

## A SPECIAL CELEBRATION. *Reynald Altéma, MD*

Jean-Marie Pierre David Auguste Michel François Chenet, better known as Papi, was born December 25, 1900. A bygone era when the number of forenames sent the strongest signal about one's caste status. A scion of Rigaud, Mr. Chenet had retained the ways, customs and sensibilities of his caste, in keeping with the tradition of tribe of our African ancestors. He believed he was a Frenchman, a misfit living in a tropical country by an accident of nature. France as he saw it posed as the universe's epicenter, and its culture as his North Star. From his perspective, he was living in an environment that didn't jibe with his refined tastes.

A brilliant mind had begotten such a haughty attitude. He had studied Medicine in France. As a polyglot, he was fluent in French, Spanish, German and English. As for Creole, that he didn't consider a lingua franca, he only used it to interact with members of the other tribe as necessary. Its use was forbidden at his home. A music lover, he played piano with ease. He had a well-stocked library but Eurocentric in orientation. One wouldn't find Price Mars or other local authors regardless of international fame. Roumain, a member of his caste, remained a nemesis because Mr. Chenet despised his liberal ideas. He had a biased mind albeit in a head full of knowledge.

His erudition, as remarkable as it was, remained stymied by blinders. His lenses couldn't see and therefore appreciate but the works of Europeans or their heirs. He would read Gobineau but would eschew Firmin. The literary output of Langston Hughes and the members of the Harlem Renaissance, iconic though they were in his country at that time, didn't sway him a bit. He would play Chopin but would ignore Ludovic Lamothe. Pulsed by the zeal of his "francofolie," Mr. Chenet would accept a revisionist interpretation of our history. As far as he was concerned, 1804 amounted to an aberration. The free fall that took place since, the result of mismanagement, ill-conceived economic policy supported his take of the events; our strangulation by powerful foreign forces were not a factor to consider. *We would have been better off to hitch our fate to the Hexagon's star*, such a statement would resume his creed and his compass in life.

Despite his dislike of the other tribe, Mr. Chenet led an exemplary life. Married to the only woman in his caste who ever charmed him, his world centered around his family life. Sanctimonious, he followed the religious rules and never had a mistress, neither smoked nor drank. He took special pride in overseeing the education of his children. His passionate listening of classical music fulfilled the mission of a favorite pastime; every member of the household had to master an instrument without exception. His cultural ecosystem included reading, music, and strict adherence to the caste system.

Without surprise, his residence looked like a plantation by design or happenstance. It occupied a city block. In this oasis, the only members of the other tribe present were of the butler class. His family members were under the strict consign to only socialize with their own caste. His own house, spacious and a two-story architectural marvel in the gingerbread style was at the center of the lot. At each corner, he had built a house for each one of his daughters. The oldest and her cadet had rewarded him by marrying each a French citizen met while studying abroad. The younger two had listened to him in choosing a member of their own tribe. However, his only son and the youngest, Jean-Pierre Joachin Emmanuel Paul Saül Gustave, the rebel in the family, Paulo for close ones, on whom he was counting to keep the male lineage, had disobeyed him. He crossed the dividing line in his alliance with a woman of the other tribe, descendant of Anténor Firmin. Paulo had the nerve and the gall to say to his father in the presence of the other members of the family, "By taking Geneviève as wife, I am recreating 1804. The alliance of the two castes has

always been fruitful for the nation. This internecine division based on the caste system needs to end.” The challenge to his authority by this disobedience, the audacity of the heretical invective and the transgression earned him complete banishment from the family. He had become persona non grata. Mr. Chenet had never faced a rebellion from within his family and couldn’t digest such an act.

On December 24, 1960, bed-bound and feverish, Papi said to Aline, his oldest daughter, “I would like to see Paulo for the celebration tomorrow.” That would be his sixtieth anniversary. This request had the reverberation of a funeral, for Paulo was an undesirable in the family compounds. There was no other meaning but the foreboding of an imminent death. Her father’s life for the last fifteen years ignored Paulo’s. In the obituary of his wife two years before, the names of Paulo and the members of his family were omitted. Papi had never seen or known his grandkids, since none of his daughters was able to procreate. As per the gossip, the Providence had bestowed him with a vengeful curse. As family patriarch, he made his decisions in an authoritarian and irreversible manner, yet always with an obsequious bent toward his French sons-in-law.

Christmas celebration held a special place in Papi’s heart. A devout Catholic, Mr. Chenet participated in all the religious ceremonies associated with this most holy day. At the same time, the Christmas festivities at the Chenets’ residence showcased pomp and circumstance. That translated into a family concert with Mr. Chenet on piano and his daughters singing as choir. He fawned over Aline’s recital, as she had studied piano at a music conservatory. Gounod’s Ave Maria held the distinction of his favorite hymn. Paulo in the days used to play either the piano or the violin with great dexterity. The wont was to segue the musical delight with a lavish feast, an extraordinary culinary adventure for the finale. Papi was known for his extreme generosity toward his progeny. His stinginess with his servants and members of the other tribe offered a marked contrast.

