

What an Ordeal!



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*“Birds fly and explore
other areas while staying
true to their nature”*

Holding her schoolbag firmly and with her head halfway bowed, Teili shuffles towards the language classrooms.

“Come on slowcoach,” says someone behind Teili.

The insecure hands that were holding her schoolbag turn into fists. Teili opens her eyes wide with fiery anger and looks at the girl that made the remark. Walking at a distance behind the girl, Teili maintains her sullen look on her until she enters the Papiamentu classroom.

Enraged, but with a feeling of insecurity at the same time, Teili walks and enters the same classroom. She already sees where the bullies sat down and chooses a strategic place where she can watch them without being too close to them.

“Haiman... Hanmanty...”

“Hi-hi-hi-hi-hi-hi...” the small group of Dutch-speaking students start laughing.

“...Miss Martina.” says the teacher trying to repair the damage.

Feeling fed up, Teili reacts by saying: “Miss, it’s been three months since school has started and you still can’t pronounce my name correctly!”

“Oh, dear, you know that I’m not good with names. Also, it’s the last period of the day, have a little compassion.” says the teacher to calm Teili down.

While the teacher continues on with the roll call, Teili grabs her pen and starts writing Haimentely Conzewits Josefina Martina on the cover of her book.

“Is that your whole name?” asks a friend seated next to her out of curiosity.

Teili smiles and nods.

“You’re joking! Who was the creative one, your mom or dad?”

Teili’s friend continues asking her and starts telling her how it came to be that she herself has two first names and two surnames.

As Teili listens, she starts decorating her name on the cover and says afterwards:

“My case is similar to yours. My grandmother told me there were intense discussions before an agreement was reached about my name. My father wanted to name me after her mother, my late grandmother. My grandmother, the mother of my mother, wanted to maintain our religious tradition and name me after the saint that related to my birthdate, according to the booklet of Bristol¹. But my mom, the most stubborn of them all, persisted that a combination of names had to be used: her name, Sharentely, including my dad’s name, Haime. In the end, they were all happy, because I got all three names.”

“Hahaha, I like your mom...”

Teili’s friend doesn’t get the chance to finish her sentence, since the teacher asks everyone to pay attention to what is written on the black board, so she can continue with her lesson.

“Alright. If we look at these words, **diversity** and **identity**, the first question that helps clarify these words is: **Who are you?** Rihanna, can you tell us what shapes your identity?”

With lots of enthusiasm and with a Dutch accent, Rihanna replies: “The school I am attending, who I hangout with and what I wear...”

“Very good Rihanna,” says the teacher encouragingly.

“But miss, I’m not done. The name my parents gave me is also part of it,” says Rihanna, interrupting the teacher and looking at Teili.

The classmates who are sitting in Rihanna’s small group, and some others in the classroom, start laughing, but the teacher ignores them and continues by saying: “That’s correct!

¹ Refers to an almanac, ‘Almanaque Pintoresco de Bristol,’ which is published annually in many Latin American countries.

If we are loyal to our roots and our culture, the world can already tell something about us by our names: where we come from and even what we believe in. But, unfortunately, there are some parents who are big sports fans and fans of certain artists, and they choose to name their kids after sports legends and famous people. And these people don't even know that their kids exist."

The teacher winks at Teili and proceeds with her lesson.

"Holy cow!" yell out the kids in class.

Teili smiles with satisfaction and continues taking notes.

Just before the bell rings, the teacher repeats: "Homework: sit in your garden or on the shore of a beach and observe nature. Write down everything that catches your attention and characterize it. Then, write 4 haikus about equality and difference, in connection to those things that caught your attention. Be creative and bring pictures!"

The kids hurry out of class to go home, and so does Teili, but just outside the classroom door ...

In the school principal's office

"Haimently Martina, I did not expect this from you. Look! Look at what you did! Black eye, scratched face, torn uniform, this is unacceptable!"

Teili sits triumphantly watching Rihanna, who is sitting with her eyes slanted and is holding a cold pack behind her neck to stop the blood coming out of her nose. *It's her own fault, either she shows respect, or I teach her how to show respect,* Teili smiles and thinks to herself.

While the school principal asks Rihanna what happened, Teili recalls how it all started... *It was the Monday of the second week of school during English class. I had to explain what an oppressed person feels.*

As I am not that good in English, I chose to do so in Papiamentu, which I have also done in other classes. Rihanna, who is more comfortable speaking Dutch, protested by saying that I should do so in Dutch, which is the official language of our country and the language of instruction at our school. My body started to feel tense and I blew a fuse. 'Who does Rihanna think she is, coming to MY country and impeding me from explaining things in my own language.' I put her in her place by making a few things clear to her in both Papiamentu and Dutch.

“What do you have to say for yourself, Haimentely?” the school principal interrupts Teili’s thoughts.

