

Arysteides Turpana: A Nation by The Sea

Arysteides Turpana: una nación junto al mar

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Abstract—Aiban Wagua, a Dule scholar, writer and historian, affirms that in Dule society, literature is life. Moreover, Beth Brant, a Kanien'kehaka scholar, asserts, “writing is done with a community consciousness”. Following Wagua's and Brant's positions, these viewpoints are evident in the writings of Arysteides Turpana. Turpana's poems reflect not the thoughts of a Dule poet as an individual; rather as from a nation. Audience members' experiences of his works will differ when reading the poems themselves. A non-Dule reader may understand them as representing the thoughts and words of the individual poet alone. A Dule reader, on the other hand, may read them and see the collective thoughts and words of both the poet and his community. In this analysis, I focus on Arysteides Turpana's poem, *Archipiélago*, which exemplify Dule way of life, Dule intellectual knowledge, and artistry, all of which demonstrate an enduring existence of the Dule nation, Gunayala, and Indigenous Abiyala. — *Dule, Poetry, Sovereignty, Abiyala, Environment*.

Resumen—Aiban Wagua, erudito, escritor e historiador dule, afirma que en la sociedad dule la literatura es vida. Además, Beth Brant, erudita kanien'kehaka, afirma que la escritura se realiza con una conciencia comunitaria. De acuerdo a las posiciones de Wagua y Brant, estas características son evidentes en los escritos de Arysteides Turpana. Los poemas de Turpana no reflejan los pensamientos de un poeta dule como individuo, sino como nación. Las experiencias de los lectores de sus obras diferirán al leer los poemas. Un lector que no sea dule puede entenderlos como la representación de los pensamientos y las palabras del poeta individual. Por otro lado, un lector dule puede leerlos y ver los pensamientos y palabras colectivas, tanto del poeta como de su comunidad. En este análisis, me centro en el poema de Arysteides Turpana, *Archipiélago*, que ejemplifica el modo de vida dule, el conocimiento intelectual dule y el arte, todo lo cual demuestra la existencia perdurable de la nación dule, de Gunayala, y de Abiyala indígena. — *Dule, Poesía, Soberanía, Abiyala, Medio ambiente*.

*Desde pequeños se sientan y escuchan los relatos de la tradición. Los kunas consideramos que no son leyendas ni cuentos sino historias que son contadas de forma diversa a como se narra en español, porque persigue otros objetivos.*¹ (Wagua 1995)

READING DULE POETRY: ARYSTEIDES TURPANA'S ARCHIPIÉLAGO

Aiban Wagua, a Dule scholar, writer and historian, affirms that in Dule society, literature is life (Wagua 1995). Moreover, Beth Brant (1994), a Kanien'kehaka scholar, asserts, "writing is done with a community consciousness" (19). Following Wagua's and Brant's positions, these viewpoints are evident in Arysteides Turpana's literary works. Turpana's literary works reflect not only the thoughts of a Dule poet as an individual, but also his poetry represents a nation. Audience members who experience his works will have different encounters when reading the poems themselves. For example, a Dule reader may read Turpana's poems and see the collective thoughts and words of both the poet and his community, as well as the Dule nation, Gunayala. A non-Dule reader, on the other hand, may understand them as representing the thoughts and words of the individual poet and their lived experience of island life. It is important to acknowledge that Dule and non-Dule readers will have different encounters in understanding Dule poetry like Turpana's works. But at the same time, it is important to note that Dule poetry, like Turpana's works, is an invitation to all readers to visualize and resonate a piece of Dule everyday life in Dule maritime world. In this article, I focus on Arysteides Turpana's poem, *Archipiélago* (Turpana 2003), which exemplify Dule way of life, Dule intellectual knowledge, and artistry, all of which demonstrate an enduring existence of the Dule nation, Gunayala, and Indigenous Abiyala. Thus, I analyze the correlation between poetics of everyday life such as cooking dulemasi, sensory experiences, material culture like hammocks, and Dule maritime life.

