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Essay

20 **The African Presence
In Caribbean Folklore**

By Leota S. Lawrence

The African presence is a viable factor in many aspects of Caribbean life and literature. A persistent interest in Africa has historically imbued the thought and writings of Black Caribbeans at all levels. For example, the Pan-African movement that had its genesis in the early 20th century was initiated through the foresight of H. Sylvester Williams, a Caribbean.¹ And in mid-20th century, some West Indians, disenchanted with the European way of life, journeyed to Africa in search of their roots.² In this article, an attempt will be made to examine works that deal primarily with the life of the folk, and by extension, the folk culture. It will be seen that in many instances the lore of West Indian folk—their tales, songs, proverbs, riddles and superstitions—is directly traceable to Africa. But as with all other forms of culture, much of it has been ingeniously adapted to the local environment of the Caribbean.

Who are the repositories of these ancient African tales and songs and proverbs? Who are the people who speak the West Indian dialect with its strong flavor or West African syntax? Surely, not the educated and urbane middle class. Those who desire to learn about the origin and nature of folklore of the Caribbean need look to the West Indian folk. It is among the peasants that remnants of an ancient African culture survive.

The Caribbean folk are, for the most part, men and women who have stayed close to the land—in the hills and villages. They have eschewed urbanization and, to a great extent, modernization in general. Their life-style has not undergone much change during the past century. These are the people who in Haiti, in Jamaica, in Trinidad, in Surinam and in Guyana have held tena-

ciously to the African tales and beliefs and superstitions that their ancestors brought with them more than three centuries ago. But theirs is a moribund breed; the very nature of 20th century society negates the presence of traditional peasant-folk in its midst.

Since a great deal of West Indian folk literature has never been recorded, and since the number of the folk is fast diminishing in the face of modern urbanization, there is an urgent need in the Caribbean for recording—in written form—the stories, the proverbs, the songs and riddles of the folk.

In the English-speaking Caribbean, perhaps Claude McKay can be given the most credit for "rescuing" the West Indian peasant from his traditionally "low" position in literature, and "elevating" him into a real and authentic human being. His novel *Banana Bottom* (1933), set in a rural village in Jamaica, is the most realistic example. As the novel progresses, the reader is treated to a close view of the day-to-day life of the folk in the little village of Banana Bottom. We see the villagers at work on the land. We share in the recreation of the younger members—their tea meetings, dances and picnics. We take part in their singing and their dancing. We share in their triumphs, their tragedies. We listen to their legends, their gossip, and their superstitions. We learn that the greatest festival next to Christmas is the celebration of Emancipation Day on the first day of August. There is humor and irony and pathos throughout.

In typical African fashion, gossip and scandal form the basis for many of the local songs. This is done with no apparent malice, but as a practical form of orally recording local events. One example: When Bitá Plant, the protagonist in *Banana Bottom*, as a child had had her first sexual encounter with Crazy Bow, the village musician—though Bitá and her father were liked by most of the

villagers—immediately composed a song to "celebrate" the incident:

*You may wrap her up in silk,
You may trim her up with gold,
And the prince may come after
to ask for your daughter,
But Crazy Bow was first.*³

This practice of the folk to create songs out of topical events is not peculiar to Jamaica; it is common to the entire West Indian area. One critic who made a study of the secular songs of the Haitian people writes that the themes of these songs are gossip, ridicule, love-making, scandal, reproach, misfortune, mistreatment, deprivation, hunger, sickness, and death.⁴ In addition, there is the obvious analogy between these songs and the popular West Indian calypso which some critics have shown to have had its origin in Africa.⁵

Then there are the work-songs. In Haiti, agricultural groups known as *coumbites* and *societies* use songs to enhance their productivity and for entertainment. The men, and in some cases women, gather to the beating of drums, wooden cylinders or the blowing of conch shell horns to till the earth together as their hoes rise and fall in a long rhythmic line across the field. In Jamaica, these work-songs are called *jammás*, and are sung in much the same way as in Haiti.⁶

When Jordan Plant, Bitá's father, has a good planting season, he invites "a host of young villagers . . . with hoes upon their shoulders to feed and work." (*Banana Bottom*, p. 112) As the men work, a "village ballad-monger" leads them in the following *jamma*:

