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June 2007 Newsletter

The "Cymbee" Water Spirits of St. John's Berkeley

By Natalie P. Adams*

Introduction

The purpose of this short essay is to highlight the belief held by African-Americans in the South Carolina lowcountry in Kongo water spirits known as *simbi* (pl. *bisimbi*) as illustrated by several first and second hand accounts in the St. John's Berkeley Parish. Researchers of the African diaspora (Brown 2000, 2002; Thompson 1998) have linked this belief to an area in West-Central Africa from where a significant portion of Africans was imported (see Brown 2002: 300-305; Littlefield 1981: 111; Wood 1974: 334-339). In the case of St. John's Berkeley, these spirits were widely believed to inhabit the limestone sinkholes that were prolific in that region.

The accounts uncovered focus on Woodboo and Poooshee Plantations now located under the waters of Lake Moultrie. A portion of the Santee limestone karst region is found in the area around modern-day Santee State Park, and incorporates Lake Moultrie, Lake Marion, the Santee Canal, and areas along the Santee River near Jamestown (Figure 1).

In 1860, Henry Ravenel published an essay entitled "The Limestone Springs of St. John's Berkeley," noting that the most remarkable one in that area was located at Woodboo Plantation. Although his examination was not exhaustive, he also visited springs at a plantation east of Woodboo, also Wantoot, Poooshee, Fountain Swamp, and Chelsea – all currently under the waters of Lake Moultrie (Figure 2). He also discusses the spring at the Eutaw battlefield of

Revolutionary War fame, and springs near Black Oak Lock on the Santee Canal (Taylor 1998: 198-199).