ARYSTEIDES TURPANA: CONTEMPORARY VISIONARY

Before delving into Turpana's poem, *Archipiélago*, I want to highlight and connect the importance of Turpana and his literary works that contribute to the continuity of Dule resistance and existence. Turpana is one of our most pro-

lific Dule writers of the 21st century. His poems have been published in different anthologies both in Panama and internationally. He published several books, also. As Esther Arjona (2020) points out, some of Turpana's notable works include: *Kualuleketi y Lalorkko* (published in 1966); *Archipiélago* (published in 1968); *Mi hogar queda entre la infancia y el sueño* (published in 1983); and *Crítica del gunasdule* (published in 2018). In our current times, we enter into the era of our Dule Centennial celebration of the 1925 Dule Revolution and autonomy. It is during this new era when we take into account to recognize Dule contemporary contributions in literature, history, the arts, sports, medicine, film, and music. These contributions continue to shape the presence of us as a Dule nation, and as Dule people of Gunayala and Panama. As Dule, in a global indigenous world, we share common experiences with other Indigenous nations when it comes to fighting racism, colonialism, extractivism, and cultural appropriation (D. N. N. De León Kantule 2022; Haglund 2019; Turpana 2018; Wagua 2007, 2021). As such, we find these themes of shared experiences in Turpana's literary works. Furthermore, in his writings, we find how Turpana invokes a poetic space for grieving, for remembering, and for advocating as both collectively and individually. On one hand, Turpana creates a poetic space to raise political consciousness and social justice. While on the other hand, he initiates a space to critique and call out the injustices of racism and violations of land grabs such as illegal mining. In addition, through his literary scholarship, Turpana generates space for the arts from film to poetry gatherings in literary festivals in Panama and globally. His writings display an emblematic stillness and pause where time crosses and interconnects the flora and fauna figures and cultural storytelling through spatial movements of words that uphold Dule autonomy, revolutionary histories and continued existence. As such, Turpana's poems, like *Archipiélago* (Turpana 2003), intimately intertwine and uncover our understanding of memory, the human senses, grief, solitude and our everyday life practices.

POETICALLY BY THE SEA: NOURISHMENT

Arysteides Turpana's poem, *Archipiélago*, describes particular facets of Dule everyday life in Gunayala and by seasons. The autonomous region, Comarca de Gunayala, is a territory that comprises a "long, narrow strip of mainland jungle extending two hundred kilometers along the coast and fifteen to twenty kilometers inland and an archipelago of 365 small islands" (Tice 1995: 3). Located on the eastern Atlantic side of Panama and surrounded

¹ From a young age, they sit and listen to traditional stories. We Kuna believe they are not legends or tales, but histories that are told in a different way than how they are told in Spanish, because it pursues other objectives.

by the Caribbean Sea, the isle communities of Gunayala are islands of poets, chanters, seers and warriors. Gunayala, above all else, is geographically autonomous with a profound history of unbroken connections where past meets present, and traditions and modernity interact, link, and coexist.

In the opening lines of *Archipiélago*, Turpana begins with a description of his place of birth on the isle community, Uwargandubb, Gunayala. He continues describing active, bodily movements of men and women consuming traditional food. Indeed, Dule communities' proximities to the ocean and its plentiful marine life allow the people to gather sea life for their daily diet comprising lobster, fish, or crab, to name a few. It is quite apparent from this first stanza, that the Dule, both men and women "Se alimentan de peces y mariscos/-Dule Masi-/En el pueblo donde nací" (Nourish themselves with fish and seafood/-Dule Masi (people's food)/In the village where I was born) (Turpana 2003: 26). It describes a common Dule meal known as *Dule Masi*, comprising a coconut stew, served with plantains, fish or other seafood on the side. On the surface level upon reading the first stanza, the reader is given a pictorial narrative of daily life of eating traditional meal. But, on another level, it is shown not only of the importance of nourishment of traditional food, but also in the making of *Dule Masi*. There are invisible and visible parallels in the acts of making and consuming food. This is a movement that involves the application of food knowledge and the production of making a meal in a process that is a shared gender balance work in Dule culture. In this sense, as shared by Michel de Certeau, there is a knowledge of techniques in the everyday practices like the arts of cooking, a type of "know-how" (Certeau 1984: 64–68). As de Certeau (65) explains, it is a type of know-how that "no longer separates two hierarchized bodies of knowledge... rather it sets off practices articulated by discourse from those that are not (yet) articulated by it." In this sense, Dule knowledge is implied and imparted via the line, "—Dule Masi—" as this traditional meal is made with generational knowledge that use ingredients from land (plantains and coconuts) and sea (fish and other seafood). Dule women and men are knowledge holders who pass down and share the practice and process in making *Dule Masi*. They demonstrate visible, physical presence of cultural practices that nourish Dule families, not only by consuming the food but also by nourishing the minds of Dule men and women on the "know-how" of subsistence food production practices. Dule subsistence food production patterns and practices are the invisible "know-how" not articulated in words

by Turpana in the poem, rather inferred by the one line, "—Dule Masi—" (Turpana 2003: 26). This phrase unfolds visible and invisible parallels of survival, existence, resistance and continued empowerment of our ancestral food knowledge on providing food security and upholding food sovereignty in modern times.

