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**A CARRIACOUAN VIEW
OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA:
“AFRICAN” THEMES IN THE PAINTINGS
OF CANUTE CALISTE**



Emmanuel “Canute” Caliste¹ is a former sailor, shipwright, carpenter, fiddle player, and artist from Carriacou, Grenada.² He started painting for his own amusement in his youth and began to sell his paintings in the late 1960s. Although some of his paintings hang in local business places, in museums, and in the Grenada Governor’s residence, most are sold to tourists. The themes he paints are of his own liking. Some ideas come to him from dream or visions. He has painted many scenes that depict a Carriacouan view of the African Diaspora. These include the “Big Drum Dance;” prayer meetings and funerals; mermaids; various Carnival scenes; quadrille dances; and

¹ . I will refer to Emmanuel Caliste in the various ways that he is called in Carriacou, where the older generation was reluctant to use one’s given name. I will refer to him as “Canute,” “Mr. Canute” (an honorific), or “Papa C.C.” (an informal name given to him in his village and based on the “C.C.” he sometimes writes as a signature to his paintings).

² I base modified sections of this paper on my three “in press” articles.

“African” houses (that once were built in Carriacou). Mr. Caliste considers himself a repository of the island’s traditional culture. Beyond Carriacou itself, his paintings are evocative of many traditional customs that bind coastal West Africa to the Caribbean.

Biographical Sketch.

Canute Caliste was born in L’Esterre Carriacou, Grenada, on July 15, 1914. As with most Carriacou people of his generation, “Papa C. C.” is “African.” Mr. Canute is Ibo, an African heritage of many people from his part of the island and one of the four most important groups on the island. The others are Cromanti (the “first nation”), Manding, and Temne. This identification with Africa predates the 1960s and was shared by only a few societies in the Americas (the others are the Haitians and various maroon groups).

When Canute was nine years of age and was walking near the local oyster bed between his home village of L’Esterre and Harveyvale, he had his first encounter with a mermaid. As he crossed a bridge that jumped a tongue of the lagoon, he heard the waves crashing against the rocks. With great surprise, he saw a mermaid sitting on a rock, combing her hair. "So when I peak, you see, I think it's a spirit and then I screech out and when I screech out she just like so, pum-joomp, she go down in the water . . . So I'm running and I see she was coming behind me . . ." (quoted by Lynette Diaz). About a week later, Mr. Canute saw the mermaid in a vision; she told him that she was “Queen of the Sea,” “God's Sister,” and that he should not be afraid. She placed The Book, the Bible, against her chest and said, "You will live by this until you die. " The mermaid had given him the confidence to engage in any pursuit he chose in life.

Canute dropped out of school to help his parents grow subsistence crops. It is possible that he learned how to read and write a little before dropping out of school. Through the course of his life he became a sailor, took up carpentry, boat building, seafaring, music, and painting. He also had many children; twenty-two to be exact (three with his wife and nineteen others with eight girl friends).

From childhood, Canute painted scenes on interior house partitions, on boards, and on any likely surface. Sometime after 1961, the Canada-based Madonna House Lay Catholic Order started a branch in Carriacou (Sister Trudy Cortens, personal

communication, March 22, 2004). While on a visit to Mr. Canute's house in L'Esterre in the late 1960s, one of the sisters noticed that he painted figures on wood and on scrap board. Sister Trudy thought that there was something to his painting but she knew very little about it. The sisters suggested that Mr. Canute paint on pressboard so that his paintings could be sold to tourists. Then, they sent one of his paintings to a curator at the Royal Museum in Saskatchewan. They wanted to find out if his painting was "childlike" or was "good." The curator wrote them back saying that his painting was an excellent example of "primitive" art and not childlike at all. It was the work of a master painter who is unschooled. He suggested that they should not interfere with his painting style in any way.

The sisters began to sell his paintings at the Madonna House in Carriacou. The checks for his sales were made out to him and the sisters taught him how to write out his name in a formal way (sometimes he spelled his name with a double 'l' but usually he spelled it as Caliste) but apparently he already could write phonetically. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, most of his paintings were marketed at the Madonna House itself. Sister Trudy remembers that some of his paintings sold from the time they were first displayed, although few tourists visited the island in those days. Jim Rudin, an American, moved to Grenada in 1968 and eventually opened an art gallery, "The Yellow Poui," which he still runs (personal communication, March 19, 2004). He also provided Mr. Canute with acrylics and pressboard. Although Papa C.C. began writing captions on his paintings on his own, Rudin encouraged the practice.