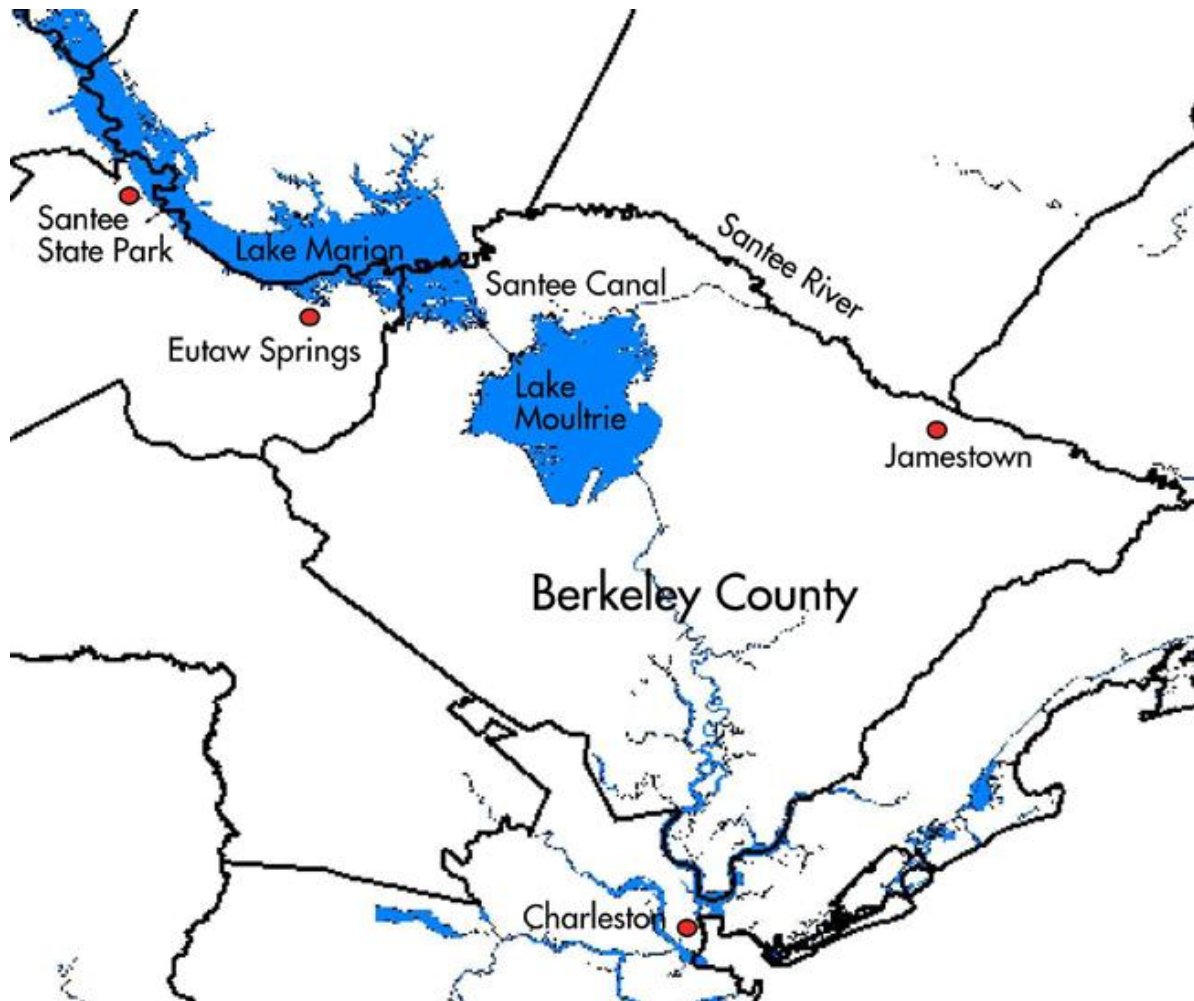


Figure 1: Map showing locations associated with the Santee limestone karst region.

Accounts of “Cymbee” in South Carolina

Edmund Ruffin

Edmund Ruffin’s (1794-1865) travels through South Carolina were part of his overall efforts to keep the slave economic system viable through agricultural reform. Because of rather severe economic depressions during the previous 25 years and the exhaustion of fields due to

monocropping, Ruffin became preoccupied with marling and liming to ameliorate the acidic and depleted fields in the South (Matthew 1992: xi-xii).