*Dis a day is working-day,
Dis a day is feasting-day,
Dig away, dig away, dig away.
Mouth an' hand mus' go togedder,
Lak a sistah and a breddah,
Dig away, dig away, dig away.*

This cooperative system that is so important in maintaining agricultural

production is common throughout the rural Caribbean. It is a direct carry-over from Africa. The custom is related to comparable groupings in West Africa of which a distinctive form is the *dokpure* of Benin: the work-group, as an instrument of cooperative labor and mutual self-help, with its tradition of giving no pecuniary reward for work done, but of making the feast which comes at the end of the day's labor adequate return.⁷

Even more striking is the carry-over in the attitudes which go with these outer forms; the manner in which the participants look forward to taking part in work groups, the enjoyment which they derive from their work-group, and the verve with which the work is done are clear expressions of these attitudes. The role of the work-song in exercising social control and enforcing conformity to local custom is entirely African, as is its function in stimulating work by setting a rhythm for it.⁸

Then there is the village market. On Bita's return to Banana Bottom after her seven-year sojourn in Europe, she wants to saturate herself in the profundity and richness of her native culture. As a result, one of the first places she elects to visit is the local market place. We read that:

The noises in the market were sweeter in her ears than a symphony. Accents and rhythms, movements and colours, nuances that might have passed unnoticed if she had never gone away, were now revealed to her in all their striking detail. (Banana Bottom, p. 41)

Melville Herskovitz writes that the institution of the market in the Caribbean is itself African. The fact is that in Africa as it is in the West Indies, the great proportion of traders are women; generally, men are the producers and women the distributors of goods. The fact that the proceeds from trading be-

long to the woman who does the trading, and that in consequence women are encountered who, though married, command independent means and exercise full control over their resources, is a carry-over of African tradition. As in Africa, this procedure gives to women a position in the economic world which until quite recently was quite foreign to conventional European practice.⁹

Another West Indian work that attempts an insightful portrayal of the Caribbean folk-culture is Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey* (1970). The work is set in rural Trinidad, and the story is told through the perspective of child-protagonist, Tee. Some of Tee's happiest memories are the August vacations she and her brother Toddan spent in a little village by the sea with Ma, her paternal grandmother. Ma, who can be viewed as a representation of the African matriarch, had a host of little "adopted" children who lived permanently with her, their number being increased every August when Tee and Toddan and others visited. Ma was a market-woman who owned a variety of fruit trees. She made jams and confections from her fruits and sold them at her market stall. At nights, when the weather was fair and under moonlight, Ma would gather the children around her on the ground and tell Anancy stories.

This childhood experience of Tee, in which her grandmother tells Nancy stories is common among all the rural folk in the West Indies, and is a direct retention of a traditional African custom. Writing about this practice of the West Indian folk, John Biggers states that the popular Nancy stories which the West Indians tell are so called from their taking Anansi, the spider of Ashanti-land, as their main character. Anansi, the spider, is a heroic character in African folklore. Like Brer Fox, he outwits all the other creatures of the forest. Among the Africans, there is an

Anansi story for every situation in life. They believe that God gave Anansi the meaning of order. He taught him architecture, the structure of dwellings, and the structure of life and society. All of this is symbolized by his web, which stands also for the sun and its rays, while the sun personifies God.¹⁰

Another critic states that in the Caribbean, Anansi is a man as well as a spider. When things go well, he is a man; when he is in danger, he becomes a spider, safe in his web, high upon the ceiling. By trickery and guile, he always gets the better of those who are bigger than he is. Anansi's home was in the villages and forests of West Africa. When the great migration to the islands in the Caribbean took place many years ago, the Africans brought with them the stories about Brer Anansi and his friends: Tiger; Crow; Moosmoos, the mouse; and Kissander, the cat.¹¹

As with most of the customs brought from Africa, the West Indian Nancy stories show evidence of change and substitution, while still maintaining their African identity. Thus the local folktales are set in the West Indian landscape, and tell of animals that belong to the islands: parrot, blackbird, peafowl, puss, tumble-bug, snake, lizard, turtle, snail, cat, dog, and rat. Lively, dramatic, witty, the stories explain why many things in the world are as they are: why wasps sting, why dogs' bellies are hollow, why the spider lives in a web, and why monkey is a follow-fashion; and always at the center of this world of dusk and enchantment is Anansi.¹²

It is not surprising, therefore, that like numberless West Indian children and their counterparts in Africa, Tee includes among her childhood memories recollections of evenings with a grandmother relating to eager children the ancient African folktales of the adventures of Anansi and his associates.

