

APRIL 2021

“TOUTAN GEN DLO NAN
LANME A MAP ESEYE TOUJOU”*

This is my story

* "As long as there is water in the sea, I will always try."



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“GEN KAPITENN KI KONN
FÈ SAKRIFIS”



JOHNY
Jean-Rabel, North West
Canvassers

Trad. I - “There are captains who make sacrifices.”

“For us, it’s not an easy job: once, we had just left when the rudder broke. I had to dive underwater to repair it and get my crew and passengers to safety. I succeeded, but during the operation a dangerous fish stung me: I had barely 24 hours to get to the hospital and not die. When this type of thing happens to you, there is no one to help you, not even the ship owner!” Sailor, Port-de-Paix, March 2021.

“Before the trip, we, along with all the passengers, perform a ceremony using the Ougan to bless the trip and invoke the Mèt Agwe (editor’s note: Vodoun deity, protector of the sea) who will protect us during the crossing. For us who are used to this type of trip, the sea does not scare us. However, the majority of the passengers know nothing about the sea and they get sick immediately. We give them buckets so that they can vomit. Sometimes, as soon as they feel bad, they throw themselves into the sea. When the wind is not in our favor, we have to “buy it”. We call it sacrifice” Captain, Saint-Louis-du-Nord, March 2021

“When we arrive at our destination in the morning, we have to wait for the sun to set to disembark the passengers in secret. During this time we stay in the heat with the terror of being discovered. Sometimes passengers think they have arrived and get off the boat on sandbanks that are flush with the boat, but then the tide comes in and they don’t know how to swim... That’s how we lose customers: *Si pa gen okenn moun ki mouri nan men w, wap vin gen plis kliyan, ou gen plis clien* (Translation: If you are known for not causing fatal accidents during your trip, then you will have more customers).” Canvassers, Jean-Rabel, March 2021.

“The boat almost never has a document because it is riskier if the boat is registered. In any case, in Haiti the authorities do not perform checks, it is in foreign waters that we have problems.” Captain, Bas Limbé, March 2021.



“SIW GEN KOB,
YO CHIRE LI.
SIW GENTELEFÒN
YO KRAZE LI.”



KATIA
Cap-Haitien, North
Migrant
(Last trip: January 2021)

Trad. 2 - “If you have money, they tear it up. If you have a phone, they destroy it.”

“I was born in Haiti, but I lived in Providenciales (Turks and Caicos Islands) for 3 years where I met my Haitian husband, with whom I have a child who is now 8 years old. They still live there, while I was repatriated to Haiti in 2015 because my visa had expired. One day, the police came to my house very late at night and asked me for my papers. I didn't have them up to date: they took me straight away!

Now I want to go back abroad because my life is there, my family is there, here I have nothing. In spite of that, I can't renew my visa and leave legally, that's why I try to take the boat as soon as the opportunity arises.

The last time (January 2021), it didn't go well: I paid 2,000 USD to travel in a motor yacht, but the organizers put us in a little boat. We left at 10 am, all crammed in the hold to hide from the police, but a few hours later the Coast Guard arrested us. We suspect that someone in bad faith reported our arrival to the police authorities of the Turks and Caicos Islands, because otherwise it would be inexplicable that they were able to detect us at sea (editor's note: The boat was intercepted at sea by the Royal Police Force of the Turks and Caicos Islands northwest of Bonefish Point, with the use of the latest radar technology).

When we disembarked, the Turks and Caicos Island Police searched our belongings and if the officers found any Haitian money, they tore it up in front of us. I had my phone with me, they seized it and destroyed it in front of me.

After that, they took us to the detention center, boys on one side, girls on the other, and two days later they flew us back to Cap-Haitien.”



ERNSO

Port-de-Paix, North West

Migrant

(Repatriated in August 2016)

“LÈ OU RIVÈ LÒT BO A,
KAPITÈN NAN DI NOU :
KOURI, KOURI, TOUT
MOUN KOURI!”

Trad. 3 - “When you arrive at your destination, the captain tells you: run, run,
everyone run!”

“I am 41 years old. I was 26 when I went on a boat for the first time 6 years ago. . We were 380 passengers. I didn't tell anyone about my umpteenth trip. It's not something you share with everyone. I didn't know the conditions of the trip, I just gave the total amount (550 USD) to the canvasser two weeks before the departure, then I waited for him to come back to me to inform me about the day and time to show up at the boarding point.

After 5 days of travel, one morning at 3 o'clock the captain announced that the trip was over. We were still in the open sea, there was just a small island, the captain told us that once we got off the boat we had to run to the right to look for the connection between the sandbank and the mainland, and that after that we would be saved! *Kounye a: kouri, kouri, tout moun kouri!* (Translation: Run, run, and we started to run!).