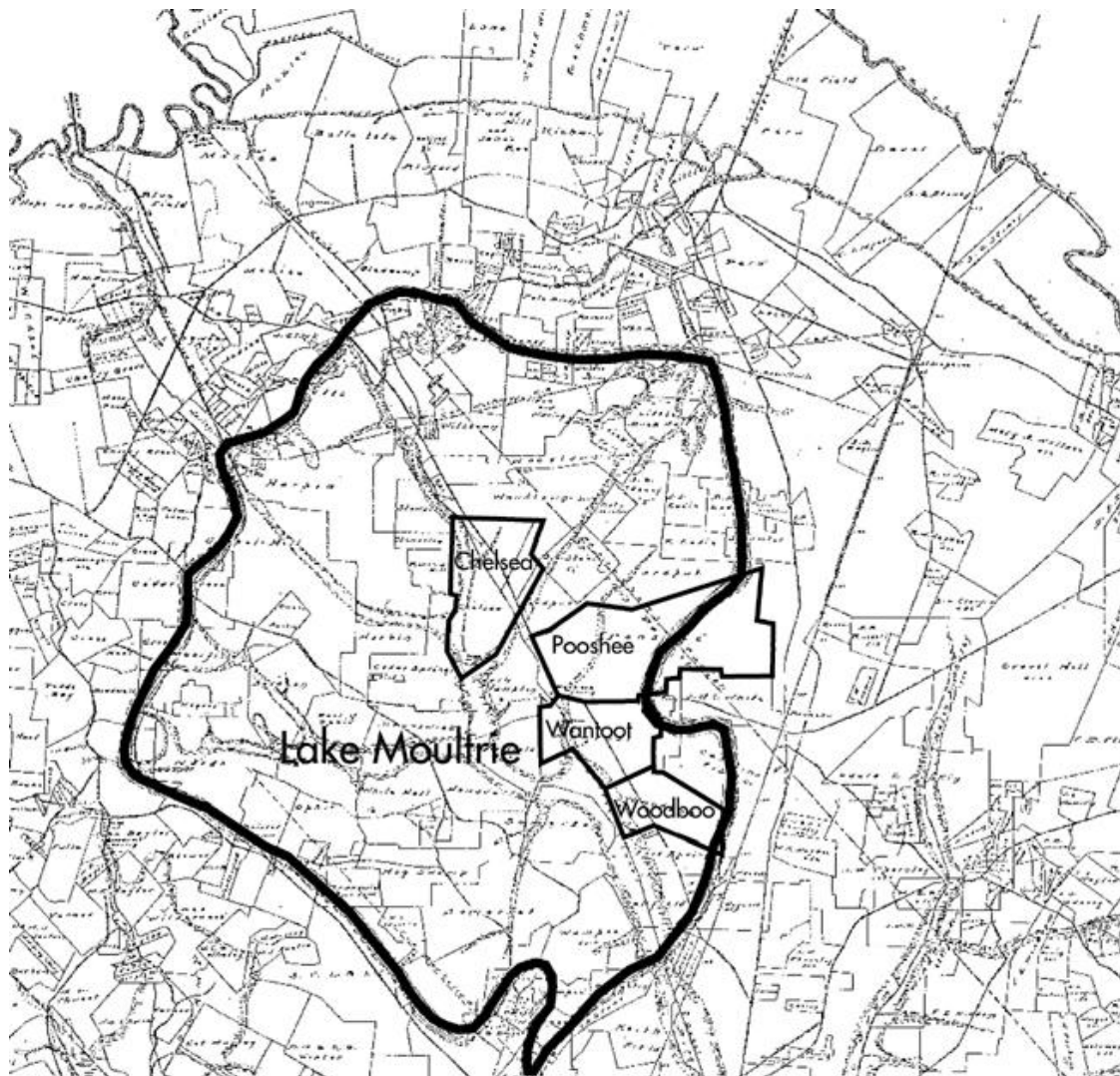


Figure 2: Map of Lake Moultrie showing known locations of Woodboo, Wantoot, Pooshee, and Chelsea Plantations.

On March 25, 1843 Ruffin visited the plantation of Mr. Robert Mazyck, the owner of Woodboo Plantation. It was in this vicinity that he had noticed numerous sinks, subterraneous passages of water, and limestone boiling springs. Ruffin referred to the sinks and springs as “fountains” (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Example of a limestone sinkhole.

At the plantation, a fountain was cared for as a part of the landscaping. It was at that fountain the Ruffin first heard of a belief amongst the slaves regarding water spirits. Each fountain of any considerable size was believed to be inhabited by what they called a “cymbee.” This was Ruffin’s best guess at a spelling and he mentions that he doubts if the word was ever written before. Each fountain had its own cymbee, with each “having a different size, appearance, and set of habits” (Matthew 1992: 166).

A slave driver that accompanied Ruffin told him that he had never seen the Woodboo cymbee, but that others had told him that it was web footed like a goose. Another elderly slave stated that, as a very young boy he had seen one at another fountain. Ruffin wrote that the man said the cymbee was “seated on a plank which was laid across the water, & that the long brown hair of her head hung down so low, & so covered her face & whole body & limbs, that he saw no other feature; nor could he answer to my question whether she as a white or a negro cymbee, except as may be inferred from her long hair.” After seeing her, she glided into the water and disappeared. The man admitted that he was “so young and so frightened, that his recollection of what he saw was rather vague” (Matthew 1992: 166). At Pooshee plantation on the Santee Canal not too far from Woodboo, Ruffin stated that a young slave boy went to a fountain for water late at night and was very frightened by a cymbee who was running around and around the fountain.

Although few witnesses to the appearance of cymbees were found by Ruffin, he stated that they are generally believed by the slaves to be frequent and numerous. It should be noted that part of the superstition was that it was bad luck for anyone who saw one to "tell of the occurrence, or refer to it; & that his death would be the certain penalty, if he told of the meeting for some weeks afterwards" (Matthew 1992: 166).

According to the local slaves, the Woodboo cymbee was only seen when the sunshine was "right up & down." At other fountains, they appeared at night. They were usually found sitting on a low bridge or plank crossing the water or on the edge of a steep side (Matthew 1992: 166).

Ruffin noted, "in regard to matters of fact of these fountains from the lime-rock, and which facts are in strict accordance with the cavernous foundation which I suppose, these fountains sometimes suddenly disappear entirely, & in other places, new fountains burst out. When the former occurs, the negroes believe that the cymbee has died, or has been offended & abandoned her residence. When Dr. Ravenel enclosed his fountain with masonry & confined & raised its water, an old half breed Indian of the neighborhood, who was half negro in blood, & wholly in habits & superstition, remonstrated with him, upon the ground that the cymbee might be made angry & leave her haunt, & that then the spring would be dried. Unluckily for the story, the fountain continues to flow as previously" (Matthew 1992: 167). At the end of Ruffin's account, Matthew notes that in Indian folklore dwarves, water babies, and old women variously inhabit springs and other wet places.