²² Through Tee's memory, also, the reader is introduced to the superstitions of the folk, and the tales and legends that arise out of these superstitions. Thus, a story had originated among the villagers about Mr. Brathwaite, the owner of a large estate. Rumor had it that Mr. Brathwaite was really a ghost, a *lagahou*. Centuries before, he had killed a beautiful woman who was a servant in the estate house; the woman's husband had worked *obeah* on him. At full-moon, he turned into a *lagahou* and, by the light of the moon, met the woman, who in the meantime had turned into a *djablesse* (vampire). There was also another legend about Mr. Brathwaite: it was said that he had killed and eaten his own wife and children, and that a similar fate awaited any child in the village who misbehaved.

Tee's encounter with Mr. Brathwaite, the ghost, was unforgettable. While picking fruits from her tree, Tee looked up and saw Mr. Brathwaite approaching. She recalled that there were certain words that were supposed to make a *lagahou* disappear, so she hissed wildly, "Marche-shoo! Marche-shoo! Whitey Cockroach! Whitey kinkolay!"¹³ But he continued to approach. In desperation, Tee remembered that curse words were supposed to work like magic in getting rid of ghosts. Thus, she recalls, "I summoned to my rescue every obscenity I could think of, and let fly like a machine gun. He stood stock still and his mouth fell open. Then I ran." (Crick Crack Monkey, pp. 84-85).

There do appear to be parallels between the supernatural beliefs and tales of West Indians and those of West Africans. The Ashanti word for ghost is *saman*.¹⁴ In the West Indies, the word for ghost varies. In Jamaica, it is *duppy*; in Trinidad, *lagahou*; but the most commonly used word is *jumbie*. According to Ashanti belief, when a man dies, his spirit or *saman* immediately appears be-

fore the Supreme Being, who ascertains whether it is to go to the spirit world below, or haunt the earth for a time if not permanently. Such a spirit then becomes a "wait-about spirit." It does not seem to have much power to harm and limits itself only to frightening people. When it is visible to the human eye, it is reported generally as being white or dressed in white.¹⁵ This is the West Indian *duppy* or *jumbie* in almost every detail.

Much of West Indian legend, folktales, and proverbs originated from experiences during the period of slavery. Some legends have as their hero a slave rebel. One such legend that has formed the theme for children's stories in the Caribbean is that of Three Finger Jack. According to legend, Three Finger Jack was a notorious Jamaican outlaw who has lost three fingers in an early encounter with the Maroons. His deprivations were accomplished single-handedly; his operations, however, covered so wide an area that they left the impression that he was leading a well-organized band of desperadoes. A reward of 100 pounds was offered to the person who captured Jack. This was a difficult task, however, because Jack himself was either an *obeah-man* or had received some powerful protection from an *obeah-man*.

Three Finger Jack's Treasure (1961) by Philip Sherlock of Jamaica is a children's book that is based on the legend of Three Finger Jack. The work is replete with proverbs, riddles, tales, and superstitious beliefs of the folk. The two children in the work, John and Hilary, have an insatiable appetite for the superstitious tales.