POETICALLY BY THE SEA: DULE EVERYDAY LIFE

Throughout *Archipiélago*, Turpana eloquently pieces together Dule everyday life. The reader is given the sense of a village located by the sea surrounded by ocean breezes and flora and fauna. For instance, the poet states:

En mi pueblo marino
Al llegar la pesca de Tortuga
Brotan flores en el cocal
Y trae el Viento del Sur...
... Así llegan las lluvias
Allá en mi pueblo
Junto al mar² (: 26).

Turpana provides the reader a visual imagery of the Dule way of life, but he also gives the reader an image of a Dule community's natural surroundings and how the people relate to them. He depicts a marine village and maritime tasks through seasonal changes with the words "en mi pueblo marino/Al llegar la pesca de tortuga" (In my seaside village/When the turtle fishing season arrives) (: 26). In many of his writings, such as this poem, Turpana brings forth the descriptions of *Nabgwana* (Mother Earth) and Dule (hi)stories in navigating the coastal, tropical environment and interaction with animals, our relatives. In "El mito sobre el árbol de la vida y los Dule", for example, Turpana speaks about the Baluwala and Dad Ibe (also known as Ibeler). He writes about the salt tree, Baluwala, the state of chaos, and the events that lead Dad Ibe and animal kingdom allies to cut down the Baluwala, which resulted in new layers that emerges and transforms the world that emerges (Turpana 2016).

Out of the destruction of Baluwala, rivers, streams, and ocean begin to arise and animals that once walked on two legs and spoke, now don't speak in human voice and walk on all four legs (Turpana 2016). By tying this narrative with *Archipiélago*, it reveals and demonstrates the closeness between the Dule, the animals and *Nabgwana* as relatives. Turpana (2016) describes this intimacy: "Desde entonces conoció la tierra lo que es el mar, los ríos, las quebradas y más tarde llegaron los hombres, es

2 In my seaside village / When the turtle fishing season arrives / Flowers sprout in the coconut grove / And the South Wind brings... / ... That's how the rains come / There in my village / By the sea.

decir, los Dule, quienes se encargarían de cuidar de toda la que hay en la Naturaleza, tal como lo hacen hoy en día.” (From then on, the earth learned what the sea, rivers, and ravines were, and later, humans arrived, the Dule, who would take care of everything in Nature, just as they do today). The oneness with *Nabgwana* unfolds how stillness and pause exist within the layers of the transformed world. As such, in the poem, stillness and pause appear in the phrases “Al llegar la pesca de tortuga” and “Brotan flores en el cocal” (“When the turtle fishing season arrives” and “Flowers sprout in the coconut grove”) (Turpana 2003: 26). With these lines, a reader receives a visual narrative of how time and space pause briefly due the change of season which is noted by the movement of animals like the turtles or blooming of flowers in the coconut grove. This pause leads to a stillness for the speaker. A stillness of remembering, of returning, but also of grief. The grief is a longing and a lamenting of change and the passing of time that overlaps through the stillness of mourning. Why mourning? Mourning calls forward time, place, and memory. Mourning, like seasons, is temporary, yet it is long-lasting. As a melancholic mood, mourning creates a pause for the speaker to recall these memories as temporary; (yet) at the same time the bereavement is long-lasting because it appears through different elements that trigger these memories of sight, sound, smell, and taste. From here we now turn to Turpana’s poesis by the sea through hammocks.

