

Guyanese Comfa:  
*Arts of the Imagination*

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
awarded by London Metropolitan University

September 2009

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## Acknowledgements

This PhD was funded by the Caribbean Studies Centre at London Metropolitan University. Members of the Centre, Headed by Professors Jean Stubbs and Clem Seecharan agreed that this study was a necessary undertaking. I am grateful for their support and belief in my ability to complete the work. The unwilting support and advice of my supervisor, Dr Patricia Murray, extended far beyond what was required. Thanks to her honesty and meticulous guidance, I feel I have at last found my voice. Dr Briar Wood, my second supervisor, allowed me to run with the experimental ideas of the novella and for that and the gentle steering I am grateful. Funding also came in various guises from my friends and family (especially Kathy, Sarah and Ming) whose 'here and there' donations enabled me to live and eat. I am thankful for their support. I express special thanks to Guyanese culturalist Eusi Kwayana who directed me to the work of Kean Gibson in my pursuit of Comfa. Through contacts he had arranged on my behalf I was provided with political insights about Guyana. I am also grateful to Brother Eusi for taking time to read a first draft of my novella; his feedback was encouraging. I dedicate this work by way of sincerest thanks to the spirit of my ancestors without whose guidance (and *insistence*) I may never have completed this work. I hope it proves to be a worthy mediation of their signs.

## Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the study of African-Caribbean cultural and religious practices. Research in this area has tended to focus on Cuban Santería, Haitian Vodou, Trinidadian Shango/Orisha/Spiritual Baptist and Jamaican Myal/Kumina practices. There has been little research on Guyanese religious and cultural practices. Kean Gibson's *Comfa Religion and Creole Language in a Caribbean Community* (2001) appears to be the most complete study of Guyanese Comfa. Comfa is the generic term used for the manifestation of spirits. Anyone who becomes spiritually possessed on hearing the beating of drums is said to 'ketch comfa'. Comfa practitioners recognise a pantheon of seven ethnic spirits: African, Amerindian, Chinese, Dutch, English, (East) Indian and Spanish. These groups have been historically associated with Guyana. Spirit possessions are stereotypically defined to reflect the ethnicity of each spirit.

Inspired by Erna Brodber's method of combining sociological research with creative writing, this thesis is organised in three parts to reflect an interdisciplinary methodology. Firstly, I combine Gibson's sociological account of Comfa with the works of writers and postcolonial critics, namely Wilson Harris, Edward Brathwaite, Stuart Hall and Antonio Benítez-Rojo to consider Comfa's significance to Guyanese cultural identity. I use Harris's ideas in his essay *History Fable and Myth* to argue that, as myth and art, Comfa has the potential to transform the recurrent image of despair, racial division and political violence that impact Guyana's cultural psyche. Secondly, I explore four texts by Caribbean writers to highlight the social, cultural and historical significance of spirit possession/spiritual practices and the way Caribbean spiritual traditions can be used as literary aesthetic. The third part of the thesis engages the foregoing analyses and theoretical considerations to write a novella with Comfa as the central theme. The novella aims to demonstrate Comfa's potentiality as a literary and cultural resource.



# Introduction

My sociological effort and therefore the fiction that serves it, unlike mainstream sociology, has activist intentions: it is about studying the behaviour of and transmitting these findings to the children of the people who were put on ships on the African beaches and woke up from this nightmare to find themselves on the shores of the New World.

Erna Brodber, *Fiction in the Scientific Procedure*

This study of Guyanese Comfa has two primary aims: to contribute to the increasing scholarly interest in the social, religious and cultural practices of the Caribbean; and to make my contribution specific to Guyana where this area of study is lacking. Whilst other African Caribbean religious practices (predominantly Cuban Santería, Haitian Vodou and Trinidadian Shango/Spiritual Baptists) have been widely studied, very little is known about African-Guyanese religious practices. I take inspiration from the work of Erna Brodber whose creative writing is informed by the socio-cultural experiences of African Caribbean (particularly Jamaican) and diasporic communities.

Although 'mainstream sociology' tends toward objective ("scientific", detached) investigation my thesis is driven by certain impulses that are unavoidably bound up with my identity, and it is therefore emphatically subjective. I am, after all, one of those 'children' alluded to by Brodber in her essay. As a creative writer, my endeavour like Brodber's is to use fiction to serve the sociological perspective, as denoted by the title of her essay *fiction in the scientific procedure*, and hence the interdisciplinarity of my methodology. For me isolating the disciplines does not enable a formidable transmission of the social and cultural experiences of African diasporic peoples, given the 'activist intentions' referred to in the above citation. How to interpret the experience of spirit possession or 'ketching Comfa', as it's referred to in Guyana, and how to critically analyse its significance to Guyanese cultural identity is the strongest impulse for this study and my chosen methodology. I would like to proceed by outlining my personal motivation for undertaking this research.

Perhaps I was too young to remember and therefore to be afraid of the Jordanites, a millennial religious organisation likened to other spiritual Baptists across the Caribbean. They adorned themselves in white clothing from head to foot, roaming the streets whilst zealously proclaiming Old

Testament damnation on the unrighteous. Thus they appeared to both adults and children like liminal spirits/ghosts sent from some mystical place to chastise them. So they were scorned and vilified. Fear has a way of masking itself, however, and I would say that for as many who regarded their proclamations as nonsensical there were those who were simply afraid of them. They mostly operated in Guyana's capital Georgetown, some distance from the small mining town of Linden where I spent my early childhood before moving to London. The Jordanites were also called 'Faithists' or 'Spiritualists', by which names practitioners of Comfa are also known. The only thing I knew about Comfa was that it was something frightening that 'happened' to people; 'something' overwhelmed them to the extent that they had no control of their behaviour. This vague understanding was lodged in my subconscious as something real and terrifying, just as the many tales of 'jumbies', 'ole higue', 'bacoo', and 'obeah'. I was terrified of these spiritual entities that were somewhat aligned to my sense of being Guyanese.

A few years ago my sister video recorded my mother's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday which was celebrated as a thanksgiving in Guyana. Amidst the throbbing of drums and singing, one of my cousin ketches comfa (goes into a trance) – and everyone attending *knows* that this is what has happened. In the video she had previously been seen dancing, ordinarily, as were others; her locked hair neatly bundled in a pile on top of her head. A short time after, she is seen flinging herself erratically around the floor. She is clearly in a trance and is given space to dance amidst some apparent confusion and uncertainty about what to do. My mother and one of my aunts are carefully watching her – mindful that she might injure herself (her eyes are closed throughout). After some time, the aunt who was 'ordering' the thanksgiving 'service' forcefully rubs some water on her face. This seems to me inexplicably aggressive. As my cousin appears to be 'returning' to 'herself' – the drummers bring their drumming to a close. She is led to a chair where she sits with her head flailing slightly until it falls limply between her legs. She stretches her arms as if she's trying to squeeze water from them (like the action of hand-wringing clothes) – it's an intense shivering. I notice that she has been left to do this; actually left to *deal* with readjusting to herself and what has just happened to her while the service continues.