In the early 1970s, when I was living in Carriacou doing anthropological fieldwork toward my Ph.D., I ordered a set of paintings depicting scenes of Carriacouan folk life as I knew it – that is, the choice of subject was largely my own and not his (an important issue for scholars of outsider art). I was not as interested in the paintings as I was in getting him to talk about Carriacouan culture. When Mr. Canute completed the paintings, I interviewed him about them, recording his brief descriptions of each painting. Those early paintings all had hand-made frames, which were painted pastel colors to augment the coloring of the painting. Other than this original set that I purchased, few of any of his later paintings were framed by him. Those early paintings were signed "Mr. Canut Calist," "Mr. Canut. C.," or "Mr. C.C.." (Later paintings from the 1990s are

usually signed “© Mr. Canute Caliste.”) None of the paintings have written comments, his hallmark since about 1975. It is these cryptic remarks that gives us an inside look at his thinking about the painting.

Although Papa C.C. continued to paint subjects upon request, the body of his work strongly suggests his world, not that imposed by the others. He has painted the mermaid (his favorite theme), tourist beach houses, whaling, planting cotton, “African” houses (a local term for “grass” or waddle and daub houses), boats of all kinds, the Empire State building (seen on his first visit to the United States), the Grenada war, the Big Drum Dance, Quadrille dances, government buildings and churches, kites, islands, the “jackular” (the devil), boat building, the “bush” (trees, plants), “beasts” (animals), Jesus, the Last Supper (with 14 disciples!), jet planes, pierrots, graveyards, and many other topics. His folk art paintings are now sought in many parts of the world and hang in galleries in the Caribbean, Europe, and the United States.

Mermaids in Carriacou.

Carriacou has many examples of the presence of a water spirits or mermaids. Carriacou’s mermaids seem related to Mami Water, the ubiquitous water goddess in West Africa. When we look at Carriacou’s mermaid - her under-ocean travels, her ability to control weather, her arbitration of luck or fate - we see attributes identical with those possessed by Mami Water. The main difference is that in Carriacou only the “Shango Baptists” that have organized rituals directed to her. Mr. Canute and the others who are not “Shango” Baptists know of her through personal experience and not involvement in a religious organization.

Canute Caliste’s mermaid is a “light skinned woman” with a finned tail, which sometimes has a zipper. He told me once that he saw her unzip her fin to reveal two normal feet. It was in the middle 1970s, when he was on his first visit to New York City, to perform for the Carriacouan community in Brooklyn and at the American Museum of Natural History, where I was a curator. He was watching television in his hotel room and the mermaid appeared on the TV screen.

In Carriacou, the mermaid is usually in the lagoon where he first spotted her. Her hands may be either in a waving position, at her side, or carrying a cross. In one painting

there are three mermaids. In the middle 1970s, he began writing captions at the bottom of the painting, which reveal his ideas about the mermaid's attributes: "the Queen of Peace," "The Maide going out for a view," "The Maid having fun in the lake," "The Mermaid resting in her gardain," "Framed Mermaid cry out for peace and joy to the world," "Studying the days in the year – peace and love to the whold," "The Mermaid said on earth peace bee on to the siner on earth," and "the Mermaid in the lake restin praying for sinner on euth."

The Big Drum Nation Dance.

The core of Carriacou's folk religion is the Big Drum or Nation dance. Such dances are always given for the pleasure of the dead, the ancestors of living Carriacouans. Living people communicate with the dead through the Big Drum performance. As noted above the dead return the communication through dream messages. Big Drum dances are sometimes a part of an elaborate cycle of funerary rituals. These events are dramatized in Mr. Caliste's paintings: the Big Drum dance, the burial, the wake, and the tombstone feast.

A dance for the ancestors of a particular West African ethnic group - a Nation dance - usually has one dancer at a time. Nation dances are given to pay respect to particular West African ethnic groups from which Carriacouans are thought to descend. These dances are always played in a special order, with the Cromanti dances coming first. After the Nation dances, the belair, and other dances are played, still for the enjoyment of the ancestors.