“It’s simple, headmaster. Every teacher here at school knows what’s happening, but none of them do anything about it. Rihanna makes fun of us who speak Papiamentu and she makes fun of our traditions. She thinks that everyone who speaks Papiamentu is dumb and was raised in the wilderness... so today I showed her how uneducated people teach civilized people to respect others.”

The principal is astonished and vexed: “Is this true, Rihanna? Did you say that?”

The expression on Teili’s face obligates Rihanna to simply bow her head and meekly acknowledge this.

“This is bullying and racism, and we do not tolerate them at this school! Your parents can start looking for a different school for you. Our school has no place for children with this kind of behavior.”

The school principal has had it up to here with this situation. His school was never the place where these types of incidents happened, but this academic year he had heard many discussions between Rihanna, Teili and some other students. And this last fight was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

Rihanna turns red and tears stream down her face, as if from a waterfall. She kneels in front of the school principal and pleads: “No, no, no expulsion... I’ll behave... I’ll do my best... I’m sorry! Teili... I apologize.”

Rihanna doesn’t know what to do. The idea of being removed from school impacted her so much that she starts panicking. The first thing that goes through her mind is how disappointed her mom would be after all that she has done to get her into this school. She cannot imagine having to go to another school right in the middle of the school year and having to make new friends. The more she thinks about it, the more she cries. She looks up and gazes straight into Teili’s eyes. With her eyes and nose red, her voice and body quivering, Rihanna grabs onto Teili’s leg and pleads: “Teili, forgive me. I won’t do it again.”

Teili’s self-confidence grows with the image in front her. Her eyes shine and the smile on her face confirms the satisfaction she is feeling. Without saying a word, she looks down at Rihanna, thinking: *Finally, justice has been served. I wish you could be admitted to a school, where you are obligated to speak Papiamentu, and where they’ll torture you when you don’t do so, so you can feel what I have felt...*

However, what Teili does not realize is that it isn’t over until the fat lady sings.

Later at Granny’s house

“Teili, come here and tell me what happened at school today.”

“Granny, do you remember the Dutch kid I was telling you about who made my life impossible at school?”

“Which one? The one you said at the beginning of the school year that if she lives on Curaçao the least she can do is learn to speak Papiamentu?”

“Yes, that one! Well, she and her friends pushed my buttons to no end. They always make snide remarks about people who speak Papiamentu. They always ridicule our habits and customs.”

“Is that so?!” says granny as she stops rocking her chair and pushes her glasses up closer to her eyes, as if that would help her hear better.

“Granny, ever since those first comments, it is as though they declared war against me, because they consistently throw shade at me when it is my turn in class, or whenever I happen to walk by. I told several teachers, but they think I’m exaggerating. My mentor is the only one that has said something to them about it.”

“Is your class mentor the Papiamentu teacher?”

“Yes, she is. Well, granny, I was fed up with the constant torture. Today I decided that I won’t keep going to school and endure the abuse dished out by these ridiculous kids who think they are better than everyone. During our Papiamentu class, they started making fun of my name. As we were leaving the classroom, she told me that my name was that of someone who lives in the wilderness. Granny, I completely lost my temper.”

“But, Teili... did granny not teach you to count to ten before you say or do something when you’re angry?”

“Granny, I took a deep breath and counted to ten. But then she added that she was curious to find out which animal my mother looked like, because it’s obvious that only an animal can give their child such an ugly name.”

Granny's jaw dropped and she held her hands in front of her mouth, as if she was praying. "Granny, I heard my name, I counted to ten, then I heard mom being compared to an animal, and I said to myself enough is enough. I hit her ten times as hard as I could with my fists. Who does she think she is, insulting my mother like that?"

As Teili tells her grandmother how the fight started and played out, granny starts reflecting on a discussion she had last week with her daughter, Teili's mother. *My daughter doesn't understand what impact her feelings of inferiority, which she mistakes for a European mindset, has on her daughter. She chooses to imitate the Europeans and at the same time neglects and underestimates her own Curaçaoan roots. She refused to send Teili to the school in the neighborhood, arguing that a school where Papiamentu is the main language of instruction will hinder her daughter from succeeding in life. She said that Teili's current school is a good school, and a lot of its alumni succeed in the Netherlands. But now this Dutch school which she thinks will enable her daughter to triumph, causes her daughter to be miserable.*

"Granny, it felt good when Rihanna got what she deserved, and it felt even better when she was apologizing to me. But now I feel sad."

"How come, Teili?"

"Granny, you know, mom scolded me on our way here. She kept telling me: 'Do you know all the things I had to do to get you in this school, and now for you to embarrass me like this?' Granny, instead of understanding me, mom still thinks that I should have told the teacher instead of taking matters into my own hands. But I wasn't having it anymore!"