After several times of watching this recording, something didn't seem right to me. Clearly my cousin had been possessed by a spirit, but there appeared to be no understanding about who/what the spirit was or their purpose for appearing. Why did the spirit choose my cousin (as a medium); what was the spirit seeking? Was it simply to dance and be brushed with water or alcohol? I knew that the dancing was necessary, but I could not understand what other significant purpose caused the spirit to manifest when it did? No one asked

my cousin (evidently as the spirit's medium) any questions. The aunt who had forcefully daubed water on my cousin was a self-styled 'highly' spiritual woman but something about the way she (man) handled my cousin disturbed me. Did she do this because she thought it was a 'bad' spirit who had manifested? Why didn't she ask the spirit to identify itself? Was the displayed aggression a mask of fear perhaps? This does not appear to be the case because she later invited my cousin to attend her own birthday celebrations, hoping that my cousin might again 'ketch comfa.' As a spiritual woman it seems fair to assume that she knew that some sort of prestige or success was derived when a spirit manifests at a given service or celebration. If the spirit manifested again, I wondered whether she would ask it to identify itself and its purpose for manifesting. In any case my cousin refused to attend this second ceremony because, as she told my sister (and later me), she didn't relish being 'showcased' in this way for my aunt's personal aspirations.<sup>1</sup>

In Guyana everyone can identify when someone becomes possessed or 'ketches comfa' where drums are playing at any given occasion. This seems at times to be taken for granted with little, if any, attempt to understand or interpret what is taking place.<sup>2</sup> In some cases the 'spirit' will 'act' or 'dramatise' what they want – to go into the back of a yard (searching for malevolent spiritual items planted there by an enemy for whatever reason) or for a cigarette or alcoholic drink. But often the person who has been possessed simply dances erratically and often to the bemusement (and amusement) of those watching. The more I watched the video of my cousin ketching comfa the more I was overcome with an overwhelming sadness for the spirit. It didn't 'seem' to me to be a 'bad' one. It seemed almost tragic to me that the spirit was not given some kind of welcome; handled more delicately (rather than the sudden, vicious brushing with water) and shown some due respect, as I think befits such a deeply psychical migration. I wondered perhaps if it was one of our ancestors who had ventured to give some direction, some worthwhile message to the family but for whom there was no willing translator of a vital text between their world and ours. There seemed to me to be a reluctance to engage with what my cousin had experienced; to understand and apprehend its meaning. What was clear to me was that there was an obvious fear and ambivalence about it just as I had feared those other spiritual entities that are inherent aspects of my cultural and ancestral traditions.

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<sup>1</sup> I was told by my mother who attended the birthday celebration that one of my aunt's daughters did ketch comfa. The way she danced during her trance indicated that she had been possessed by our grandmother. There's no indication that my cousin (thus possessed by my grandmother) was asked to identify herself or her purpose for appearing.

<sup>2</sup> I'm not speaking here about an organised Comfa ceremony which is primarily this work's focus. However, it must be noted that ketching comfa is not confined to organised comfa ceremonies, it is a given possibility at other drum-featured celebrations.

I accept that the inexplicable, the extraordinary and the mystical are difficult to comprehend given our sense perceptions and rationalism. But I wonder whether the fear and ambivalence about our ancestral traditions are part of a learned behaviour about how we should respond to the paradoxes and complexities that we would otherwise intuitively reflect upon. My contention is that this fear ultimately inhibits our understanding of our cultural identity. Thus this work is an attempt to advance an interpretation and perhaps a better understanding of what it means to ketch comfa.

The developing interest in African-Caribbean religious and cultural practices is a signal of emerging new ethnicities that reflect an essential continuity with Africa. Despite the displacement and consequent disruption to the African worldview caused by slavery, there is a collective sense of connectivity with traditional African practices in the Diaspora. Marimba Ani associates 'worldview' with religion, though she asserts that this it is not 'necessarily in [religion's] institutionalized form.'<sup>3</sup> She elaborates that:

[a] world-view results from a shared cultural experience, just as it helps to form that experience. It presents us with a systematic set of ideas about many things...World-view helps us inject "meaning" into life; to determine which are meaningful experiences and events which are not. It encompasses "Metaphysics." [Speaking] of the "African Metaphysic" or Spiritual Philosophy...indicat[es] our conceptions of the structure of the universe, the relationship and origin of nature and human beings, truth and knowledge, reality and the nature of being.<sup>4</sup>

This world-view notwithstanding, the continuity with traditional African practices in the Caribbean constitutes adaptation, syncretism<sup>5</sup> and creativity. In Chapter One I outline the shared characteristics of these practices as expressing a collective, though somewhat, redefined world-view related to African traditions in the Caribbean. Importantly, the adaptations and syncretism challenge the notions of 'historylessness' by which the Caribbean has been characterized. Conceived as a mere adjunct of the European metropolises, the Caribbean has been defined historically in terms of the system of slavery, plantation and colonialism and therefore as a place where nothing was created. However, Caribbean writers such as Wilson Harris,

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<sup>3</sup> See Marimba Ani, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken: the implications of African Spirituality in the Diaspora*, Nkonimfo Publications, Baltimore, 2007 (1980), p.4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> This is the term generally used to describe 'active transformation through renegotiation, reorganization, and redefinition of clashing belief systems' – hence its association with religious practices. See Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, eds, in *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, 2003, p.7.

Edward Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, Antonio Benítez-Rojo, Jamaica Kincaid among others stress that there are vestiges of creativity within the heterogeneous cultural framework of the Caribbean. I argue that some of these vestiges can be located in the syncretic African-Caribbean religious practices, such as the Comfa perspective.

In *History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas* Wilson Harris contends that historians (both colonial and colonial stewards who became 'new historians' after independence) overlooked these vestiges as significant to Caribbean cultural sensibilities. Harris argues that the 'condition' of slavery and colonialism can be surpassed through the location of a 'figurative meaning' beyond the 'apparently real' identity of 'historylessness' and by the accommodation of what he calls 'unpredictable intuitive resources.'<sup>6</sup> What Harris perhaps means by this is that in order to counter the stigma of historylessness it is incumbent to intuitively engage those aspects of Caribbean cultural identity that have hitherto been discredited; to go beneath the surface of our historic and contemporary experiences - for these (outer/apparent realities) only reveal what appears superficially to define us. Thus 'figurative meaning' might be understood as 'being able to apprehend spirit in matter', as asserted by Marimba Ani, in underscoring the principles of African philosophy and world-view.<sup>7</sup> Harris calls for a similar apprehension as a means by which ancestral knowledges, neglected traditions and ancient myths - (Caribbean vestiges) can be recovered and creatively hauled back into the cultural frame.

My consideration of Guyanese Comfa through the 'arts of imagination' emphasises the complementarity of imagination and reality which embeds African cosmology. One example of this cosmology is acknowledged by Malidome Somé in *Of Water and the Spirit* (1994). An initiated Shaman of the West African Dagara group of Burkino Faso<sup>8</sup>, Somé writes that the 'world of the Dagara does not distinguish between reality and imagination.' The two are instead closely connected, and thus it is believed that 'if one can imagine something then it has at least the potential to exist.'<sup>9</sup> For my thesis I use this ideological assumption and Wilson Harris's concept of 'arts of imagination' to explore the significance of Comfa to Guyanese cultural identity. This is important methodologically to my purpose because, as argued by cultural

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<sup>6</sup> *The Edgar Mittleholzer Memorial Lectures – History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas*, Ministry of Information and Culture, Guyana National History and Arts Council, 1970, p.8. Hereafter, I'll use *History, Fable and Myth*. This essay will be used as a framework throughout the thesis, particularly for Chapter 3.

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit, p.5.

<sup>8</sup> The origins of the Dagara are traced to the Gold Coast, now Ghana in West Africa.

<sup>9</sup> See in *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman*, Tarcher/Putnam Book, 1994, p.8

anthropologist Sylvia Schomburg-Scherff, I feel that the anthropological study of Caribbean communities 'can learn tremendously' from Caribbean fiction. Schomburg-Scherff asserts:

West Indian novelists[...] explore themes which constitute core Problems in modern anthropology – for example, the problem of the historical construction of meaning against the background of the traumatic African history of displacement, enslavement and colonial oppression, or the problem of the personal, social and cultural construction of identity against the background of local race, class and gender relations.<sup>10</sup>

I use the creative process (the imagination) therefore *specifically* because it allows me to interpret reality subjectively. I am conscious of the subjectivity of perception and interpretation which are naturally bounded by my identity. The imagination enables me to situate my work within disciplinary boundaries – literature/literary criticism, cultural anthropology, social sciences, and post-colonial theory/criticism; attempting thereby to present an encompassing ('formidable') rereading of Guyanese cultural identity. Although other studies (sociological, anthropological and historical) of Guyanese culture (Gibson 2001, Bisnauth 1996, Moore 1995, Smith 1980, Daly 1975,) have included its religious elements Comfa has only been implicit<sup>11</sup> as a subject in Guyanese literature.