Mr. Caliste's Big Drum Dance paintings show a typical configuration of three drummers, singers, and dancers, all collected around an area called "the ring." The oldest Big Drum painting available is one he painted at my request in 1971. It is framed and illustrates a generic Big Drum dance, with elements from the belair and others from a Cromanti or Midnight Manding. Two male and one female dancer face three drummers. To the left is a woman playing a chac-chac and to the right is another woman playing the "oldoe," a hoe blade hit with a piece of iron.³ To their right and left and behind the

³ As with the cowbell in many West African rituals and the "bottle and spoon" in Trinidad's carnival, the oldoe, which is hit to beckoning the ancestors, may be viewed as capturing the spiritual essence of the ritual, the moment that the ancestors or spirits are called by the people.

drummers are singers and the crowd, which together form the “ring” around the dancers. The ring is open in the foreground, so that Papa C.C. is able to paint an interior view of the dancers, singers, and drummers, without the view being blocked by spectators in the foreground. It appears as if a woman is dancing between two men, but that sort of dance unit does not normally occur: individuals dance alone in the Big Drum, although when one gives way to another (either could be male or female) they grab each other and whirl, with one dancer taking over the center of the ring from the other. In the painting, the woman has her skirt pulled out on either side at the waist to show her petticoats. Her dress is Carriacou’s version of the nineteenth century formal Creole outfit. An oldoe player would not be part of a belair dance. The oldoe is only played for certain Nation Dances called “beg pardons” – those performed to please the ancestors - and can be either Cromanti or Manding Nation dances.

The next Big Drum painting I have by Mr. Canute was painted in the middle 1970s and shows a variety of flesh tones, ranging from light blue-grey to light brown, to a dark blue-grey-brown. This scene is similar to the first example except the oldoe player is gone and there are fewer people at the sides and rear of the ring. It carries the following inscriptions: “Mr. Canute Caliste. African Dance Big Drum. The singer in Carriacou Isla.” The female singers are on the right and the male singers behind the drummer, illustrating the sometimes separation of the sexes during public occasions. (There is no formal separation for the Big Drum performance. This suggests the usual public pattern of the separation of the sexes rather than a feature of the Big Drum dance.)

Big Drum paintings from the late 1990s show the growth of Mr. C.C.’s art: drummers are in an open space in a cotton field and the singers have more formal outfits, various iconic bushes frame the ring, the towels carried in many of the performances are clearly shown, a dancer is featured by herself with no other people in the painting, Big Drum dancers are accompanied by his quadrille group (something that probably never happens), and people that appear to be dancing a quadrille are performing in front of drummers.

The Wake Cycle of Paintings.

The core of rituals for ancestors is an elaborate cycle of wakes, beginning with the first wake; the burial on the following day; prayer meetings (also called wakes) three, nine, and forty nights after the death; and then annual prayer meetings held until money is gathered to place an expensive tomb on the grave. Modeled after the forty days Christ wandered the earth before ascending into heaven this series of wakes nevertheless has the feel of an African funerary ritual. The focus of the rites is to comfort the ancestor more than it is to act out Christian belief. If the dead relative is well treated, that is, if the wakes are big, boisterous, yet respectful; if a “parents’ plate” (a “Saraca,” ritual food for the dead) has been properly maintained; if dreams from the ancestor are given their due; and if a tombstone is purchased and set within a few years of the burial then the deceased will be pleased and will return to his grave and will not trouble living relatives with so many requests. Once entombed a satisfied ancestor is said to join the “old parents.”

The fact of a death is sounded around the island, or in Mr. Canute’s words:

Well, the first thing that they do — they make contract to bury the Dead [i.e., hire gravediggers] And then they moan. They cry, you know. They announce it by call, send a few parties. Ring the news over the island, and say that Mr. Harry is dead and will bury at four o’clock today. In English they say, “Who hear, tell the others — Sa ki tann, parlay lot.”

Mr. Canute’s burial painting is also detailed and, as with his other paintings, shows the ideal rather than an actual burial:

After that person dead today, the next day they will get ready. And they will go and bury them at the same hour, which — they say — which — is four o’clock. Now they are on their way, going to the cemetery. Now to go and have burial.

