

# review

Saloon One person, thousands of voices: Anna Deveare Smith performs in the capital

Books It's complicated: Charles Freeman plots the stuttering history of early Christianity

# Random rules

January's earthquake may have reduced much of Port-au-Prince to rubble, but one industry continues to pulse amid the devastation. Pooja Bhatia examines the world of borlette, the lottery system in which an astonishing number of Haitians invest their income – and their dreams  
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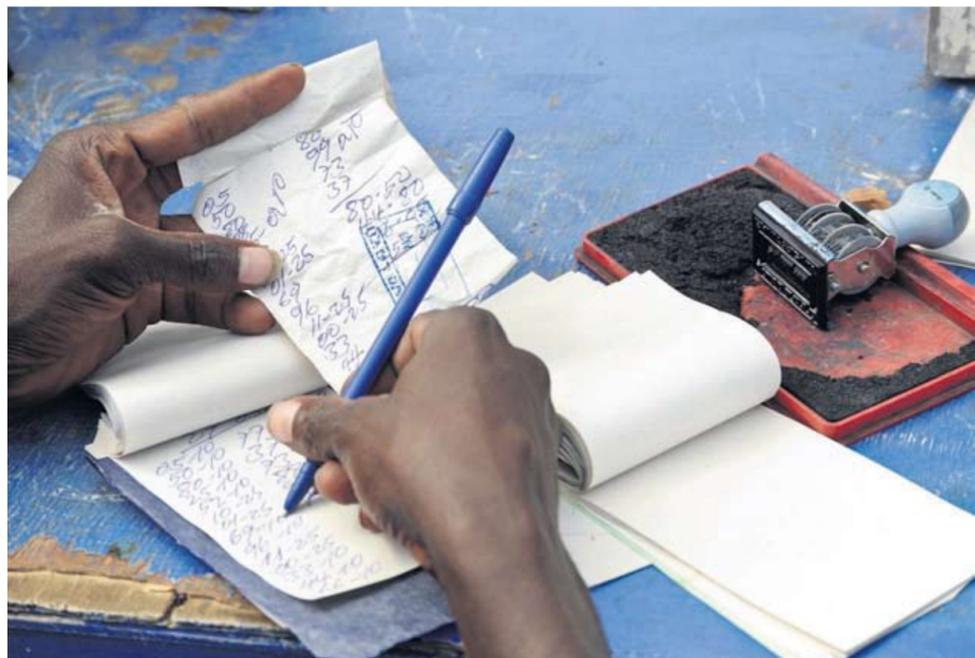
review

the 54

The percentage of the Haitian population that survived on less than \$1 a day prior to the earthquake that struck southern Haiti in January



A chalk board announces the day's winning draw in the settlement camp on Champs de Mars.



Milot Beaubrun sells numbers to a lottery customer. Haitians spend as much as \$1.5bn on the borlette each year.

# Dream ticket

Pooja Bhatia explores the persistent popularity of Haiti's borlette, whose small wagers continue to provide 'a kind of succour to the spirit' for the battered residents of Port-au-Prince

On January 12, Milot Beaubrun's neighbourhood vanished. The earthquake knocked it off the mountain-side, and the next day he and his family moved one hillside over to an area called Tapis Rouge, or "Red Carpet", so named for the wide, rust-coloured road that seems to unfurl down the slope. Some 2,000 families have set up makeshift homes – built from bed sheets, branches, tarps, corrugated tin and plywood – along the roadside, making it one of Port-au-Prince's medium-sized resettlement camps.

The quake took his house and his little girl's foot, but Milot managed to save the little bureau that constitutes his lottery business. Shortly thereafter, he set it up in the middle of the red carpet, chalked in the day's winning draws, and got to work selling numbers. Sales have slowed; the earthquake practically decimated the city's population, sent hundreds of thousands to the countryside, and destroyed countless little businesses. "But Haitians still dream, and so they still play," Milot said. It doesn't cost much to get in the game: you can buy a number for as little as one gourde – less than three cents. Milot has done well enough to build himself a new shack, one with a metal roof that keeps most of the rain out.