Kean Gibson is a socio-linguist whose book *Comfa Religion and Creole Language in a Caribbean Community* (2001) appears to be the only complete work that focuses primarily on the subject of Comfa. I use Gibson's work to provide an overall account and analysis of Comfa. Comfa, as Gibson writes is 'the generic term for the manifestation of spirits' and 'refers to anyone who becomes spiritually possessed on hearing the beating of drums, or who becomes possessed without apparent reason' (2001, 1). In Guyana this is referred to as 'ketching comfa' as opposed to the more explicit term of 'spirit possession'. The word 'comfa' is a derivative of the Twi (the generic language spoken in parts of Ghana, West Africa) word *o'komfo*, 'meaning priest, diviner, soothsayer.'<sup>12</sup> Comfa also refers to the Guyanese religion of "Spiritualism" or "Faithism", the organising body of which is the Faithist Church. 'Faithism' is historically linked to another African-Guyanese religious group the Jordanites or 'White-Robed Army.' The significance of this organisation to the Faithist Church will be briefly outlined in Chapter One, although it's worthwhile to note that it has declined since its expansion in the pre-independence period.

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<sup>10</sup> See Sylvia M. Schomburg-Scherff, 'Women Versions of Creole Identity in Caribbean Fiction: A Cultural-Anthropological Perspective', in *A Pepper-Pot of Cultures: Aspects of Creolization in the Caribbean*, ed. Gordon Collier and Ulrich Fleischmann, Editions Rodopi, 2003, p.368.

<sup>11</sup> I say implicit because Pauline Melville's short story 'Table Wuk' is one such example – which does not explicitly identify this 'ritual' with Comfa.

<sup>12</sup> See in *Comfa Religion*, p.1. Dale Bisnauth also locates *okomfo* in Ghana. 1996, p.89.

Gibson argues that, unlike other African-Caribbean religions (that stem mainly from Yoruba in Nigeria), Comfa is 'essentially Bantu' (2001, pp. 35-37). Dale Bisnauth (1996) more specifically provides an Akan derivation of Comfa. In Akan possession is (among other names, such as 'fume fume', for example) known as 'Akom'. Akom also involves drumming and dancing and is considered culturally to be a form of artistic expression. The links between Comfa and Akom will be briefly considered in Chapter Three. Importantly, this consideration aims to further advance the Comfa perspective as a potentially resourceful form of artistic expression, as the dance of Akom is in Ghana.

Comfa is arguably one of the least known among other syncretic African-Caribbean religious practices<sup>13</sup>, which include Cuban Santería, Haitian Vodou, Jamaican Kumina, Pocomania and Myal, Trinidadian Orisha and Shango, and Brazilian Candomble, to mention those most well known. Comfa has some links with the Trinidadian Orisha religion owing to the similarity of the ethnic composition of both countries. For example, the Orisha religion combines elements from five traditions: African, Catholic, Hindu, Protestant, and Kabbalah. The Faithist Church is similarly influenced. But unlike these religious perspectives, in Comfa possession is not attributed to Yoruba Gods or translated Catholic saints. The influence or rather predominance of Yoruba deities is also not found in Jamaica. But the Congo Supreme Being – Zambie - (God) has been retained in the Kumina practice. In Comfa one of the manifesting spirits is identified as 'Congo' which shows there are perhaps more links with Kumina and other Jamaican practices such as Myal as will be discussed in Chapter One.

The Comfa pantheon is made up of spirits from seven ethnic groups that contributed to Guyana's historical, economical and political development: African, Amerindian, Chinese, Dutch, English, [East] Indian and Spanish. Faithists use the number seven because of its biblical significance. There are otherwise 6 ethnic Categories in Guyana: African, Amerindian, Chinese, East Indian, European and Portuguese. However, the Portuguese ethnic group is subsumed by the English ethnic spirits in the Comfa pantheon. The 6 ethnic groups in Guyana are, in any case, a contrivance because the Portuguese are European, but in much the same way as 'Irish' and 'blacks' were once thrust together as one despised ethnic component of British society, in Guyana so too were the Portuguese under British colonialism. Ravi Dev's point that the British did not include the Portuguese in their 'self definition' as 'Europeans

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<sup>13</sup> I'd argue that this might be the case even given other under-studied practices such as for example Big Drum of Grenada and Carriacou, Kele in St. Lucia and Shakers in St. Vincent.

'as they did the odd German or Frenchman' is well made.<sup>14</sup> Because Portuguese came to the colony as indentured labourers they were 'regarded as distinct by the British residents' who saw them as 'second class citizens.'<sup>15</sup> The Portuguese were also singled out as different because they were Catholics, not Protestants and they spoke a different language. This is the basis for Guyana being considered as a land of 6 and not 5 peoples. But the English are in fact not a distinguishable ethnic group, but part of the 'white' category that would generally include Europeans. And indeed, it's fair to assume that English refers to Scots, Irish and Welsh.

This diversity of the Comfa pantheon and the rationale used by practitioners I argue uniquely contributes to the study of identity formation in Caribbean societies. However, in Guyana there is a general disengagement with the practice, unlike the open acknowledgement of such practices in other areas of the Caribbean. Most Guyanese plead ignorance about it which is perhaps part of a wider ambivalence towards cultural/traditional perspectives which have been historically discredited and stigmatised. Thus Brian Moore (1995) argues that in Guyana 'by the time of emancipation African-Creole religious rites [which slaves had brought with them to Guyana] were dismissed as "superstition" or "fetish"', (p.152). Consequently, traditional Afro-Guyanese practices such as Comfa were forced underground, where they largely remain. The lack of knowledge about Comfa is perhaps also problematised because of the explicit association with the controversial African- Caribbean practice of obeah. There are various interpretations and perceptions of this religious/cultural practice, but it is predominantly associated with sorcery, magic (both "black" and "white") and witchcraft. Incomprehensive interpretations and perceptions persist which I think have much to do with internalised colonial prejudices as the belief in the evil/good consequences obeah is able to manifest. The obeah perspective will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

There are various positions held by social scientists and anthropologists on the subject of spirit possession. I take as relevant to my purpose, James T Houk's assertion that spirit possession is only a specific type belonging to a broader category of "altered states of consciousness" and is notably 'culture-bound' and therefore variable (1995, 116). According to Houk social scientists and anthropologists agree that to analyse the cultural aspects of spirit possession, an examination of the 'meaning and significance of behaviour and

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<sup>14</sup> See Ravi Dev 'The Persistence of Ethnicity' in *Race and Ethnicity in Guyana*, ed., Kampta Karran, England, Peepal Tree Press, 2000, p.105.

<sup>15</sup> See Winston McGowan in 'Demographic Change in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Guyana', in *The Arts Journal: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Literature, History, Art and Culture of Guyana and the Caribbean*, Vol.1:2, p.19.



ideology from the worshippers' perspective' is necessary (1995, 120). It is this subjectivity and cultural specificity that I consider to be relevant for interpreting the meaning of spirit possession ('ketching comfa'). Kean Gibson also acknowledges the significance of cultural specificity as well as subjectivity in trying to interpret/understand cultural phenomena like the Comfa perspective.