On one occasion, the children witnessed workmen cutting down a cotton tree, which in the Caribbean is regarded with a certain amount of awe and superstition. The tree has to be felled in a certain way, and certain

songs have to be sung to appease whatever evil forces it possesses. If this is not done, it is believed that one of the workmen will be killed. Even after it has been felled and shaped into a boat, the craft cannot be launched until its bow has been sprinkled with blood. While other boats can be launched by breaking a bottle of liquor on the bow, the cotton tree boat is not safe until it has tasted blood.¹⁶

As the workmen swing their axes, they chant:

*It's not me am cutting you down,
It's not me am cutting you down,
Jack man Dora, Oh my Dora,
See the big tree coming down,
It's old Doniwaw cutting you down.
(Three Finger Jack's Treasure, p. 18).*

When John asks his uncle why the men should be singing such a song when everyone could see that they were cutting the tree down, his uncle replies, "Perhaps the tree doesn't see, perhaps it only hears. . . . Many is the man the cotton tree killed because he didn't do the right thing when he was cutting it down." (*Three Finger Jack's Treasure*, p. 19). This superstitious belief concerning the cotton tree can again be traced back to Africa. Leonard Barrett writes that although the tree has lost its "sacred" quality for modern West Indians and has been replaced by the common fear of ghosts harbored in the tree, the cotton tree is holy to the Africans.¹⁷

Another children's book, *Legends of Surinam* (1971) by Petronella Breinburg, contains stories based on legends that originated during slavery; many of these legends are still popular in Surinam today. The story "Sjaki and the Flying Slaves" deals with three West Indian legends. The first is that of *Water Mama*, as it is known in Surinam and Guyana. This phenomenon, *Rubba Mama* in Jamaica and *Mere de l'eau*

in Haiti, has the body of a woman and the tail of a fish. She appears on moonlit nights near canals and rivers.¹⁸ Water Mama is often found combing her hair and singing to herself. She has long hair hiding her face which, if seen, appears bestial. She is blamed as the cause of sudden drowning, and the drowned person may be the object of her love.¹⁹

This legend, appearing in German and other folklore also, probably has its origin in the old Ashanti myth about the divine origin of water, and is as well a reflection of what constitutes the very basis of Ashanti theological beliefs, namely, the accepted relation of every important body of water in Ashanti-land to the Supreme Being as a "son of God."²⁰

The second folk legend in this story concerns the *bakroo*, called *bakoo* in Guyana. *Bakroo* is a little man who lives in a bottle; he can be obtained from an *obeah-man*. He must be fed bananas and milk. He is let out on moonless nights to bring back money, gold and jewelry for his owners, who must live restricted lives in order to keep *bakroo*. *Bakroos*, unrestrained, stone houses, causing great damage.²¹

Sjaki, the little boy in the story, had spoken to both *Water Mama* and *bakroo*; therefore, he knew that they existed. The *Water Mama* had explained to him her reasons for preferring to live under water, and why she was half-woman and half-fish. He had also spoken to the *bakroos* who had explained to him why they were so tiny and had such big heads. Now Sjaki wanted to see the flying slaves. Sjaki had heard of the flying slaves who flew and made an awful noise once a year. And this particular night, Sjaki's brother had explained, was the night of the flying slaves, since it was the anniversary of Emancipation Day.

The legend of flying slaves in Surinam on which this tale is based has its origins in an event that supposedly took place many years before the actual emancipation of the slaves in Surinam. The legend goes that the word had gone around that those slaves who could stop eating salt would be able to fly back to Africa. Therefore, all the men went on a salt-free diet. But their wives and children were forced to eat food in the houses where they worked. So it became clear that only the men would be able to fly back. Their attempt, unfortunately, had ended in death for all of them. Their spirits, perhaps, had made the journey to Africa. Every year, on the anniversary of Emancipation Day, they returned to Surinam.²²

Going one step further, Susan Feldman states that similarity between West Indian folklore and African folklore is based not only on the subject matter, but also on the method by which the stories are narrated.²³ African storytelling, she writes, is a highly dramatic art, interspersed with songs and dances and involving a great deal of audience participation. The same is true of West Indian storytelling.²⁴

Zora Neale Hurston corroborates this statement by describing how the folk in the Bahamas combine their storytelling with songs and dances.²⁵ The narrative songs, she explains, are accompanied by the exceedingly African folk dance called the fire-dance. The dances are purely social. She goes on to explain that the participants are usually divided into two groups. There is a drummer, who usually takes his place near the fire. The drum is held over the blaze until the skin tightens to the right tone. There is a flourish signifying the drummer is ready. The players begin to clap their hands. The drummer cries, "Gim-bay!" (a corruption of the African word, *gumbay*, a large drum) and begins the song.