Robert Wilson

Robert Wilson (1838-1924) was born and educated in Charleston and, as a young man, practiced medicine in St. John's Berkeley Parish. Prior to the Civil War he trained to become an

Episcopalian minister, but during the war served as a doctor at Wayside Hospital in Columbia. Afterwards he served as rector at the Episcopal Church in Stateburg, then Maryland, and later back to Charleston. In his “Half Forgotten By-Ways” he describes a Christmas he spent at Pooshee Plantation. The year is unknown, but the account was written in 1876 and published fifty years later. In examining Ruffin’s diary, Ruffin makes no reference to Wilson and it is unknown if they ever met. Wilson obviously knew the owners of Pooshee – the Ravenels - and his accounts of cymbee spirits closely corresponds to that of Dr. Henry Ravenel’s son, the younger Henry Ravenel, where he may have picked up the story.

Wilson notes that an octagonal brick wall enclosed the spring at Pooshee. He states that two miles away on Woodboo Plantation there were two similar basins that were connected by a shallow stream (Wilson 1926: 155). About a mile in the opposite direction, through a belt of wet pinelands, there were a dozen or more of these ponds. The largest of them was no more than six by nine feet and are not drained by any stream. Others existed at the famous Eutaw Springs 15 miles away and 10 miles beyond that were the last of these basins in the chain (Wilson 1926: 156).

He states that the slaves “have peopled these fountains with spirits which they call *cymbies*, akin to the undine and the kelpie. On Saturday nights you may hear a strange, rhythmic thumping sound from the spring, and looking out you may see by the wild, fitful glare of lightwood torches dark figures moving to and fro. These are the negro women at their laundry work, knee deep in the stream, beating the clothes with heavy clubs. They are merry enough when together, but not one of them will go alone for a *piggin* of water and if you slip up in the shadow of the old oak and throw a stone into the spring, the entire party will rush away at the splash, scream with fear convinced the *cymbee* is after them” (Wilson 1926: 156-157).

Henry William Ravenel

Henry William Ravenel (1814-1887) was the son of the owner of Pooshee Plantation, which was the ancestral home of that family. The young Ravenel was not only a planter, but also a botanist and scientist. Ruffin probably knew Henry as “just a young scientist-planter that was interested in agricultural improvements” (Matthew 1992: 333). The young Ravenel was a strong supporter of Ruffin’s previously mentioned survey.

In Henry Ravenel’s “Recollections of Southern Plantation Life” (Ravenel 1936:776), he states, “there was a general belief in the guardian spirits of water called *cymbee* among the slaves.” He stated, “I have never been able to trace the word to any European language and conclude it must be African. If anyone disturbs the spring, the Cymbee would be angry. If it was destroyed or much injured from any cause, the Cymbee would leave it, and the waters would dry up. The Cymbees were proportionate in size to the spring” (Ravenel 1936: 776).

Ravenel then provides a nearly identical story regarding the women washing clothes and it is probably from him or another Ravenel family member that Robert Wilson got his story. He concluded “they all have entire faith in Cymbee – and one of the old men told me with a grave face that he *had seen it*. On inquiry about its appearance, he described the old traditional mermaid – a female form – half fish – sitting on the banks and combing out its long tresses” (Ravenel 1936: 776).

Clara Milligan

Pooshee Plantation comes up again as a location occupied by water spirits in a much later context. A black woman by the name of Clara Milligan warned some white children who were playing beside of a pool. She warned “Got to be really carefully if you go in that water. Simbi’ll get you.” One of the children, Nina Langley remembered that warning occurred sometime

between 1915 and 1921. Her daughter, Patricia Dwight of Charleston, brought this story to Robert Farris Thompson's attention, who published this brief account (Thompson 1998: 61; 301).

Ras Michael Brown's Discussion of the Ruffin Account

In a paper presented at the 2000 fall meeting of the Southeastern Regional Seminar in African Studies, historian Ras Michael Brown discusses the Ruffin example. Brown contends that "West-Central African nature deities, called *simbi* spirits in Kikongo, served the enslaved people of the early Lowcountry as spiritual benefactors around which captives of diverse African origins and those born in the Lowcountry built their communities" (Brown 2000). Brown specifically points to a Kongo proverb that notes, "where your ancestors do not live, you cannot build your house." Brown argues that nature spirits allowed those who were either strangers to the area or lacked ties with named ancestors to "still have access to the agents of Other Worldly powers and to feel attached to the land where they lived."