As well as to reconcile the lack of study in this area, Gibson relates a personal reason for writing *Comfa Religion*:

[a]t the beginning of my research on Comfa...I found it difficult to come to terms with the phenomena of Comfa participants manifesting spirits of seven different ethnic groups and changing their behaviour in keeping with stereotypical conceptions of each group. My initial response was that this was a case of schizophrenia.  
(2001, xiii)

She later felt that Guyanese cultural practices could not simply be interpreted by monoculturalist theories to which she had been exposed:

Then on August 1[st] 1991, I was at the Square of the Revolution where there was a national celebration of Emancipation Day[...] As a participant I was as happy as the thousands who were enjoying the African-derived drumming and dancing, the square dancing accompanied by an African drum and harmonica, the Chinese dragon dance, and the massive boom boxes blaring Reggae and dub music. Then at another moment I was an observer and I thought I should not be enjoying this. I should not be relating to this kind of diversity and feeling comfortable. I should be indulging in monoculturalism although it is unreal to me. Maybe I was also schizophrenic, but I was certain I am not, just as Comfa practitioners do not consider themselves to be mentally unbalanced. A few months later I decided to make a video documentary [...] of the diversity, of the many voices that is me, and which I, other Guyanese, and people in the Caribbean are comfortable with, although some may not admit it.  
(Ibid, pp.xiii-xiv)

As a socio-linguist Gibson might express ambivalence about the several voices that define her identity, but as a creative writer those multiple voices provide a vitally enriching resource that inspires my writing. In any case, what Gibson has acknowledged is that the unquestioned application of dominant theories is inappropriate to understanding/interpreting the 'syncretic' culture of the Caribbean. Indeed, in *The Repeating Island*, Cuban writer Antonio Benítez-Rojo argues that it is time for 'post industrial society to reread the Caribbean, to do the kind of rereading in which every text reveals its own textuality' (the diversities and complexities of cultural identity within the Caribbean

complex). He proposes a rereading of Caribbean history and experiences that encompasses the 'objectives of Chaos'. Chaos, he asserts, 'looks toward everything that repeats, reproduces, grows, decays, unfolds, flows, spins, vibrates, seethes' (1992, 2-3). This is not unlike Wilson Harris' 'unpredictable intuitive resources', as earlier discussed. The Caribbean, argues Benítez-Rojo, does not have a 'Euclidean coherence'; its cultural objects, like the Cuban cult of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre are 'supersyncretic' (1992, 10). Notably for me this extension from the syncretic to the supersyncretic illustrates the necessity of interdisciplinary discourse in considering such cultural practices as Comfa. Although Gibson identifies the syncreticity of Guyanese Comfa, my reading of Benítez-Rojo identifies Comfa as a 'supersyncretic' and therefore a more complex perspective that reflects the diversity of Guyana's and by extension Caribbean cultural identity.

The thesis is organised in three parts. Firstly it provides a comparative consideration of Comfa in the context of other African Caribbean religious practices as well as a critical analysis of the perspective. For my critical analysis I draw on the works of writers and postcolonial critics - Wilson Harris, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Stuart Hall and Antonio Benítez-Rojo to further the sociological analysis of Comfa. I use these works because I feel that they usefully contribute to the developing critical focus on aspects of African-Caribbean religious practices and cultural identity. Thus for the first part of my thesis I combine Gibson's social analysis of Comfa with the theories of postcolonial criticism as a necessary cross-disciplinary approach to studying comfa's cultural significance.

The second part explores four texts by Caribbean writers to highlight the social, cultural and historical significance of spirit possession and spiritual practices. Dennis Scott's play *An Echo in the Bone* (1985), Michael Gilkes's 'dream play' *Couvade* (1974)<sup>16</sup>, Erna Brodber's novel *Myal* (1988) and Pauline Melville's short story 'Table Wuk' (1998) have been selected for two main reasons. First, they exemplify precisely the argument forwarded by Sylvia Schomburg-Sherff about the contribution Caribbean writers make to the 'understanding of the processes of Creole identity formation.'<sup>17</sup> Secondly, I use these texts to consider how spirituality and Caribbean spiritual traditions can be used as a literary aesthetic. The theme of spirit possession in these texts (with the exception – at least explicitly of Melville's short story) broadens the significance of Comfa as a literary and cultural resource. These texts also intuitively engage Wilson Harris's concepts of the 'arts of imagination' and

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<sup>16</sup> The plays are discussed in the historic order of their theme/subject, rather than their date of publication.

<sup>17</sup> See Sylvia M. Schomburg-Scherff, in *A Pepper-Pot of Cultures: Aspects of Creolization in the Caribbean*, ed. Gordon Collier and Ulrich Fleischmann, Editions Rodopi, 2003, p.368.

'perspectives of renaissance' as a means by which to compensate the discredited knowledges of Caribbean cultural sensibilities, thereby challenging notions of historylessness.

For the third part of the thesis I have engaged these concepts to write a novella with Comfa as the central theme. The novella is the culmination of the foregoing analyses and theoretical consideration of Comfa. Inspired by Brodber's novel *Myal*, I have entitled the novella *Comfa*. The narrative is based on Kean Gibson's account of a 'Drum Work' Comfa ceremony. Of the many Comfa rituals observed by Gibson in her field research, I found the 'Drum Work' most compelling because I made some connections between the experiences of the family concerned and those of my own family. It seemed to me that there was an unwillingness or failure to accept/acknowledge the ancestral practice of Comfa despite the awareness that this was the cause of personal/collective tragedies within the family. This is signalled in my novella by the recurrent phrase 'see and blind, hear and deaf.' These tragedies were as far reaching as the death of a young child which was believed to be caused by the family's failure to keep up their ancestral traditions. A ceremony – the 'Drum Work' – was held with the aim of appeasing the ancestors and thus to prevent further tragedies. The relationship to ancestors is an inherent aspect of African Caribbean cultural practices and it is this aspect of a collective world-view which particularly defines the Diasporic continuity with African traditions. As Malidoma Somé asserts:

[i]n many non-Western cultures, the ancestors have an intimate and absolutely vital connection with the world of the living. They are always available to guide, to teach and to nurture. They represent the pathways between the knowledge of this world and the next. Most importantly – and paradoxically – they embody the guidelines for successful living – all that is most valuable about life. Unless the relationship between the living and the dead is in balance, chaos results.  
(1994, pp 9-10)

It is perhaps for this reason – the possibility of chaos and familial/social disorder (not least by the punitive reality of death) that ancestral practices like Comfa are generally regarded with ambivalence in Guyana. However, as earlier mentioned, it is also veiled in incomprehension, fear, and cultural distortion as a consequence of slavery/colonialism during which time it was discredited. Interestingly in Guyana children born with a 'veil' or 'caul' (the flimsy membrane/covering) over their face is believed to be spiritual visionaries. Often such children are thought to be 'flighty', meaning that they are *slightly* (not totally) mad which has led to the tendency to steam their face with hot water at birth to prevent spiritual insights. I invert this spiritual/psychical cultural belief in the novella to demonstrate its figurative

significance to redefining the image of despair, violence, disunity that blights Guyanese cultural identity. My novella is therefore an attempt to recover the ancestral knowledge of Comfa, whilst demonstrating (through the various narrative techniques I use) the difficulties and complexities of naming/known/understanding the significance (meaning) of 'ketching comfa' or spirit possession in Guyana. This tripartite approach emphasises the interdisciplinarity of my methodology.

Chapter One - 'Guyanese Comfa and other African Caribbean Religious Practices' contextually positions the Comfa perspective with other more well known African Caribbean practices. The Chapter considers the similarities and differences between these practices and Guyanese Comfa in order to highlight Comfa's distinctness as a symbol of Guyana's cultural identity. Chapter Two - 'Ketching Comfa: Spirit Possession in Guyana', provides an overall account of the phenomenon as described by Kean Gibson in *Comfa Religion*. Gibson's book details a number of Comfa ceremonies which she observed in some of Guyana's coastal villages and the capital, Georgetown. I focus on the 'Drum Work' account for my analysis in this chapter which is described by Gibson as the 'most African' ceremony she'd seen. The Chapter considers how 'ketching Comfa' or spirit possession informs/transforms the lives of practitioners and enables them to interpret their social, cultural, individual and communal experiences.

Chapter Three - Comfa as '*arts of imagination*' uses Wilson Harris's essay *History, Fable and Myth* to critically analyse Comfa as myth and art, which has the liberating potential to transform the recurrent image of despair that impacts Guyana's cultural identity. To broaden the significance of Comfa as an empowering symbol of cultural identity this analysis is supported by the cultural theories proposed by Edward Braithwaite ("creolization"), Stuart Hall (cultural identity and Diaspora) and Antonio Benítez-Rojo ("supersyncretic"). My use of Harris and Benítez-Rojo has already been noted but I'll briefly outline the importance of Braithwaite and Hall to my purpose.