The setting for the burial is the Harveyvale graveyard. A school that is actually behind the graveyard has been converted in Papa C.C.’s mind – into a church in the painting, from which a priest and two altar boys are heading toward a funeral procession. Two men lead the procession carrying a banner. I have never seen this feature of a burial; it may have been part of burials in the past. (Flags and banners form an important part of

Carriacou's iconic culture and may front carnival masquerade bands, fly from houses during weddings, or the yards of Spiritual Baptists.) The coffin, carried by six male pallbearers, is behind the banner. The casket has been placed on two yellow chairs, a common procedure in the funeral processions of former times. This gives the pallbearers time to rest, as the graveyard could be miles from the house where the wake has taken place. Behind the pall bearers are two lines of people, one made up of women and the other with men. As this is one of Mr. Canute's paintings completed in 1971, the only writing is his signature, "Mr. Canut Calist."

Another painting shows a typical prayer meeting or wake. This is Papa C.C.'s description of this painting (recorded on July 9, 1971):

Well, in the wake they gather a crowd. Seat them. Pray. Tell Nancy stories. They talk about. And then they have all their drink. And then they get up. And after that, they break bell [barrel]. Yes, they make a Parents' Plate [special food for the deceased]. Kill beasts and cook food and put on the Table [Saraca]. And then they sing [hymns].

In this quote Papa C.C. refers to "Nancy stories." These are Carriacou's version of the Asante cycle of trickster spider tales. "Break bell" refers to the custom of breaking an empty wooden rum keg in honor of a dead sailor. The top of the barrel is cut out and sticks are put into it to mimic rigging on a vessel. Men grab the stick and circle the barrel while singing shanties and slamming against the sides of the barrel until it breaks.

This prayer meeting painting is one of Mr. Canute's most detailed early paintings. There are two buildings pictured, as is a flowering tree. To the left there is a kitchen, from which two men are bringing a basket of food, a teakettle, and a bottle. A woman brings a tray full of some unknown goodies, perhaps some "bakes." Four other people are heading toward the house, a large building in the center of the painting, which contains the body of the deceased (not shown). In front of the house, in highly stylized fashion – enlarged so that Papa C.C. may paint the detail he requires – is the prayer meeting table. Most of the men and women seated around the table carry hymnals, from which hymns are selected for singing. A woman has her hand up; she is probably requesting a hymn by the

number in the hymnal. A man has his hands raised; he is the “chairman” who acts like a referee between the seated people who favor one hymn or another. The table is covered with a white tablecloth – missing is the sail or tarp that normally roofs the table and protects the people from rain. On the table are three settings of plastic flowers, several bottles of “jack” rum (180 proof), and two pitchers of water, drunk along with the jack.

Conclusion.

The “African Themes” in the title of this paper are African Diasporic themes, a continuously created mix of available cultural resources from diverse sources, most assuredly including West Africa, that have been blending in the central Atlantic region for over four hundred years. These African themes are both putative and historic. In the case of Papa C.C.’s attributions of his specific Ibo heritage, his sense of waddle and daub houses being “African,” and his labeling all components of the Big Drum dance as “African,” show his beliefs of his own history. The actual historic “African-ness” of these characteristics is a much harder nut to crack and is a very complex problem.

What we have in the Diaspora is a Creole cultural calaloo. Creole culture, like Creole languages, exists in as many varieties that one chooses to name, from coastal West Africa, throughout the Caribbean and elsewhere. Moreover, as with Creole languages, there are aspects of this Creole culture that seem more at home with Euro-American culture and other elements that seem to fit a West African model culture. There are “standard” versions of this culture and vernacular versions, elements that even the most localized Creole cultures share and idiosyncratic “deep” cultural elements that can be understood only in the most abstract way outside their context. It is not as important to see this “deep culture” as simply “African” or “somewhat African” as it is to understand thoroughly the cultural context of some particular activity as that context gives that cultural heritage meaning. Papa C.C.’s African culture comes alive only when its meaning is revealed although this very understanding shrouds specific historic connections. Even the sense of African-ness in his eyes and in the eyes of other Carriacouans may change through the ages.

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