The earthquake razed half of Port-au-Prince, and yet hundreds of its rainbow-coloured lottery shops – called *banques de borlette* – are still doing a brisk trade. Gariishly coloured, the *banques de borlette* are modest constructions that withstood the earthquake better than most: single-storey shopfronts, tin shacks, kiosks the size of a telephone booth, bureaus like Milot's or rickety, rotten wood tables. These days, some borlettes operate in tents and under tarps. At the time of the last official count, in 2005, the streets of Port-au-Prince were home to nearly 2,000 of them – more than double the number of schools and universities in the city (that is, when Port-au-Prince had schools and universities.) All told, Haitians spend as much as \$1.5 billion per year on the borlette – a staggering amount in a country whose gross domestic product last year was \$6.9 billion.

Eleven private companies run *banques de borlette* in Port-au-Prince; the largest have hundreds of franchises. Before the earthquake, the director of the Association National de Tenaciers de Borlette (ANTB), which loosely regulates the industry, told me that more than 100,000 people worked in Haiti's borlette sector. That figure would make the borlette the country's largest employer. "People depend on the borlette

to live," the director said.

He meant the workers, but the sentiment applies as aptly to the players. Haitians play the borlette to live. Yes, wagers deplete resources for tents, tarps, food, water, medicine and bus fares out of the devastated city, but the borlette has always offered something outside mere survival. It provides a kind of succour to the spirit, a reason to get up in the morning, and the sense of significance that few of us can do without.

The lottery plays a similar role in developed countries, of course – giving hope to the desperate, however misplaced, self-defeating, and costly that hope is. In Haiti, almost everyone was already desperate before the quake; almost everyone plays. Even those who have scraped, saved, and created better lives for their children through sheer fortitude – responsible types who go to church every day – they play. Their pastors and priests probably play, too.

False consciousness plays a negligible role; most Haitians have a curious self-awareness about the lottery's palliative effects. "It's the hope of the

miserable," said Julet St Hilaire, a lanky, light-skinned 45-year-old. He had lost his house in Christ Roi, a hard-hit Port-au-Prince neighbourhood, and was sleeping in Champs de Mars, the country's largest public plaza, along with tens of thousands of other homeless Haitians. Since the borlette had reopened, 10 days after the earthquake, he'd been playing twice a day. He'd won a little, lost more, and was slowly depleting his savings, but that wasn't the point: "It nourishes the spirit," Julet said.



Life has never been fair for poor Haitians. Their ancestors emancipated themselves with a revolution, but Haiti remains far from the *liberté, égalité, et fraternité* its architects envisaged. For the past 25 years Haiti has teetered on the precipice of anarchy; in the vacuum left by an absent state, Haitians founder. Farmers toil, but the earth yields little. Parents ache for a better future for their children, but educational fees are exorbitant and most schools are sub-

standard anyway. The children that manage to graduate will have a hard time finding work: a job in textile assembly, an industry the international community touts, tends to reward a 10-hour work day with barely enough money to feed oneself. No one believes the government will help them; in the last election, less than three per cent of those eligible to vote in Port-au-Prince bothered to do so.

The earthquake has plunged already precarious lives into a fathomless hell. Many have lost faith in any kind of future, and for good reason: nearly three months after the earthquake, there is still no plan to shelter the 1.3 million homeless Haitians from the impending rainy season and the awfulness it portends.

From this vantage, the borlette offers a remedy to a history of injustice and disorder. It offers hope, of course, a chance to circumvent the rigid class system, but something else, too: a sense that there is an order to the world, that there are rules we might understand, if only we could see more clearly. The outcome of the borlette is, of course, purely random.

But insisting that it has an order requires a kind of faith, which, in turn, can sustain.

Everywhere the lottery is a vehicle for dreams; in Haiti, however, this is literally the case. To succeed at the borlette, you have to dream. Or you might ask a dreamer to share one of his reveries or use esoteric calculations to spirit up numbers.