I use Edward Braithwaite's work on Creolization to further Gibson's notion that Comfa (and the Creole language) expresses renewal and variation within the framework of a Creole system or Guyanese community.<sup>18</sup> Guyana has been politically and economically split along the racial lines that reflect the two (ethnically) dominant groups, African and [East] Indian. Consequently racial tensions and divisions, coupled with Guyana's economic deprivation perpetuate the violence akin to the disturbances of the 1960s by which time 'apanjat politics' (vote for your own race) had become irrevocably implanted

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<sup>18</sup> See Gibson, 2001, p.217.

in the Guyanese psyche. Focusing on the Jamaican context Brathwaite argues that despite slavery and colonialism, there were creative possibilities that failed to be apprehended by both black and white Creoles. The process of 'creolization', he argues defines the creation of something quite unique ('material, psychological and spiritual-based') when culturally discreet groups come into contact with one another.<sup>19</sup> Creolization is an important concept for the discussion of Caribbean communities because it identifies a culturally liberating response to the postcolonial condition. However, as Clem Secharan emphasises in Guyana 'Africans and Indians [continue to be] separated by a cultural chasm that breeds mutual incomprehension.'<sup>20</sup>

In his essay 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' Stuart Hall suggests that cultural identity can be defined in terms of "one true self" hiding inside the many other, more superficial selves" which a people with a shared history have in common.<sup>21</sup> Hall also suggests that given 'the intervention of history', cultural identity might be defined in terms of 'difference', hence the heterogeneity of diasporic identity. For Hall cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' (it is not static), of being in the process of production.<sup>22</sup> I draw a comparison between Stuart Hall's suggestions and Victor Turner's 'processual symbolic analysis' which Gibson uses to argue against the interpretation of Comfa as a 'static' reflection of Guyanese society.<sup>23</sup> This is based on Turner's assertion that 'societies must be seen as continuously flowing (processual) rather than static,' as discussed by Kean Gibson in her analysis of Comfa rituals.<sup>24</sup> This will be explored in more detail in Chapter Two. Hall's essay is useful because it problematises the notion of an essential identity, as does the comfa perspective and its pantheon of ethnic spirits.

Chapter Four – 'Myth, Ritual, Trance: Spirituality as literary aesthetic in four texts by Caribbean writers' explores the way the predominant theme of spirit possession is used in literature to express the cultural experiences of the Caribbean. This exploration highlights the commitment by Caribbean writers to the development of a distinctly Caribbean literary aesthetic. I have chosen the earlier noted works of fiction because I feel they exemplify the 'complex creative perspectives' initiated by Wilson Harris in *History, Fable and Myth*.<sup>25</sup> The Chapter also briefly highlights a selection of other Caribbean fiction that

<sup>19</sup> See in *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971, p.308.

<sup>20</sup> See 'Whose Freedom at Midnight? Machinations towards Guyana's Independence May 1966, in *The Round Table*, Vol.97, No.398, 2008, p.721.

<sup>21</sup> See *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, Patrick William and Laura Chrisman, Harvester-Wheatsheaf, Hertfordshire, 1993, pp.394-395.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> In *Comfa Religion*, pp.170-171.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> *History Fable and Myth*, 1970, p.8.

centralise the themes of spirituality and spirit possession. Chapter Five – *'Something Buried in the yard: Commentary on the Novella Comfa'* outlines the creative process involved in composing the novella. I discuss the experimental form, narrative techniques used, the use of dialect (Creole) and the currency of racial disunity and 'mutual incomprehension' that embed Guyanese psyche. The novella with which the thesis concludes is an attempt to write the narrative of Comfa that engages with the foregoing critical themes and ideas about its significance to Guyanese cultural identity. In tune with the texts I explore in Chapter four, I've embraced a complex narrative strategy to depict the experience of Guyanese Comfa and effectively to demonstrate its potential as an aesthetic literary resource.

As earlier stated, this work is primarily aimed at contributing to the study of African Caribbean religious and cultural practices with a specific focus on this under researched perspective. There is a much deeper aim, however. Overall, I hope that my thesis provides a formidable representation of the Comfa practice that not only initiates a rereading of Guyanese cultural identity, but also conveys its potential for healing the historically blighted nation. It will be underscored that Guyanese Comfa constitutes a 'daring and complex creative perspective' that has yet to impact the racially split Guyanese psyche. It is there, I feel, that the imagination meets reality and thus designs a 'figurative' [reconciliatory] meaning' to the 'real or apparently real world.'

# Chapter One

## Guyanese Comfa and other African Caribbean Religious Practices

Caribbean Creole religions developed as the result of cultural contact. The complex dynamics of encounters, adaptations, assimilations, and syncretism that we call *creolization* are emblematic of the vibrant nature of Diaspora cultures. They led to the development of a complex system of religious and healing practices that allowed enslaved African communities that had already suffered devastating cultural loss to preserve a sense of group and personal identity. Having lost the connection between the spirits and Africa during the Middle Passage, they strove to adapt their spiritual environment to suit their new Caribbean space.<sup>1</sup>

The adaptations and assimilations out of which African Caribbean religious practices developed are testimony of their vitality and regenerative capacity, but these changes were also inevitable given the attempts by colonial authorities to suppress them. At different times throughout the Caribbean the practices were outlawed forcing them to be practiced clandestinely and resulting in the loss of some of the indigenous African influences.

Common amongst the religious traditions that were brought to the Caribbean from Africa, was the belief in a Supreme Being, an almighty God, who was referred to by different names by the groups of enslaved Africans. Although referred to by different names, similar characteristics were recognisable in this Supreme Being. According to Mozella Mitchell for example, this Supreme Being was believed to be:

the author and preserver of all creation, who is almighty, omnipresent, omniscient, infinitely good, transcendent. Only among a few was the Supreme Being actually worshipped (such as among the Akan [of Ghana]). Worship, however was accorded the lesser deities, who were closer to humans in existence.<sup>2</sup>

The lesser deities functioned as mediators between humans and the Supreme Being from whom they were derived. As will be shown, it is the retention of African deities/spirits, having been syncretized with Catholic Saints that

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<sup>1</sup> Fernández Olmos, M and Paravisini-Gebert, L, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean,; An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo*, New York University Press, 2003, p.3

<sup>2</sup> See Mitchell, Mozella G., *Crucial Issues in Caribbean Religions*, Peter Lang, New York, 2006, p.19.

distinguishes the more widely known practices (Santería, Vodou, Orisha religion) from those with Christian (mostly Anglican) influences. In Jamaica, for example, the practice of Myal -out of which came Revival -does not incorporate the worship of multiple gods. Kumina practitioners worship one God - King Zambi of Congo origin. In the Surinamese practice of Winti three major deities are entertained, one of whom is known as 'Kromanti' (African) but adepts also acknowledge lesser deities and spirits, such as 'Bakru' (a demon spirit). The Orisha religion of Trinidad comprises elements from five traditions: African, Catholic, Hindu, Protestant and Kabbalah. Practitioners of Guyanese Comfa entertain a pantheon of seven (ancestral) spirits based on Guyana's multi-ethnic complex. The rituals, beliefs and practices regarding ancestors and the interrelatedness between life and death are also common characteristics of African traditional religions that survived in the Caribbean.

The aim of this Chapter is to position Comfa in the context of other African Caribbean religious practices and to consider the role Africa continues to play in the practice. My aim is also to locate the adaptations and syncretism in order to highlight Comfa's cultural specificity. Beginning with Comfa, the Chapter provides an overview of a selection of other African Caribbean religious practices. I will outline their key features, historical development and structural composition and highlight the similarities and differences between them. I proceed with an outline of the shared characteristics of African Caribbean religious practices as observed by Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert in *Creole Religions of the Caribbean* (2003:pp.9-11). Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert identify 12 shared characteristics of Creole religions, which I have summarised as follows:

- 1: African-Caribbean religious practices generally combine Monotheism and Polytheism. They all share the belief in one 'Supreme Being' or 'Creator of the Universe'. But as well as the one God – there are also a 'Pantheon of deities' who act as 'intermediaries' between the Supreme Being and humans.
- 2: The practices acknowledge a link with dead ancestors who have an influence on the experience of the living. This characteristic demonstrates the inherent Africanicity of all the Creole Religions.
- 3: The practices share the belief that certain objects can be effectively invested with 'supernatural power' – 'mineral, vegetable, animal and humans'.
- 4: There is also a belief in other spirits – outside the deities and ancestral spirits who can be resorted to for good or bad influences over someone. Adepts and participants of the practices adhere to the African worldview in which all things living or animate are believed to have 'a will and a soul'.
- 5: The religions are based on the 'mediation' between humans and spirits, derived through a variety of rituals, ceremony, initiation, divinations, spirit possession and healings.