The drummer does not always select the song. The players often call out what they want played. One player stands inside the ring. He or she makes a preliminary flourish, which occurs on the first line of the song, does his dance on the second line, and chooses his successor on the third line and takes his place in the circle. The chosen dancer takes his place and the dance goes on until the drum gets cold, that is, until it gets out of tune. The drummer goes to the fire and tunes it again.²⁶

It is in those works that deal with the Caribbean folk and their culture—their day-to-day existence, their customs, beliefs, legends, tales, songs, dances—that these African culture retentions can be glimpsed. An in-depth study of the literature that is concerned with the life of the West Indian folk will reveal several authentic parallels between traditional Africa and the West Indies. □

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Books

The Wayward and The Seeking

A Collection of Writings
by Jean Toomer

Edited by Darwin T. Turner

Howard University Press

450 pp. \$14.95

Reviewed by Girma T. Wubishet

Most Americans, at one time or another, have found themselves torn apart by the race dilemma. And the professional ones among them—writers, engineers, lawyers, doctors and educators—have been victims of various society-imposed labels, "Indian," "Wasp," "Negro."

Jean Toomer, by his own admission a man of mixed races, was no exception. To his chagrin, he had been labeled and introduced to the literary world as a "Negro."

In "The Wayward and the Seeking," a

collection of Toomer's writings edited by Darwin Turner, chairman of the Afro-American Studies Department and professor of English at the University of Iowa, one reads about Toomer's problems with race. This book dispels some of the mysteries surrounding Toomer's personality. It sheds a new light on his lifelong effort toward a concept of one race—the "American race"—for all of the citizens of the United States.

Toni Morrison, author and literary critic, in a review which appeared in *The Washington Post*, July 13, 1980, ascribes Toomer's preoccupation with race to his marriages to two white women. Morrison argues that "the artist of an integrated marriage who finds his career at a standstill inevitably attributes this phenomenon to the racism of his field. . . ." If one agrees with Morrison's observation, Toomer appears to have devoted all of his time and energy developing the concept of "racelessness" as a cop-out or as an excuse for his failure to go beyond the plateau of excellence he had reached in his book, "Cane" (1923), which dealt with the beauty, passion and vulnerability of Black people, mostly southern Black people.

Soon after "Cane" was published, Toomer abandoned his career as well as the race. His publishers, insisting on placing him among Negro writers, asked him to feature himself as a Negro in a publicity campaign for "Cane." Toomer refused on the ground that he was not a Negro. The racism of the publishers manifested itself in what they demanded of him: to write only about Negro life.

Toomer avoided identification with either race in order to maintain a genuine association with Black people as well as white people.

Alice Walker, poet and novelist, in a July 13, 1980 review in *The New York Times*, wrote that the "fiction Toomer

wrote after *Cane* depicts only white people and never documents their racism in any way; it's as if Toomer believed an absence of black people assured the absence of racism itself."

In retrospect, one finds Toomer writing favorably about the near-white "colored" people, among whom he grew up:

. . . they were not conscious of being either colored or white. They had no active prejudices against black people or white people. Knowing that I had been of, and had come from, a white world, they were not curious about this world and certainly they did not feel that it was either superior or inferior. Segregation, if known to them, meant nothing. They had never run up against the color line.

Such statements by Toomer create the illusion that the mulattos were the ideal example of genuine human beings. Therefore, the importance of such statements lies not so much in the truth they reveal about mulattos, but in the information they provide about Toomer's favorite people. In contrast, one finds Langston Hughes, in his autobiography, "The Big Sea," belittling the well-to-do neighborhood and praising the "down-to-earth" people:

From all this pretentiousness Seventh Street was a sweet relief. Seventh Street is the long, old dirty street, where the ordinary Negroes hang out, folks with practically no family tree at all, folks who draw no color line between mulattoes and deep dark-browns, folks who work hard for a living with their hands.

It is difficult to accept Toomer's assessment, as well as Hughes', on their face value, especially when one considers the American society where the psyches of people are continually pricked by racism.

Toomer's life demonstrates his ability to intermingle with both Blacks and