But among all these, it is best to dream, according to my friend Frenot. He filled out lottery tickets at the Celeste Bank on Avenue John Brown, a mile or so from my house, and, back in the autumn, had agreed to school me in the ways of the borlette. "But not everyone dreams every night," Frenot said. "Some people never dream. Or maybe they don't remember their dreams." He was happily didactic.

"If I have a dream, I always play the dream," confirmed Michelet, a guy who hung out in Celeste Bank whenever he got bored sitting outside. "I mean, I would play the dream. But I never have money." This last was accompanied by a plaintive look.

Given that dreams are demoted

stories, with arcless plots, characters that resemble someone you know but not exactly, and sudden set changes, how does one translate a dream into a number? In Haiti, the answer lies not in psychoanalysis, but in something called the *tchala*. Practically every borlette shack has one. The *tchala* is a numerology reference book that lists common elements of dreams alongside a corresponding two-digit number for each. The index is written in French, which poses an obstacle for the vast majority of players, but the borlette workers are supposed to be literate and French-proficient.

The *tchala* is as comprehensive as a decent dictionary, with entries ranging from "abandonment" to "zigzag". And it's beautifully specific. There is an entry for "rain", of course, but also rain in the moonlight, rain in the sunshine, rain falling on a tomb, with clouds and wind, with neither clouds nor wind – eleven in total. Under "Beans": white beans, congo beans, black beans, red beans, tender beans, dry beans, bean soup, and beans the dreamer can't identify. Horses, which are perhaps the stuff of dreams in the countryside, merit 36 entries.

Frenot claimed to know the entire *tchala* by heart, though he seemed to specialise in livestock. "For example, you dream about a goat. Goat gives you 28 and 82. Or you dream of a pig. A pig gives you 32."

With *Old Macdonald* playing in my head, I asked: "And if you dream of a chicken?"

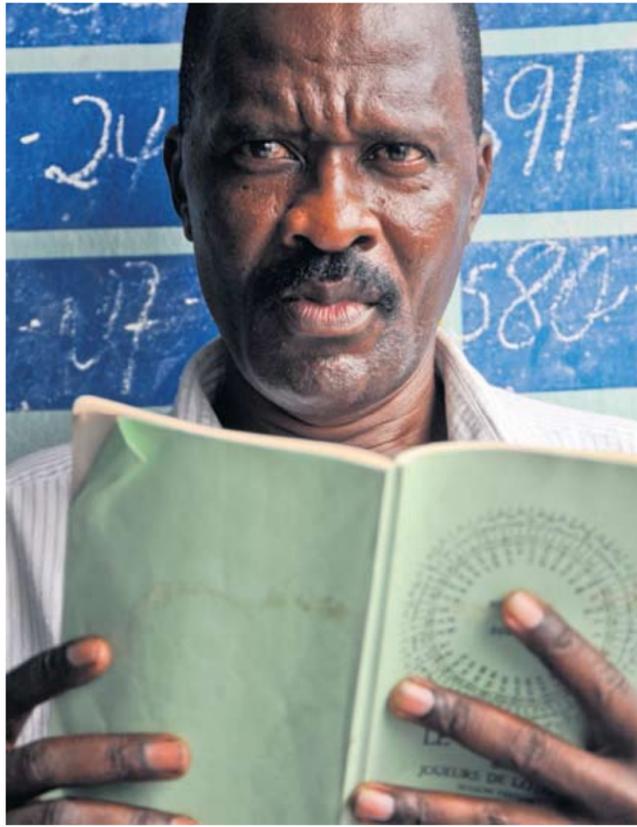
Frenot was stumped. He grabbed the shop's well-worn *tchala* and searched for *poulet*, fumbling. "Eggs!" Michelet shouted before Frenot had the chance to reply. "A chicken gives you eggs!" We all laughed.