6: Contact between humans and spirits is 'mediated by a central symbol or focus, a fundament or philosophical foundation that serves as the dynamic organizing principle of spiritual worship'.<sup>3</sup> For example, in the context of Comfa this would be the *ganda* – the ceremonial space where the service takes place or the ceremonial table consisting of various ritual items.

7: Central to the Creole religious practices is the performance of magical spells and conjurations as well as herbal/magical medicinal healing. The practice of Obeah (in various guises) is generally inherent in African Caribbean religions, and is believed to be effective in manifesting good or bad consequences.

8: Fernández Olmos and Paravasini-Gebert cite Roger Bastide's (1971) observation that 'magic', as inherent in Creole religions must be seen also as a 'syncretic variant,' meaning that Europeans also brought with them to the 'new world' their own varieties of medieval magic. 'European magic' was, however, deemed to be 'superior in one major aspect - it 'guaranteed European' dominance whilst 'African magic had not prevented enslavement' – as such it was deemed 'inferior'. Bastide's term 'magical accumulation' refers to the blending (syncretism) of African practices with European magical formulas, the outcome of which was a more potent spell or healing remedy.

9: According to Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, music and dance are central to this 'magical accumulation'. Drumming, clapping, singing and chanting by way of enticing the spirits and deities to possess practitioners are general functions of the Creole practices.

10: As a general feature of African Caribbean religious ceremonies, music and dance re-engender a sense of community and Africanity. 'African space', family structures, inter-community relations/responsibilities and obligations to deities is recreated in houses, temples and designated rooms.

11: The functions of religious leaders are central to the maintenance of Africanised structures. Other than the community based power invested in these leaders, there is no 'central authority' to which they are accountable. Participation in the practices, is 'individualised and community based'.

12: Lastly (but not at all least) 'spiritual power is internalized and mobilized in human beings who become...possessed.' Whether by deities, orisha/loa or ancestral spirits, possession is therefore a defining element of African Caribbean religious practices by which means myths are dramatised, 'relived' and 'renewed.'

Many of these characteristics can be found in Guyanese Comfa. The main exception is that Comfa is monotheistic, although Indian deities - Lakshmi, Durga and Ganga Mai are incorporated. Comfa, like the Jamaican Myal/Revival and Kumina practices does not have a pantheon of lesser gods –

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<sup>3</sup> Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert list a number of symbols from the Cuban Regla de Ocha and Regla de Palo practices as well as the *hounfort* space in Vodou.

that is gods other than the Supreme Being/Creator. In Comfa, the pantheon comprises seven ethnic spirits, not deities/gods, whom practitioners honour in order to guarantee their assistance for economic, social, physical/spiritual and emotional gains/well being.

Kean Gibson uses similar criterion as the above characteristics to contextualise Guyanese Comfa. She refers to George Simpson's classifications of 'cult' religions (his term) which fall into three categories. The 'Neo-African religion' category share many of the characteristics identified by Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, with the exception also noted by Gibson that in Comfa there is only one God. The 'Ancestral' category in which Simpson places such practices as 'Cumina'/'Convince (of Jamaica), Big Drum (of Grenada and Carriacou) and in which, although African deities have 'disappeared', honouring the ancestors has been retained. Being given a 'proper burial' is an important aspect of the Ancestral category. According to Gibson funeral rites such as the 'nine-night', 'forty-night' and 'one-year' rituals still persist in rural areas in Guyana though they are not as common as they once were. Simpson places Jamaican Revival Zion and Pocomania groups, Shouters of Trinidad and Shakers of St Vincent in the 'Revivalist' category. Gibson notes that Revival Zion shares similar features as the Faithist religion – which include 'God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the archangels, the prophets and also the dead' (2001: 166).

In her consideration of Comfa as a 'Neo-African religion' in Simpson's terms, Gibson argues that:

it is probably the lack of several Gods with distinctly African names, and the similarity between the characteristics of the African God and the Christian God that has made the religion difficult to detect, and for academics to construct. Added to this is the fact that the ancestral spirits do not usually have a name- their identity is generally in ethnic labels. To some extent, it is therefore personal and private. Thus Comfa and the other Neo-African religions share [mostly the same traits] but the manner in which their respective cultures are organized makes them different. (2001: 165-166)

Gibson argues, therefore, that in 'Catholic dominated' countries like Cuba, Haiti and Trinidad<sup>4</sup>, 'the equation of Catholic Saints with the African God' provided a ready syncretism. Gibson further argues that in Guyana which was 'dominated by the Church of England and an elite who were afraid of and [therefore] censured African beliefs, the continuation of a religious system with several Gods would have been foolhardy' (2001:167). In any case she concludes that Faithism 'fits comfortably' into all three categories, and

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<sup>4</sup> In Trinidad's case this is prior to British colonisation.

although there is no doubt about Comfa's African connection, it is not possible to fit the perspective independently into any one of Simpson's categories. The following outline of Comfa provides an overview of its historical origins and the adaptations and syncretism that emphasise its cultural distinctiveness from the other African derived practices.

### *Guyanese Comfa*

The Dutch first brought African slaves to Guyana in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century for the purpose of cultivating sugar and cotton. By 1814, following persistent wars between the English and the Dutch, the main colonies Demerara, Berbice and Essequibo, which were under Dutch control were eventually ceded to the British and would later collectively form 'British Guiana'. The numbers of African slaves brought to the Guyana colonies are not well recorded, but according to Dale Bisnauth, between 1651-1808 the English brought 1,900,000 to their colonies in the Caribbean, while the Dutch introduced 900,000 to the Guianas and other parts of the Caribbean (1996:80). It is also uncertain from where in Africa slaves were taken to Guyana, but it is likely that they came from the Congo, Gold Coast (now Ghana), Senegambia, Bight of Benin and Sierra Leone and other areas of West and central West Africa.<sup>5</sup>

Undoubtedly, as with other African Caribbean religious practices, Comfa benefited from this mix of different tribal groups and languages that were introduced to Guyana. However, the word 'Comfa' is a derivative of 'okomfo', an Akan word meaning 'priest', 'soothsayer' or 'diviner'. In the areas of Ghana I visited during my research I saw occasional shrines belonging to *akomfo* (plural of 'okomfo'). I was informed that it was an *okomfo*, Komfo Anokye, whose legendary vision of the golden stool established the Asante kingdom of Ghana. In the Guyanese Creole context, however, Comfa refers to the 'manifestation of spirits' and describes anyone who becomes spiritually possessed on hearing the beating of drums. Such persons are said to 'ketch comfa'. Comfa also refers to the religion of 'Spiritualism' or 'Faithism' which is organised by the Faithist Church. The practice was formerly associated with the worship of the 'watermamma' spirit. According to Brian L Moore, the 'watermamma cult' (as he refers to it) stemmed from the West African worship of river gods. He suggests that this particular aspect of continuity with African religious practices was perhaps made possible by Guyana's many rivers.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Dale Bisnauth, *History of Religions in the Caribbean*, Africa World Press, 1996, New Jersey, pp.80-82. See also Vere T Daly's *A Short History of the Guyanese People*, Macmillan Education, UK, 1975, pp.52-53.

<sup>6</sup> See in *Cultural Power*, 1995, p.138.