Brown states he believes that "cymbee" is an attempt to represent the pronunciation of the Kikongo word *simbi*. The words not only match in sound but also in meaning. Nature spirits known as *bisimbi* (plural of *simbi*) often take the form of water spirits and he believes the lowcountry example is unmistakably derived from West-Central African understanding of *simbi* spirits. As previously mentioned, although presumably knowing nothing about African culture, Henry Ravenel believed that the word was African.

Brown argues that West-Central Africans were particularly influential in the cultural development of the slave society because they arrived during times that corresponded with the formative phases in the growth of slavery and not because they numerically dominated the population. This argument is laid out in his article "*Walk in the Feenda: West-Central Africans*

and the Forest in the South Carolina-Georgia Lowcountry” (Brown 2002) and should be consulted for further information.

He suggests that simbi spirits may have offered West-Central African slaves powerful spiritual benefactors within slavery. They may have focused their anxieties over health and fertility on the simbi spirit. The existence of simbi in the South Carolina lowcountry exhibits the concerns African slaves had about the maintenance of community and their spiritual and material survival. As such they were vital features of the mental and physical landscape (Brown 2000).

Brown (2000) believes that the existence of simbi in South Carolina is not an “Africanism,” but rather a mechanism for community building within the system of American plantation slavery. Regardless of the cultural plurality that existed during slavery, it “transformed into a complex African-Lowcountry culture that incorporated various influences into a framework that had been established by West-Central African founders. In this process the fundamentally similar perspectives concerning nature spirits that Africans from many regions brought with them were retained by ultimately expressed in the idiom of West-Central African Kongo culture.”

Bisimbi in West-Central Africa

In Kongo, bisimbi inhabit rocks, gullies, streams, and pools, and are able to influence the fertility and well being of those living in the area. They are closely related with persons born abnormally (called *baana ba nlongo*) and *minkisi* which are magical devices or “power objects” (MacGaffey 2002: 212). They are powered by nature spirits such as bisimbi.

The difficulty in categorizing the manifestations of these spirits is illustrated by a 1915 KiKongo text, which states:

What are bisimbi? They have other names, too. Some are called python, lightning gourd or calabash, mortar or a sort of pot. The explanation of their names is that

they are water spirits (*nkisi mia mamba*). The names of some of these *minkisi* are: Na Kongo, Ma Nzanza, Nkondi and Londa. They have many appearances of all kinds. Some are seen to be green, or red, black, or perhaps in spotted or sparkling colors. The body in which they are appealed to is of three or four kinds: 1) the body of a person 2) of a snake such as a python or viper 3) a calabash or gourd 4) of wood or pottery. Sometimes a spark of fire (quoted in MacGaffey 2002).

MacGaffey (2002: 213) states that they affect the lives of people in three modes. “They are the tutelary spirits of particular territories, they become incarnate as twins and other special children, and they are the principal animating forces in *minkisi*. Since the destruction of indigenous polities under colonial rule, the great, named spirits are scarcely remembered. Nowadays, *bisimbi* are most familiar as anonymous spirits able to cause trouble if they are not treated with respect.”

Conclusions

The accounts of “*cymbees*” in St. John’s Berkeley Parish of South Carolina clearly demonstrate the belief in West-Central African *simbi* water spirits and their association with limestone sinkholes in the area.

How African-Americans envisioned the functions of these spirits in the sinkholes is not obviously clear. The references from the nineteenth and early twentieth century do not elaborate in this regard. The only conclusion one might draw from reading the accounts is that they were creatures to be feared. At the same time, however, their presence was desired as exhibited by the admonishing statement that enclosing the fountain at Woodboo would make the *cymbee* angry and it would leave. Brown (2000) suggests that the fear “*cymbee*” spirits invoked did not alienate people, but simply “confirmed that nature spirits and the sites associated with them were legitimate channels of Other Worldly power.” As later generations continued to have many of the same concerns about community maintenance and spiritual and material survival, they likely

remained "vital features of the mental and physical landscape into the twentieth century" (Brown 2000).

Note

* The author, Natalie P. Adams, R.P.A., is a vice-president and archaeologist with New South Associates.

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