A man at the counter was betting 13, 70, and 36. In his dream, he said, he was running up a mountain, towards a young lady who was selling coconuts. "The girl gives you 13," he said, "the coconut gives you 70, and if you dream you're running, that gives you 35." I checked the *tchala*, and he was right, but I didn't understand why he bet on 36, rather than 35, the number for running.

"Because I was running up a mountain," he explained. "If you're running uphill, you add one. If you're running downhill, you subtract one. And if you're running on a level surface, you stick to 35."



But who writes the *tchala*? I asked around. Nobody knew. I told a street-side book seller I was looking for one, and the next day he'd found a fresh copy, its pages coarse and thin as a

The borlette offers hope, of course, but something else, too – a sense the world can be ordered. Many players turn to the *tchala* to determine their numbers.

The estimated cost, in billions of US dollars, of repairing the damage caused by the January 12 earthquake. This figure represents 114 per cent of Haiti's GDP



The quake destroyed his house, but Milot Beaubrun managed to save the little bureau that constitutes his lottery business, which he set up in the middle of a settlement camp in Tapis Rouge. Photos by Daniel Cima for The National

potboiler's. The title is *Le Brevaire des Joueurs de Loteries*. This was the tenth edition, published in 1978 by a publishing house that no longer exists, and prepared by a mysterious "ACM."

I wondered at first why so many people would trust an unknown author to interpret their dreams. But it turns out, many players don't use a written *tchala* at all; the *tchala* they have is in their heads, a sort of cultural heritage. Moreover, Haitians often correlate a dream element with a number that, according to the *tchala*, is incorrect. And nothing in the *tchala* directs users to add one if they're running up an incline; or to choose 15 because they dreamt of someone whose name starts with the 15th letter of the alphabet; or, as I've heard, never to bet on their children or a dream of their children. Ultimately, the source of the *tchala* doesn't matter as much as its function: to impose structure and meaning on events, ideas, and dreams that might not mean anything.

Like dreamers the world over, Haitians fantasise about sex a lot. The number for a nubile woman is 13, dozens of men told me, while the number for an older woman is 46.

In Haitian reveries, love is only slightly less prominent than death. Even before the quake, Haitians had morbid dreams: the *tchala* lists 19 numbers for death, but there are dozens of other variations. "If you dream someone is dead, but in real life he is alive, it's 39 and 2," said William Lima, one of Shirley's friends. "If your dead mother comes to visit you in the dream, you play 47 and 74. That's if she says something to you. But if she doesn't speak, you play 8, 88, and 80." William went on and on and on until Shirley interjected.

Premonitions of death in a dream, she said, don't signify as much as they used to: "If you dream of death nowadays, you can't really trust it. It's only because you've seen so much death that you see it when you sleep, too. We've seen too much," William agreed.

Shirley, like hundreds of thousands of Haitians, is scared to return to her damaged house. Not far from its ruins, she now lives with 14 other people in a makeshift cabin of particle-board and bed sheets. It has a door with hinges and a lock jury-rigged with a bottlecap washer. They take turns sleeping five to the mattress, which they've elevated five inches off the ground with cement blocks and a sheet of plywood. It protects them from the mud that seeps in on rainy nights.

But even those Haitians with less crowded beds aren't sleeping peace-

fully, and the dreams that once generated numbers come less frequently. After the quake, according to the psychiatrist Daryn Reicherter, many Haitians are too stressed to drift into REM sleep, when the most vivid dreaming takes place.

To be sure, a good night's rest has long been a luxury for the urban poor: houses were too small to sleep their residents, so people slept standing up or took turns on the mattress, like Shirley. But it is different now. Reicherter, a Stanford University professor who specialises in post-traumatic stress disorder, was visiting Haiti to help a team of lawyers build a case for humanitarian parole – legal entry into the United States – for Haitians suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). One symptom of PTSD is nightmares about the traumatising event, but, Reicherter said, some of the Haitians he'd interviewed had become hyper-vigilant: so preoccupied with waking fears – of aftershocks, of not being able to feed their children or themselves, of water seeping into their tents – that their minds could no longer rest. They weren't dreaming at all anymore.