'Faithist' is also the name used to describe the Jordanite religious Movement. The Church of the West Evangelical Millennium Pilgrims (WEMP), to which Jordanites are affiliated, was founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century by a Grenadian called Joseph Maclaren following a conversation between himself and Bhagwan Das, an East Indian from Trinidad. Maclaren travelled to the then British Guiana in 1895 where he began to win converts to his new religion.<sup>7</sup> But due to the influence of Nathaniel Jordan who joined the 'faith' in 1917, WEMP members began to be identified as 'Jordanites'. They are also known as the 'White Robed Army' because of the head to toe white clothing they wear. 'Segmentation' in the movement over time has led to the development of various groups who had previous association with the founding (WEMP) organisation. According to Gibson the Faithist movement is one such example of the segmentation within the WEMP.<sup>8</sup> Similarities between Jordanites and Faithists include the 'Church hierarchy headed by a Bishop, worship on Sabbath, baptism, strong reliance on the Old Testament, dreams and visions, use of white-robos, and a close relationship to its Guyanese sociocultural context.'<sup>9</sup>

Indeed according to Judith Roback (1973) Jordanite membership is virtually African, but as with its Faithist offshoot the movement reflects 'Guyana's cultural mosaic' as it combines features of the African, Hindu, Judaic and Christian traditions.<sup>10</sup> One Hindu influence in the Jordanite movement is the belief in reincarnation. Roback observes that this is not confined to racial boundaries. For example, she relates an account of a Jordanite member, 'Agnes', who claimed that she had once been an East Indian from Madras.<sup>11</sup> Members are called to the Faith through visions, dreams and signs, hence the movement is considered 'didactic, prophetic and admonitory.'<sup>12</sup> Judith Roback recounts one such calling, which in Guyana is familiar to both spiritual practitioners and non-practitioners. James Klien who later became a Jordanite priest was born with a 'caul', a flimsy membrane that covers the face at birth. Being thus born suggests a gifted ability to see spirits. However, Klien's aunt steams his face with hot water, which was intended to prevent him from seeing spirits. The steaming of his face results in Klien falling ill. But in a vision he was told that he must take up 'spiritual work', which he promised to do, and was subsequently healed of his sickness. He saw Nathaniel Jordan following this and became a priest of the WEMP church. This familiar account of the way in which an individual is prophetically, didactically directed to

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<sup>7</sup> See *Comfa Religion*, 2001, p.56.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> See Judith Roback's PhD, *The White Robed Army*, Department of Anthropology, McGill University, Montreal, 1973, p.32.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.67.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.68.

become a spiritual practitioner is the basis for my depiction of Bess in the novella.

Gibson observes that the fundamental difference between the two movements is that Jordanites do not refer to ancestral spirits or to the 'obeah worldview' as do Faithists. Faithists relate the worship of ancestors to the Old Testament and the Twelve Tribes of Israel from whom they believe they are descended. They believe that the practice of worshipping ancestors was 'handed down to them 'from generation to generation throughout the world by God.' Gibson adds, though, that for some practitioners the 'descent from the twelve tribes is an adoption' – more accurately Faithists believe that they are 'remnants of spiritual Israel.' The suggestion is that as Africans they are descended from Ham the cursed son of Noah. Ham's curse was his enslavement to his brothers, Shem from whom Faithists believe East Indians and Israelites were descended and Japheth from whom Chinese, Amerindians, Spanish and English descend.'<sup>13</sup>

In *Comfa Religion* Comfa is noted in the 'other' or 'non-stated' category of Guyanese religious practices. Gibson argues that this is possibly owing to an explicit association with Obeah. Obeahism continues to be a misunderstood and misappropriated paradoxical aspect of the Caribbean cultural framework. I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter Two, but for now I proceed by outlining briefly other aspects that are part of the Guyanese worldview. Some of these cultural features are poetically summed up by A.J Seymour as:

[the] Massacura Man protecting the river, Dai-Dai ('di-di')  
protecting the forests, Bakkoo [Bacoo] making his owner  
prosperous, Moon Gazer, White Lady, Coolie Jumbie,  
Kanaima the avenger, Ganga Manni who sold marijuana,  
Old Man Pappee who took children away, Watermama,  
protector of river folk, Fairmaid and Duppy.<sup>14</sup>

This 'pantheon of legendary figures', as Seymour calls them, tend to be viewed with varying degrees of scepticism, disbelief and fear. But Seymour further writes that they are not all 'horrendous figures to terrify the imagination of the hearer.'<sup>15</sup> Indeed for Comfa practitioners these are real entities that populate the Guyanese 'universe'. But as Gibson argues 'belief in Old Higue is not so prevalent in Georgetown as it was up to the 1960s, but it is

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<sup>13</sup> *Comfa Religion*, pp. 57 -58. Gibson cites Genesis 9:25-27 to emphasise the rationale for this which relates that Ham's curse was to be slave to his brothers and therefore 'the fact that Africans were enslaved is the explanation for them being descendants of Ham.'

<sup>14</sup> See in *Cultural Policy in Guyana: Studies and Documents on Cultural Policies*, UNESCO, France, 1977, p.51.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

very much alive in rural areas.’<sup>16</sup> The Old Higue is believed to be a ‘blood sucker’ (like a vampire), usually a woman who ‘thrives on babies and animals.’ She moves at night in the form of a ball of fire. She is believed to remove her skin and hides it before going out. Red marks found on young childrens’ bodies are thought to be the work of Old Higue. Attacks by Old Higue can be repelled by blue night-clothes worn by children.<sup>17</sup>

Of some interest to me is the figure of Bacoo, known to be a malevolent spirit. The general description of a Bacoo is that they are short/little and black. They can be both male and female – though they are mostly thought to be male. Only people gifted with spiritual sight can see them.<sup>18</sup> But according to Gibson ‘one knows a Bacoo is around when lights are turned on and off, stoves turned over, food thrown on the ground, furniture wrecked [and] houses stoned.’<sup>19</sup> They like to be fed with sweets, ‘milk, bananas or honey’ and will create mischief if they are not given these items. It is believed that Bacoos can be bought from Suriname to bring wealth to those who own them.<sup>20</sup> Thriving businesses are believed to have Bacoos ‘working’ for their owners.

My interest in the Bacoo serves to emphasise the distinction between these spiritual entities and the ancestral spirits. Like the Bacoo, ancestral spirits can cause death but this is perceived as a sanction for the failure to upkeep the tradition of honouring them. The Bacoo also needs to be acknowledged but their function is primarily malevolence. They are not ancestral spirits although they may have been purchased by an ancestor at some time in the past. This means that they can be ‘inherited’ from past generations without the awareness of the present generation. As they are a destructive spiritual force the family would need to perform a ritual of exorcism otherwise the demon spirit will continue to wreak havoc, spiritually possessing, for example, certain members of the family. Although non-practitioners or Guyanese in general might consider tales about Old Higue, Bacoo, jumbie and obeah fantastic and therefore unreal, for Comfa practitioners these spiritual entities are inherently part of a ‘world that is suffused with power’ and which can be manipulated for good or evil.

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<sup>16</sup> *Comfa Religion*, pp.27-28.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p.27.

<sup>18</sup> Because of their innocence or purity it is believed that children are predisposed to seeing them.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 29.

<sup>20</sup> I am a little uneasy about stressing this but from personal knowledge this is a general (popular) understanding. This is supported by Gibson because she writes that ‘Herskovits (1941, 254) describes the *bakru* of Suriname as a half wood, half flesh dwarf who is ‘given’ by a practitioner of evil magic to a client who wishes wealth.’ *Ibid.* See also H.U.E. Thoden Van Velzen and W. Van Wetering’s description of the Suriname ‘demon’ (‘bakuu’) spirits in *The Shadow of the Oracle*, Waveland Press, Illinois, 2004, pp.223-237.