POETICALLY BY THE SEA: HAMMOCKS

As nightfall descends and the jungle is silent, Turpana describes that one can hear the sound of the hammocks swaying from side to side (: 26). An example of hammocks’ soft rhythm and tempo, Turpana (26) writes:

Bajo pulsaciones de tinieblas
Se oyen chirriar las hamacas³

His choice of words, such as “pulsaciones de tinieblas” (pulsating darkness) and “chirriar las hamacas” (creaking sounds of the hammocks), describe the slow, melodic tune of a lullaby (: 26). When Turpana is talking about the sound of the hammocks, the rhythm that they make, he is talking about the rhythm of Dule life—strong and vibrant. The hammock symbolizes the place of various aspects of Dule everyday life in different communal settings: as a place to sleep, as a place to bury the dead and as a place to procreate. In a community gathering, the hammock is a place where the saglas lie down while

leading a community meeting, telling a story or chanting, and even in medicinal rituals the hammocks are used during events like a complicated childbirth.

In his work, “The World of Spirit, Disease, and Curing”, Mac Chapin (1997) talks about the positioning of the woman, the midwife and chanter during a Dule childbirth ritual. Chapin notes that during a difficult childbirth, “while the midwives take care of the woman, the chanter positions himself on a wooden stool at the head of her hammock, places some dried chile peppers on the coals of a clay brazier to keep the bonigana⁴ at bay, and begins to intone his chant” (237). The position of the chanter “at the head of her [woman’s] hammock” is an example on how the hammock is used in diverse settings in Dule daily life (237). The hammock is the symbol of Dule life. It represents Dule cycle of life: procreation, birth and death (Purbagana 2009).

Expanding on the interpretations of the hammocks as shared by Chapin, Panamanian sociolinguistic anthropologist, Luz Graciela Adames Joly (Adames Joly and López 1981; Adames Joly 2021) records Dule singer/poet Griselda María López’s (1981; 2021) performance of a lullaby song while sitting on a hammock singing to her baby cousin and little sister while her grandmother was busy with household tasks. Adames (1981; 2021) points out that namakedi (songs) have different variations to understand songs which are dependent on gender and place. Adames (1981; 2021) clarifies that for Dule women in a domestic setting a “namakedi” is known as “cantos de hamaca” (hammock songs). In her namakedi or singing from hammock performance, Griselda “sat swinging in a hammock with the two children, while shaking a gourd rattle and singing lullabies for them” (Adames Joly and López 1981; Adames Joly 2021). Much like the hammocks’ creak sounds as described in the poem, one can imagine such the nightfall domestic activities of lullabies being sung and hammocks swinging back and forth. By following Turpana’s descriptive words of the hammock sounds, a reader can imagine how the hammocks are utilized in the evening as described by Chapin and Adames and heard by the speaker at a distance in nightfall. Overall, as Achu A. De León Kantule (n.d.) eloquently summarizes:

the Hammock is the centre or the heart of Kuna culture. Not only is the hammock our resting place at the end of the day; it is also used to cradle our mortal remains when we begin our voyage to our next life after death. The hammock is the place

3 Under the pulsating darkness / You hear the creaking sounds of the hammocks

4 *Bonigana* in Dulegaya refers to a spirit that causes illness (Chapin 1997: 222).

from which our Sailas, or spiritual guides, sing to us everyday in our meeting house, relaying our collective memory through sacred songs. When we are sick, our healers sing to us while we lie in our hammocks, and burn cocoa seeds in a clay pot under the hammock, helping them to travel to other dimensions in order to cure us.

Following the lines of hammocks' sounds, we return to the description of the flora and fauna in the second stanza which gives the reader a sense of the natural environment. Turpana speaks of the growth of new vegetation and the fragrant smell of plums as reflecting life's cycle (Turpana 2003: 26). The smell of fresh fruit in the air and the rebirth of flowers blooming in a coconut grove signify the ongoing processes of nature (26). Just as men and women do their daily tasks like cooking, fishing or taking care of the family, so, too, does the earth take care of its flora and fauna (of which the Dule are a part) by providing sunlight and rain. Furthermore, the birthing of flowers and new vegetation growth are similar to the hammocks—they are the life cycle of Dule everyday life. There is birth, growth and death. These samples of life's cycle in Gunayala exemplify the spatial practice of living that recenters of birth and death in between pauses and stillness of the “creaking sounds of the hammocks” and the blooming of flowers and fresh fruit growth (26).

FULL CIRCLE: ALL SENSES

Archipiélago vividly gives the audience an insight to the speaker's memories and experiences of living in Gunayala. These memories and experiences even if spoken as an individual, it characteristically is a shared experience for every Dule as a collective. Turpana reveals a common Dule lifestyle as lived among the typical flora and fauna among coastal Dule communities in Gunayala (see Figure 1).