Every lottery sanctioned by the ANTB uses the same *tiraj*, or winning draw, of three numbers. To guard against corruption, the *tiraj* comes from the New York State Lottery. Though the occasional rogue outlet advertises a Washington DC or Boston lottery, most borlettes pull their winning numbers from New York.

In the early 1950s, Haitians imported the borlette from Cuba and used its *tiraj*. By decade's end, Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba, and Francois Duvalier in Haiti. Castro abolished the street lottery, perhaps seeing it as a tool to exploit the masses. ("The revolution will not be left to chance," he reportedly said.) Duvalier, the brutal dictator known as "Papa Doc", was jealous of any institution outside his control. So he nationalised the informal industry, directing all lottery revenues to the state's coffers, and Haiti started drawing its own numbers. Often, Duvalier or an underling would tip off the winning numbers to the regime's minions and *Macoute* henchmen – an elegant encapsulation of a repressive state that exploited its people in order to finance their repression. Many Haitians caught on, and an underground lottery developed, using numbers drawn from Venezuela – but you could be imprisoned, tortured or killed if you were caught playing it.

In 1988, two years after the fall of the Duvalier regime, the lottery was privatised. Borlette owners formed the

ANTB, which is governed by a trio of administrators they elect to two-year terms. The administrators, who are not owners, regulate the game with kid gloves. For instance, it was the ANTB that determined the borlette would use New York numbers; it also sells the notepads whose triple-copy sheets serve as lottery tickets. In practice, though, only the market governs the borlette.

New York State has about a dozen types of lottery; the Haitian borlette mixes and matches the results of two New York Lottery games to arrive at the three winning numbers; for example 18, 49, and 80. Using those three two-digit numbers derived from the New York lottery, there are a few ways to win. The most popular are the *borlette simple* and *marriage*.

*Borlette simple* runs like this: if you win the first number, you'll earn 50 times your wager; the second pays 20 times; the third, 10 times. If you bought every number, you'd win back 80 dollars for every 100 you spent, so playing the borlette simple, in the long run, will cost 20 per cent of your wager. In *marriage*, you "marry" two

numbers, and if two of them appear, you earn 1,000 times your wager. The odds of winning are much lower – about one in 5,000 – but Haitians love it because the payoff is much larger than that of the *borlette simple*. Moreover, players are already apt to riff on variations of a single number: if you play 92, you should also play 29. "It's like they're twins, brother and sister," an unemployed grandmother once told me. Twins are considered lucky in Haitian culture. "You can't have one without the other."



The idea that Haitians' reveries can accurately predict a set of numbers randomly generated in New York does not, of course, stand up well to experimentation. Most days, dreamers lose. But for many players, that doesn't reflect poorly on the method. As my friend Manes, a driver for a non-governmental organisation, tells me, losing just means that you misinterpreted your dream, didn't focus on it clearly enough or forgot some important element. Possibly you played the right number on the wrong day. There are a few hard-nosed types, people who freely admit that they have no special insight into the draw and will probably lose, but they are the exceptions.

There is a method available to those who don't dream: to *fe matematik*, or do maths. This is like no maths I have ever seen. Frenot explained.

He drew a square and then divided it into nine squares. In the middle square, he wrote "8", for it was the eighth of the month. Diagonally left, he wrote 9.

"Why?" I asked. "Because you add one," he said. "Why do you add one?" "This is the method," he said. "And it works if you do it correctly."

In the square below 8, he wrote "7" and continued counterclockwise around the square until "2". I thought I saw where it was going, until he wrote 0 in the remaining box.

The end result was something like this:

2	3	4
0	8	5
9	7	6

That was just the beginning. By pairing adjacent numbers and matching numbers on the corners, Frenot went on to generate dozens of two-digit numbers. If you wanted to win, he said, you should play them all, and probably their twins, too.

"How do you know this method?" I asked.

"This is the method that works!" Frenot insisted.