When I arrived, I slept in the forest for a year. Together with other compatriots we had rented a small warehouse in a Bahamian's house, only to store our things, but we were living in a totally clandestine way.

I got a daily job as a mason as soon as I arrived. *Yo baw 150 USD: ou prey; yo baw 100 USD: ou prey; yo baw 50 USD: lakay pa bon, ou blije prann yo.* (Translation: If they offer you 150 USD you take it, if they offer you 100 USD you take it, if they offer you 50 USD even though it's not good, you have to take it anyway). I had to pay back my debt to the person who had paid me for the trip and so I was obliged to accept the fee that the employer offered me, even if it wasn't much.

During my 6-year stay in the Bahamas, I managed to save money to buy a small piece of land in Jean-Rabel (editor's note: North West, Haiti) and now I have my vegetable garden and my house. It allowed me to never try to leave again...at least not by boat!”



“WAP FÈ TOUT PANSE : SI
M PRAL MOURI M KITE
PITIT MWEN DEYÈ!”



CACOURT
Cap-Haïtien, North
Migrant
(Last trip : March 2021)

Trad. 4 - “You think about a lot of things: if something happened to me, my children would be left to their fate.”

“I am 34 years old and a mother. It was the first time I travelled by boat. A cousin of mine convinced me that going abroad (e.g. Turks and Caicos Islands) was the only way to improve my life and that of my family.

I was afraid, yes! Before you embark, they always tell you that there are three options: “*Gen prizon, gen rive, gen mouri!*” (Translated: either they arrest you, you arrive safely or you die).

When the boat hit the reef, I could see the water rising in the boat. I, like many other passengers, cannot swim, it was my first experience at sea. We didn't have life jackets. We were crammed together and the space on the boat was getting smaller every moment. I thought I was going to die. We started screaming for help and finally the Coast Guard arrived to save us.

Two days later, we were flown back to Cap-Haïtien. The ONM (National Office of Migration) registered us but most of us never give our real name or city of origin. We are afraid of reprisals or that they will denounce us and we would not be able to leave again by boat.

“IOM gave us some money to start a new business, but *li gen tan fini, wi* (Translation: it was quickly spent!) I bought food supplies for my family and then I invested the remaining sum... As soon as I get the money together for another trip by sea, I'll go back!”

“NOU PEDI KAP, NOU TE FÈ 14
JOU NAN LANME A, MANJE A
FINI, MENM DLO A FINI!”



TI BEN
Saint-Louis-du-Nord, North
West

*Trad. 5 - “We lost the cape, we stayed 14 days at sea,
there was no food, not even water.”*

“I was 16 the first time I traveled. One day, a friend put this idea in my head and a week later I was on the boat. Since then, I have been a sailor!

I know that it is not a legal trip, because you don’t have any document with you, but we offer a *korek* trip (Translation: correct trip) according to the conditions of the crossing. For example: two years ago, I made a *vwoyaje ki pat korek* (Translation: not correct trip): I was a sailor on a boat that was supposed to arrive in Miami, but it lost its course. We spent 14 days at sea. The trip took longer than expected and there was not enough food stored for everyone. There were more than 90 of us on a 12-meter sailboat. The passengers had nothing to eat or drink after 7 days. During this trip, two people lost their lives and the captain himself lost consciousness. At that moment, with my rudimentary knowledge of navigation, I took over for two days and two nights until we reached the Cuban coast. There, we stocked up on food and headed back to Inagua (Bahamas). The Cubans like us and they always help us when we are in trouble!”

- Are you glad you tried to leave Haiti? Yes, very much, because here we live badly!
- Are you planning to make this trip again? *M panse fèl, wi!* (Translation. I think I will do it again, yes)



“YO TE PASE DEVAN’N,
YO PAT WE NOU.
POU YO WÈ NOU SE MAJI
A NOU DEFÈT.”



John Joseph
Pillatre, North
Captain


Trad. 6 - “The Coast Guard passed us by and did not see us. For them to see us, we had to undo the magic.”

“I have been working as a boat captain for a year. Before, I lived in Port-au-Prince with my wife and two children. Now I have rebuilt my life here in the north of the country. This type of business suits me much better: thanks to the trip, I manage to earn the price of the trip for 5 passengers, between 2,000 and 5,000 USD.

The last trip I took was in January (2021), with a 40-foot (12.2 meters) wooden boat with two engines. It carried 159 passengers to the Turks and Caicos Islands. It did not reach its destination: at 4 am the boat hit a reef, which punctured the boat and water started entering the boat. I quickly undid the magic to make us visible to the Turks and Caicos Coast Guard and allow them to rescue us.