Feeling powerless, Teili starts crying, and with a high-pitched and trembling voice, she says: "How come are we, who speak Papiamentu, only imbued with bad qualities and for us to be good we have to be more like the Europeans?"

Why do we have to keep quiet, accept everything, be submissive and allow others to do whatever they want with us? Granny, there are still people, even teachers, who think that Papiamentu will not get us anywhere.”

Granny pats Teili’s head trying to console her and says: “Calm down, sweetie, not everything in this world is black and white.”

But Teili’s sobbing gets worse. She hugs her grandmother’s legs tight and puts her face in her lap and says: “I think I was born in the wrong family and in the wrong country. Damned the day my mother decided not to go with my choice of school and instead put me in this one!”

Teili was inconsolable. She felt defeated. Her grandmother who felt Teili’s sadness, tries to cheer her up with a story.

“Teili, dear, do you know that what you are going through is akin to our colonial history? Your fight is comparable to the fight for our language, Papiamentu.”

Teili stops sobbing and looks up astonished.

“Do you know that the fact Papiamentu is taught in school is quite a recent development? When I used to go to school, we were forbidden to even speak Papiamentu in the schoolyard. We were punished if we were caught doing so and to make matters worse, there were people fighting to keep Papiamentu out of all official business. Many people fought for years for the language to gain official recognition. However – since for many years or better said many centuries, people were brainwashed into believing that what was theirs would not get them anywhere, that they aren’t able to do anything they want, or that they were not good enough compared to others – to this day, there are people who still believe this.”

Teili sits up straight and takes a deep breath. Granny wipes her face and continues by saying: “They seem like robots that have been programmed to think that way and an antivirus has been installed to reject anything that might change their thinking.”

“Granny, does this mean that mommy’s way of thinking is similar to that of these robots and that she has been programmed by the Dutch?”

Granny chuckles and continues, “dear, having people think this way of themselves and their culture is not only the doing of the Dutch, but that of every other colonizer as well. Back then, during the colonial period, people did not believe in diversity. They did not appreciate that each flower had a color, which together could make for a beautiful bouquet. Back then, it was either you do as I say, or I’ll force you to comply.”

“What do you mean by that?” asks Teili amazed.

“Listen, dear. If you read history, you will notice that all colonized territories were operated in the same manner: the colonizers conquer a piece of land and tell others it’s theirs, they kill the ones that oppose, and they obligate the remaining people to do as they do. They managed to do this by giving the oppressed people very demanding work to do and by making them dependent upon the colonizers for food and then dependent upon them economically. Moreover, they would give the oppressed an education, which moulded them into the type of people that the colonizers could benefit from; in other words, people who are submissive, who do not believe in themselves, and who need the colonizers in order to survive. The reality is that all colonizers did or tried to do this. Some were more successful than others, but worldwide it had been more or less the same; the colonized often had to sacrifice their identity, who they were, to stay alive.”

“Does that mean that neither mommy, nor I, nor any of us know who we are?”

“No, no, no, my dear Teili. It’s not that bad. Robots are easily wired and will do whatever they are programmed to do, but that is not the case with humans. But, sweetie, why don’t you take a shower to cool off your body and cool down your mind, while granny prepares some food for you. And then, as you eat, we can continue talking about our identity, who we are, and our history.”

During the teachers’ meeting that week

“I don’t agree with this. There might be educational laws that we must comply with, but there are also human rights which we have to take into account; and in my opinion, the latter should weigh more than the former. How is it possible that a few parents can impose their will like that? Because they are part of the parent committee, our school must accept whatever they say? Not only do they think that their child should have more chances than the others, but also that we should treat them favorably: they want us to change their children from one group to another, change their class mentor, grant them an exemption from Papiamentu... wake up! What are we doing?” says the Papiamentu teacher, who is also Teili and Rihanna’s mentor, indignantly.

“I understand that you are upset, but we are up against the wall. Getting bad publicity won’t benefit our school, and these parents contribute to our school whenever necessary,” reacts the deputy principal.

Emotions were running high during the meeting. The Papiamentu teacher felt betrayed. The teachers she thought would back her up remained silent, while the rest supported Rihanna.

“So, do we ignore justice in favor of prestige and money? Do I understand this correctly?” the Papiamentu teacher attempts one last time.

The principal immediately addressed the teacher based on her insinuation and asked to carry on with the other agenda items. The meeting continued in Dutch as usual.

It's ridiculous, Teili's class mentor thinks to herself, five people do not understand Papiamentu, and now all twenty-something of us need to conform to speaking Dutch, just because the language of instruction at our school is Dutch. Pshaw!

The teacher left the meeting frustrated. Not solely because the majority voted for Rihanna's return to school, but also because her colleagues did not have her back. The ones that proudly proclaim their support of Papiamentu, on this occasion held their tongue.

But this is not the end, Teili's class mentor thought to herself, I am going to make this a personal battle.