"Are you going to play them?" I asked.

"I don't have any money today," he said. I told him I would play for him – we could split the winnings 50-50 – and bet 10 gourdes on each of seven numbers. We didn't win.

While Frenot claimed that people came to him to *fe matematik*, I never saw anyone who did.

Still, many players do these exact calculations, or variations thereof, themselves. On the bus, attending a simmering street-side stew, or waiting for customers, Haitians scribble and mull over scraps of paper or spiral-bound notebooks.

At first glance, it's bunk: building on randomness with some systemised randomness, and arriving at a result that purports to mean something. In a way it seems tragic. But it's very human. Magical thinking is a response to a world that doesn't make sense, and *matematik* and the *tchala* are, in a way, instruments that aid the search for meaning. Human beings try to read randomness, and in this, the borlette looks a bit like life.

Of late, randomness has seemed especially cruel in Haiti. After taking time to help me understand the borlette during the autumn, Frenot disappeared on the morning of the quake. He hasn't shown up at Celeste Bank since then. His co-worker there doesn't know whether he died, is languishing in a hospital tent or fled to the countryside. I checked the address where Frenot once told me he lived; the house there had pancaked.



It is no coincidence that the borlette re-opened 10 days after the quake, just after transfer agencies got the cash to payout remittances from Haitians working abroad. In 2009, Haiti received \$1.9 billion in remittances – more a quarter of its gross domestic product. In 2010, it is likely to be more. Remittances enabled Jude Pierre, 56, to get back in the game. He was out of work before the earthquake, and now he was homeless, but Jude has children in Miami, New York, and Montreal. After the earthquake, they all sent money.

It wasn't a waste to spend the money on the borlette, rather than food or building materials, Jude insisted. "This is how I make money," he said. "But don't you lose more often than you win?" I asked.

"I don't know, I win a lot," Jude said. Anyway, he said, what else was he going to do with a couple of dollars?

If you think of a bet as an investment, the return is generally a negative 20 per cent. In absolute terms, it's an awful financial venture. But on the

other hand, where else in Haiti can you put a tiny bit of capital to work if you don't have a job or the start-up money for a small commercial enterprise? Commercial banks don't take deposits as small as one gourde, and you need to read and write to open an account at most banks. Besides, the few gourdes the poor manage to save disappear fast; that's thanks to the ethic of *yon ede lòt*, or one helps the other. For Jude, as for many other Haitians, the borlette was not just a psychological palliative, but – compared to the alternatives – a rational economic decision. That is why it is called a "bank".

Before the earthquake, the fourth-largest borlette in Port-au-Prince, Lesly Center, had 200 outlets. According to my sources, it took in at least \$200,000 a day, 364 days a year, for about \$73 million in yearly revenues. Lesly Center's director, 34-year-old Lesly Brezault, Jr, didn't comment on that figure, but in a conversation six weeks after the earthquake, he said that business was down by 75 per cent. Almost a third of his franchises were damaged. Some of those franchisors got back in business by putting up a table and a placard. Still, the customers still alive and in Port-au-Prince had less money to spend.

Lesly had earned a business degree in anticipation of taking over the borlette, which his father started. For 11 years, he had worked 14-hour days building up the business; it was his life and he loved it. And now, he said, he was debating shutting it all down. "I'm starting to think that it may not be worth it," Lesly said.

In many ways, the borlette is a tragic institution, and in development terms, Haiti would be better off without it. Lotteries generally function as a regressive tax, because the poor play disproportionately. In Haiti, the borlette is especially sad, because the state doesn't tax borlette revenues or winnings; lottery taxes would at least provide money for infrastructure and social development, as they do in the United States.

For better and for worse – and despite Lesly Brezault's worries – the borlette will likely live on. And in a way, Haitians need the borlette now more than they ever have. It doesn't just provide something to hope for or to get excited about. The borlette allows them a modicum of agency, a sense that their dreams and ideas matter. As Milot Beaubrun says, Haitians still dream – and so they still play.

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