When the Coast Guard arrived, we all said *pa gen moun ki kapitenn* (Translation: There is no captain among us). If they can identify the person in charge of the boat, they arrest him and put him in jail. The sentence is often very expensive and very long (editor’s note: between 3,000 and 20,000 USD and between 10 months and 5 years in prison).

When a trip is not successful, the passengers lose their investment and there is no possibility of reimbursement, but they are not angry: they went on a boat trip, they spent some time in the Turks and Caicos Islands (in the detention center), and they came back to Haiti for free and by plane: finally, it’s worth a try!”



“NOU TE GEN PWOBLEM
AK MOTÈ A, NOU TE
MANDE ED, EPI YO TIRE
SOU NOU”



NENE
Jean-Rabel, North West
Migrant
(Last trip: April 2019)

Trad. 7 - “We had a problem with the engine, we asked for help,
and then they shot at us.”

“On my third trip, I decided to go to Providenciales in a motorboat that came out of Oboy (editor’s note: Le Borgne). There were more than 100 of us, including at least 27 women.

They told us that the trip would take 5 hours, but after 3 days of sailing without ever seeing land, the captain told us that he had gotten lost, and on top of that the engine had broken down. I started screaming in panic. *Pilot la li pale mal avem : li te dim lap lagem nan dlo a sim pap sispann kriye !* (Translation: the captain insulted me by threatening to throw me overboard if I didn’t stop crying).

Finally, after a few hours we came across some fishermen and asked them for help. Once we were close to the shore we didn’t even have time to get off the boat when they shot at us. I jumped into the water, even though I couldn’t swim. All of us abandoned the boat and while they stole the gasoline, the engine, and everything in the boat, the police arrested us. After two nights of sleeping on the floor of the prison, they took us back to Ouanaminthe by land, and that’s when I realized that we were prisoners in the Dominican Republic.

I returned immediately to Jean-Rabel, and a few days later I left with the same captain and the same price that I had given (editor’s note: 330 USD, or 50% of the total), but this time on a yacht. We were only 27 people. We arrived in Providenciales but when we disembarked the police came upon us and repatriated us.”

A man with a shaved head, wearing a colorful patterned t-shirt and dark shorts, stands on a beach. The beach is heavily littered with plastic waste, including bottles, bags, and other debris. A small, weathered wooden boat is partially visible behind him. In the background, there is a calm sea and a clear blue sky. A dark blue text box is overlaid on the top left of the image.

“NOU RISKE LAVI PAN, NOU
RISKE PRAN PRIZON NAN,
TOUT SA POU FÈ LAVI MIYO
POU MOUN KIVLE PATI !”



WISLY
Port-de-Paix, North West
Captain

Trad. 8 - “We risk our lives, we risk prison, all to make life better for those who want to leave.”

“I am the best captain in the region, I have been getting on and off boats since I was 12 years old. I also pilot cargo ships throughout the Caribbean! My favorite routes are Dominican Republic - Miami (via Puerto Rico) and Haiti - Miami (via the Bahamas).

I have an excellent reputation. The passengers are safe with me and the owner has full confidence in me. I have never failed! To handle a boat, you need experience. You can't play with the lives of hundreds of people. Unlike other captains, I control the weather, the winds and the currents, I follow the stars and I watch the birds. I have a compass and a GPS. And then the mystique does the rest. When the travelers are gathered on Tortuga Island, the boat is ready and the provisions are stored, the shipowner calls me to go there with the sailors I have chosen. The price per passenger is not fixed, sometimes it does not depend on the destination but on the economic possibility of each candidate and his relations with the shipowner. When the Coast Guard stops us, I hide the passengers in the hold and then I pretend to be a fisherman who has lost his course. They give me the direction to Haiti, I wait a few hours and then I take my original route. Once I arrive at my destination, if I have driven a wooden sailboat, I sink the boat so as not to leave any trace of my passage, I wander around the Bahamas for a few days like any other undocumented migrant and when I want to go back to Haiti I let myself be caught by the migration agents who repatriate me free of charge by plane.

When it's a yacht, you have to bring it back to Haiti. In this case, it is possible that the boat is correctly registered (even if the owner almost never gives his real name). Once it arrives abroad, the yacht is loaded with goods from the United States, such as food products, sanitary products, used clothing, etc.) for resale in Haiti (obviously, without going through customs!).

Every time I go to sea, I am aware of the risks I face, but I am offering a service to the community that is looking for a better life. Now that I have saved enough money to get a legal visa to migrate to the US, I want to end this job!”



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« Kan chèche kibò lavi fè kwen »

(We go in search of a better life)

Bélo



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