<sup>5</sup>  
we call one ‘Emi’ and the other ‘E.B.’  
With Mandy and Katie they are four,  
a unique and beloved group.

They have learned Papiamentu, they are very sweet,  
their favorite word must be *abliif*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Traditional food of Curaçao. Tutu is a kind of bean loaf and Funchi is a cornmeal dish, similar to polenta.

<sup>3</sup> Traditional dances of Curaçao, reflecting both European and African influence.

<sup>4</sup> We were in Curaçao during the Referendum of 2009, when the island voted whether or not to accept a proposed plan for moving to a status of autonomy within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The people were divided nearly 50/50, but the ‘yes’ vote won.

<sup>5</sup> Emily De Jongh Elhage is the Prime Minister of the Netherlands Antilles and her name and face are on billboards everywhere.

<sup>6</sup> From the Dutch ‘Wabliief t – short for Wat belieft u? (What do you want?)’, commonly used to ask someone politely to repeat what they have said.

“I’m doing my best.” “Where are we going?”  
At times it’s hard, but they have a lot of guts.

We have traveled all over, “Kathy, Teng Li!”<sup>7</sup>  
Everything in Papiamentu, I don’t understand.  
They call us *Makamba*<sup>8</sup> and also Aruban  
Our hearts are from here, with an American passport.

In very little time they can speak quite well,  
everyone asks them “Why?” and “What for?”  
The answer is beautiful and it can work for you.  
“Because - it’s *dushi*<sup>9</sup>, and also, why not?”

As I finish writing this I am in Curaçao getting ready to record a CD of my songs in Papiamentu. It is not the end of the story, but I am reminded of how blessed I have been by my love affair with this language and culture. For me, there is no better way to celebrate such a beautiful melodic language than with song. I know there will always be a space for this creole part of me and I look forward to many more songs to come.

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<sup>7</sup> A Chinese restaurant that was a landmark for us.

<sup>8</sup> A somewhat pejorative term for Dutch people in Curaçao.

<sup>9</sup> *dushi* – a wonderful all-purpose word for anything pleasant or loved – literally ‘sweet.’