In Gunayala, the Dule are “primarily farmers and fishermen... [hence they obtain] a large part of their protein from ocean fish... [Furthermore] their lifestyle is definitely conditioned by their location on islands near the coast” (Ventocilla 1997: 59). The collective practice of Dule everyday life as depicted in Turpana's *Archipiélago* exemplify a collective discourse of maritime, coastal island life.

The poetic words inscribed by Turpana present a realm of shared, collective experiences with which the Dule poet and Dule reader are familiar. As Brant Brant (1994) points out, “an act that can take place in physical isolation... the memory of history, of culture, of land, of Nation, is always present—like another being.” To under-

stand *Archipiélago*, one must listen to Turpana's verses that embody these philosophies of physical isolation or individualism, that brings together a collective solidarity at the same time. Turpana artistically uses vivid descriptions to capture the human senses of sight, sound and smell. His poem is a lyrical memory that invokes a recalling, re-turning, and re-telling of collective resistance and unbroken, shared coastal and communal existence in an expressive image. Further, it elucidates a pause and stillness of memory and life practices, as well as a mourning of what once was to what it is now in the present. The similarities between memory and mourning are the stillness, the pauses, and the senses. The speaker's emotive memory is the poetic centrality of their mourning. It is a lamentation of joy, of melancholy and of silence. It summons an individual's experience, while imploring a collective understanding and Dule shared experiences. Turpana's poem pays homage to Dule lifeworlds and knowledge from the food practices and consumption to navigating birth and rebirth of life's cycles as demonstrated in the growth of new flora and fauna and textile usages like the hammocks. Thus, this is similar to the ways in which Dule leaders, like Nele Kantule, call upon collective, historical memory to implore the calling and re-calling, the arriving and returning, and the telling and re-telling of chants and stories of Ibeler, the 1925 Dule revolution, and Babigala:

Los cantos más insistentemente entonados por Nele y por el venerable Colman, eran sobre la lucha de Ibeler y sus hermanos, sobre Igwasalibler, hijo de Ologanagunkiler, sobre Duiren y las invasiones de los *sawisawidulegan*. Con esos cantos él nos levantaba el ánimo, él nos hacía tomar las armas para continuar viviendo con dignidad. Nele, así, nos metía en los corazones el espíritu de Ibeler. Nos hacía sentir parte de los hermanos de Ibeler para defender a la Madre Tierra (Wagua 2007: 108)⁵.

Like Nele's songs, Arysteides Turpana's poem impart sounds, word choices, rhythm, tempos, tones, visual elements in verses that illustrate life lessons, cycle of life, culture, history, as well as, personal and collective accounts of daily life in a Dule Nation by the sea. These concepts, as described in *Archipiélago*, continually weave us, as Dule, together in collective unity and

⁵ The songs more insistently sung by Nele and the venerable Colman, were about the struggle of Ibeler and his brothers, about Igwasalibler, son of Ologanagunkiler about Duiren and invasions of *sawisawidulegan*. With these songs he was uplifting us, he made us take up arms to continue living with dignity. [From] Nele, just like that, the spirit of Ibeler got into our hearts. It made us feel as we were one of Ibeler's siblings in order to defend Mother Earth.



Figura 1: Agligandi, Gunayala. Photograph by Sue Patricia Haglund.

solidarity, across lands and oceans, across chants and poems, but most of all, across realms from past to present. Turpana reminds the reader that his writings are versatile and revolutionary, at the same time quiet and still. And it is in this poem where we find these themes: stillness, revolutionary, knowledge, and responsibilities to *Nabgwana*.

To close this essay, I leave my own poem, “Maestro Turpana,” in dedication to and in memory of Arysteides Turpana. His writings are a contribution to Dule and Panamanian literary works that showcases his talent as a poet, an essayist, a philosopher and an intellectual of the 21st century.

MAESTRO TURPANA

Maestro Turpana,
querido poeta,
Me imagino
muchos días como hoy
estás junto al mar.

Descansándote en la hamaca
en nuestro archipiélago querido,
Cantando poesía
Como el aire respirado
Del Gammuburwi
Junto al mar⁶.

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- 6 Maestro Turpana, / dear poet, / I imagine / many days like today/ you are by the sea. / Relaxing in the hammock/ in our beloved archipelago, / Singing poetry / Like the air breathed / from Gammuburwi / By the sea./ Itogua.

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