The choice of Aline to handle this mission reflected a deliberate act, well calibrated and not a miscue. In her capacity as first daughter to begin with and then as Paulo’s godmother, she retained the moral authority and the sentimental bond necessary to smooch the wayward son. However, this order would be delicate to carry out because the entire family disliked Paulo’s wife for one unforgivable stigma: her dark hue. Aline had to know that Paulo would never come without his wife, a peerless black beauty, who had captured his heart. Aline had once tried to invite him alone to her house and his response was fire and fury, “I don’t go anywhere without my wife.” Aline, terrified by the idea of Papi’s imminent demise, was thinking hard about the best way to complete this difficult task that by its sensitive nature had her in a very awkward situation. If Papi was going through his last days, she would have to do everything to grant his wish, lest she harbor guilt for the rest of her life. She also knew that Paulo inherited from Papi the donkey’s stubbornness and the unflinching conviction of a monk. What should she do? Facing this murky situation, Aline decided to go to her brother’s house to convey the message in the presence of his wife Geneviève. “Papi asked me to invite you to the celebration of his birthday. He is gravely ill, and I am afraid this could be his last,” Aline announced with a sad mien, ill at ease in the presence of a sister-in-law that she had always ignored. “First of all, let me begin with a reminder about basic courtesy. You didn’t greet my wife properly and this is not acceptable in this house. If you can’t do it, get out and don’t ever come back.”

Making the best out of a bad situation, Aline had to greet Geneviève with the best manners. She saw up-close for the first time her nephew and niece; the boy looked like his grandfather and the girl looked like her grandmother both on the paternal side. Suddenly Aline felt a mixture of emotions. On one hand, the familiar features of the children so far unknown reminded her of their

consanguinity; that offered a spontaneous and beneficent soothing. On the other hand, the optics unleashed an acute shame that provoked formation of tears that she could hardly contain. The sight of the children reminded her in the worst way of her own infertility; that in turn opened a wound that had never healed. She was in the throes of a meltdown.

Paulo, worried about the discomfort, the agony of his sister, but stung in his pride by the rejection of his choice of a spouse, couldn't refrain from bellowing, "No question of participating at a celebration after all these years of scorn. If he's dying, I'll visit him, but I'll not participate in a charade!" These strong words lost their sting when he saw the scene that he had dreamt of so many times: a buoyant Aline hugging her nephew and niece. The tears that she shed were a surprise that mollified him.

"My little darlings, you are so cute!" Aline went straight to Geneviève for a warm embrace, albeit late, nonetheless welcomed, a caress better expressed by showing than by telling. Aline then turned toward Paulo, "No question of you coming over to visit us. The entire family will come here." From meltdown, Aline had an epiphany. This eureka moment came suddenly and in a fell swoop, it cleansed the grime of a cataract that cluttered her lenses. Indeed, she left Paulo's house promising to come back later. She figured she wouldn't have any difficulty to convince her husband who had quite a bit of influence on her father. Her father would feel uneasy disagreeing with his son-in-law; her sisters wouldn't oppose Papi, once he were to make a decision. Fact remained they all lived under his authority.

However, the task was easier than predicted. Each one wanted to thaw the ice, but pride was involved and furthermore people wanted to stay clear of this matter to avoid lighting a powder keg. Papi's reaction was surprising. "I can't leave this world in peace without a reconciliation with my son. Your mother had asked me to do so when she was sick, but I was obstinate and blinded by my prejudices." The thirst for this reconciliation turned out to be widespread. To start the healing of the scar, several steps took place. In the first place, the sisters went on a shopping spree for gifts for their nephew, niece, sister-in-law and brother. Next, they all went to visit Paulo to meet Geneviève and the children. All the sobbing was enough to fill cups with tears as they cried their hearts out. Christmas Eve predisposes the heart toward forbearance; it fills the lungs with pure air and liberates the mind of sinister thoughts.

The sisters' visit, aunts' gifts, warm tears of sisters-in-law had a cumulative and positive effect with a natural amplification. Paulo brought his family to visit his father at his bedside. Papi had the surprise of his life, rejoicing in the special glee known only by grandparents. This felicity twinned with the shame of an existence based on a warp premise of the superiority of a caste. This shame forced Papi to acquire a tardy humility to express a contrition left hanging for far too long.

With everyone watching and listening, with a trembling voice and directed at Paulo, Geneviève and their two children, Papi gathered all of his energy in a final effort, "One thousand regrets and apologies for all the pain I have caused. That would please me to keep the tradition of my birthday's celebration with all the members of my family, without exception." Then turning toward Paulo, with an expression of mental anguish and physical suffering, with diffuse perspiration and high fever, he pushed himself to add haltingly, "You... were right. The alliance of the two camps .... was always fruitful. I ... regret this error." He then promptly fell into a coma. The previous day, his physician, an old friend, had made the diagnosis of acute pneumonia. Mr. Chenet had decided to remain in bed, no matter what.

This Christmas Day, the celebration did take place, with the participation of the entire family, but Papi was confined in his room comatose. What could have been a swan song turned out to be sirens' song. Paulo left the assistance slack-jawed by playing a version of Choucouné at

the violin and Geneviève as singer and pianist, creating a lenitive atmosphere, giving goose bumps to each attendee. To end the session, a trio of Paulo on the violin, Aline on the piano, Geneviève as mezzo-soprano, enlivened with a rendition of Gounod's Ave Maria. As proof of poetic justice, Papi expired after this majestic interpretation.