

Transcript

My name is Jeff Fischer, and I served as the co-manager of an electoral assistance project for the International Foundation for Electoral Systems in Haiti for the 1990 general election.

A few days before his February 7th, 1991 inauguration, as Haiti's first democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide made a simple request to the Haitian people. He asked them to beautify the capital Port-au-Prince's best face should be shown to the influx of people expected to attend the event.

Aristide had received a first-ballot majority of over 65% in a field of 11 candidates and his popularity translated into an overwhelming and positive response to the former priest's request. People set to work in the neighborhoods, sweeping, whitewashing, and removing debris.

They also started to paint. They painted curbing, utility poles, and guard rails with the national, red, and blue colors. The city began to take on a carnival appearance, with improvised banners and decorations strung across its narrow streets.

Self-appointed teams set up collection stands to raise money to buy cleaning and painting supplies, and to direct traffic around the work in progress. Like the writers of New York City's freeways and subways at the time, a public canvas had been selected. This public artwork took on a profound appearance when hundreds of street paintings began to appear around

the capital on walls and buildings, on main thoroughfares, and side alleys. Murals of varying themes and sizes were created by neighborhood artists. The themes and symbols employed were political, social, and religious in nature. However, others were portraits of ordinary life.

Some of the paintings contained images and written messages, others portrayed with images alone. In addition to portraits of the new President, the flag, and country, three symbols appeared frequently in the works reflecting the themes of the Aristide campaign.

The first symbol was the rooster in the campaign. Each political party chose a symbol to

appear on the ballot, and Aristide's party symbol was the rooster. The Creole sobriquet, kok kalite, or the quality rooster, was applied to his candidacy. In the Haitian tradition of cock fighting. The kok kalite is the rooster that never loses; a fighter. The champion.

The second symbol was that of se lavalas. The meaning of this Creole word has been described in several ways as avalanche, flood, or torrent. More frequently as the scene of two rivers converging. It was meant to convey the image of the mass of hope of Haitian people coalescing in support of the Aristide candidacy to overwhelm Dictator Duvalier and his Ton Ton Macoute oppression, which would be cleansed from society.

And third, the conch shell appeared because it had been a traditional instrument blown to signal uprising and resistance and was used as a communicator during the January 1991 failed coup attempt by Duvalierist Roger LaFontant.

Since these paintings appeared on public structures, they became subject to the frailties which such exposure incurs, and they faded over time from view as symbols of celebration for the country's nascent democracy at the time. This frailty paralleled that of Haiti's struggling democracy today.