Two weeks later during Papiamentu class

"Rihanna, you're up. Mention three things you like about the people of Curaçao?"

Rihanna felt uncomfortable, but she knew she had no choice but to think of an answer. However, Rihanna remained tongue-tied for a long time.

"Can any of your friends help you?" asked the teacher.

Once again you could hear a pin drop.

"Teili, can you tell us three things that you like about Dutch people?"

"Of course, miss. They are very good at doing business, they are blunt, and they are frugal... I mean, they know how to save money for a rainy day."

The whole class started to laugh.

"Well done, Teili. These are good traits that we should appreciate in others. Rihanna, did you manage to think of something?"

“Yes, miss,” replied Rihanna timidly, “the people of Curaçao are great cooks and... they know how to have a good time.”

“And if we listened carefully, this is what we call diversity,” the teacher winks at Teili. “We should learn to appreciate what others have that we do not have, without thinking that the grass is greener on the other side or that we have to be the same to be as good as them. There’s no good or bad in diversity. There are differences. Let’s keep this in mind when working on our homework assignment which is tied to our next project and to our presentation, which will be in two months on the International Mother Language Day.”

Two months later: International Mother Language Day

The big day has arrived. Little by little the auditorium became jam-packed. The section reserved for parents and visitors was full, while the seats at both sides of the stage, which were reserved for the schoolkids were almost full. Who could have imagined that this project, relating to the celebration of the International Mother Language Day, would have become this popular?

The program was varied, and each class brought their own cultural touch to the show. There were presentations in mandarin combined with a demonstration on how to make dumplings, followed by a martial arts show accompanied with Chinese music. The next presentation consisted of a combination of three classes, who joined together to demonstrate the influence that the Spaniards had on Latin America. The show was very comical, especially when listening to different variants of Spanish and to witness how rhythmic and full of gusto these ethnic groups can be. The headmaster was proud to see how his school overflowed with multiculturalism, coexistence, and acceptance of others’ differences.

But the mood changed when students of the Papiamentu teacher's class got on stage. Contrary to the other groups, the presentations of this class seemed to promote division. Teili's group was the one that began. They presented a poem about the Dutch's cruelty during slavery. The poem was distasteful and did not fit the occasion. It seemed that they wanted to throw shade at Rihanna's group.

Rihanna's group was not to be outdone. In a rap song, they told Teili's group how successful they are as Dutch people, and what they do not like about people from Curaçao. One could feel the tension build up in the audience and the school principal tried to approach the Papiamentu teacher to demand an explanation, but before he could reach her he walked into members of the press, who had just arrived to film part of the event for a news report. The sound of *tambú*² and *chapi*³ started to be heard. Teili's group got back on stage. They started to sing and dance demonstratively in front of Rihanna's group. Everybody started to whisper and to ask what was going on. The school principal, who in the meantime had reached the mentor of this class, asked the teacher to intervene, as the situation was getting out of hand, especially considering that the press was also present.

However, the Papiamentu teacher, who was feeling stubborn and who had been waiting for this opportunity answered: "I was not the one who granted no child a second chance at this school."

With steam coming out of his ears, the school principal tried to get on stage, followed by the Papiamentu teacher... but it was already too late. The two groups were standing face to face and, exactly as foreseen, a brawl broke out between them. One kid started to push the other.

² Tambu or tambú can refer to either the music genre found on the islands of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, or a small drum, which along with a hoe are the main instruments played in tambú music.

³ A hoe, without its handle, which is used as one of the main musical instruments in tambú music.

Another started to pull another's hair... Good Lord! Hell broke loose. The audience started to panic. But the moment the principal and some other teachers managed to get on stage to stop the fight, the sound of *tambú* and *chapi* resumed, but with a different rhythm which paralyzed everyone. What seemed like a fight turned into a theatrical performance. The Papiamentu teacher, who was also part of the play asked the audience:

“Are we truly open to diversity, or are we still stuck in the past? Do we still think that the grass is always greener on the other side?”

The Papiamentu teacher repeated the question to the beat of the *tambú*, while the students guided the people who had gotten on stage back to their seats. Once they finished doing this, Teili and Rihanna's group joined together to dance a *tambú* song. Halfway through the song, Teili recited a poem about her struggle at school. After, the music changed from *tambú* to *tumba*⁴ and Rihanna sang a cheerful song praising the Curaçaoan people's characteristics. This last song had everybody dancing and singing along with the chorus: “Laga historia atras, mi stima bo mane bo ta.” *Leave the past behind, I love you the way you are.*

The school principal was struck dumb, and so were Teili and Rihanna's parents. The teachers were over the moon. In the end, the group received a standing ovation. The two girls hugged each other and at the same time said: “Job well done, my friend!”

THE END

⁴ Tumba is a music genre of African origin which is found in Aruba and Curaçao.