In Faithism the spiritual realm is comprised of Celestial and Terrestrial Forces, and Earthworkers. The Celestial includes the Judaeo-Christian God, Jesus, the angels, saints and the biblical prophets. The Terrestrial realm includes 'entrees, deities and friends of the family.'<sup>21</sup> The 'entrees' is made up of seven ethnic spirits: African, Amerindian, Chinese, Dutch, English, East Indian and Spanish. Although all seven spirits are available to them, Comfa practitioners are believed to have "three workers"- one of whom will be the "main [or dominant] worker" (or spirit); the three are reduced to one to designate the unity of God. Participants submit their petitions to the seven ancestral spirits but their instructions come from God. In any case, the ancestral spirits must be honoured, not merely because they 'do the work' for participants, but because they would otherwise harass and chastise individuals for failing to acknowledge them. I will discuss the significance of the East Indian deities Durga, Lakshmi, Khaal Bhairo and Ganga Mai which form part of the Terrestrial realm in Chapter Two. The 'friends of the family' category comprises the acquaintances of the entrees and deities.<sup>22</sup> There is another category in the Terrestrial realm known as 'Depth' to which the English spirits are also assigned.<sup>23</sup> The greater function of these 'Depth' spirits is to provide assistance in the form of healing, advice or financial solutions for participants.

The seven spirits have ethnically stereotyped characteristics and designated functions. The Amerindian (also called 'Buck'<sup>24</sup> – man or woman) and the African spirits are skilled in the use of herbs and plants. They are therefore 'healers'. Kongo (or Congo) refers to a specific African spirit. As well as being healers like the Amerindian spirits, according to Gibson the African spirits 'can also be used for evil deeds' though this is done as a 'form of redress.'<sup>25</sup> Dutch spirits – also called 'Djukas', are consulted for the acquisition of wealth. Djukas are African Surinamese (of the former Dutch colony Suriname which borders Guyana); their traditional religious practices are believed to be very powerful and are perhaps incorporated in the Comfa practice for this reason. Practitioners travel to Suriname for more potent spiritual remedies or for a specific spiritual work. Indian spirits are believed to inhabit the sea (as befitting the Indian deities) and are known for their 'protective powers'.

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<sup>21</sup> *Comfa Religion*, p.75.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> This seems confusing to me. Even if one accepts that the English are accorded a godlike/superior place which is related to their economic drive in the formation of Guyana, I am puzzled that there should be a further layer in the stereotyped hierarchy as outlined by Gibson and which literally *positions* the English spirits above the 'Deities,' 'Entrees' and 'Family and Friends'. It has not been possible for me to verify the rationale for this but an economic motivation (owing to the financial assistance 'that might be derived from having an English spirit) is the most obvious and credible one. See *Comfa Religion* for a 'hierarchical relationship of the spirits and humans', p.84.

<sup>24</sup> This is a derogatory term, though widely used in Guyana, like 'Coolie' (East Indians). The name is derived from the Dutch 'bokken' to refer to a 'wild/nimble animal. See Mary Noel Menezes (ed), *The Amerindians in Guyana 1803 -1973: A Documentary History*, Frank Cass Co Ltd, London 1979, p.3

<sup>25</sup> *Comfa Religion*, p.79.

The Chinese are healers, 'readers' and 'priests' and like the other spirits can be used for either good or bad purposes. As noted above the English are considered as 'depth spirits', and thus regarded as being in a 'class of their own' – almost on the same platform as God. They too are 'readers' and 'high' priests and are associated with wealth. The Spanish spirits are hardly entertained because they are conceived as sexually demanding prostitutes. I'm not able to expand on the reason for this but Gibson explains that promiscuity whether heterosexual or homosexual, is believed to be the consequence of having a Spanish spirit (2001: 80).<sup>26</sup>

Comfa ceremonies are defined in terms of the ethnic spirit/s being entertained, although each ceremony (unless it is a dedicated Celestial work) will acknowledge all the ancestral spirits. Ceremonies are called either 'African Work'; 'English Dinner'; 'Banquet', 'Indian Work', 'Chiney (Chinese) Dinner', 'Table Work' or 'Drum Work' and so forth. Notably, ceremonies for English, Chinese and Spanish spirits are called 'Dinner' and for the other spirits they are considered a 'work'. The ceremonies vary from between two and ten hours and can be either 'Celestial' – such as honouring those in the Celestial realm – or a combination of 'Terrestrial' and Celestial. Objects included in the ceremonies are candles (of varying colours, but white candles are used mainly for Celestial work); floating wicks, flowers, rainwater, sea or creek (spring) water, various stereotypical ethnic foods (curry for Indian, chowmein for the Chinese for example), liquor (white or brown rum, beers) and spiritual colognes such as Kananga and Florida water.

Song and dance are also features of the ceremonies. Songs will include hymns, 'Sankies' (so named after Ira D Sankey, an American gospel singer and composer) and Creole rhythms. The Comfa drums are the main musical instruments played at the ceremonies, though this will also depend on the ethnic spirit being entertained, in which case the saxophone, trumpet, guitar and other percussion instruments might be included. Music is played according to the ethnic spirit being acknowledged in the ceremonies. African rhythms are called 'kromanty' or 'Congo'.

Dances are also stereotyped: waltzing or 'a simple two step' will express the manifestation of an English spirit. The two-step might also identify the manifestation of a Spanish spirit. A Chinese spirit might manifest by hopping

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<sup>26</sup> Kean Gibson provides a break down of the ethnic composition of Guyana and an explanation for the racial stereotypes and hierarchy adopted in the Faithist religion. For example, the superiority of the English is owing to the sheer dominance of their colonising mission – they overthrew the other Europeans to claim Guyana and thus controlled the wealth of the colony. For a more detailed discussion see *Comfa Religion* pp1-13.



on one leg. Africans dance by bending their upper torso and moving up and down which is similar to the way the Dutch spirits dance. Congo spirits dance by shaking their shoulders and rolling on the ground. The Buck (Amerindian) and (East) Indian also perform a similar dance - one that resembles the hip gyrations and small hand and feet movements of East Indian dances. Entities that are referred to as 'wandering spirits' are seen to manifest by participants moving on the ground or being visibly unable to control the movements of their muscles.

Ceremonies also include the African derived system of divination. Divining would be manifested through one of the 'reader' spirits - during which revelations are made about illnesses and sorcery (such as spiritual 'blockings' - the malicious prevention of an individual's prosperity or progressiveness) and where futures are foretold. Evidently, Comfa has transplanted some aspects of an indigenous, though uncertain African past, but the gods have not made the transition into the heterogeneous multi ethnic Guyanese complex. I think though that a look at Gibson's outline of the candles used in Terrestrial ceremonies reveals an interesting process of syncretism that appropriates Catholic saints into the ethnic composition of Guyana.

According to Gibson ceremonies that honour the seven Terrestrial workers might be held individually (for one of the workers) or collectively at a 'Banquet'. A table is laid with various items such as 'sea and creek water, flowers, various foods, drinks and coloured candles stereotyped for a particular ethnic group.'<sup>27</sup> The colours are identified with a particular catholic saint; some are associated with a zodiac sign and have different symbolic meanings and attributes as follows<sup>28</sup>:

White – Celestials – Aries – Purity  
Light Blue – St Bartholomew – English – Gemini – Prosperity  
Green – St James (Son of Zebedee) – Dutch – Cancer – Money  
Yellow – St James (brother of Jesus) – Indian – Taurus  
Red – St Judas – African – Leo – Love  
Pink – St John – Chinese – Aquarius – Success  
Orange – St Simon – Amerindian  
Gold – St Thomas – Spanish – Sagittarius – Kingship

In a number of African Caribbean religions Catholic saints have been syncretised with African deities and have corresponding colours, number, particular foods, principles and attributes. For example, in Cuban Santería, the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p.85

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Yoruba deity Oshun is identified with St Caridad; her colour is yellow, eros is her principle, her dance posture is coquettish and her emblems are a fan, gold or peacock feathers.<sup>29</sup> However, as outlined above, in Comfa the Saints or apostles are identified with an ethnic (Guyanese) ancestral spirit and candles are used to represent their colours.

Furthermore, a connection can be made between the Cuban 'Regla de Palo' practice and the identification of the African spirits with St Judas in Comfa. In *Creole Religions of the Caribbean* Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert observe that, in Regla de Palo, the magical ability to make contact with the dead is the most feared of its Congo element.<sup>30</sup> The spirit of a dead person can be used for good purposes in which case they are identified as 'cristians' (Christian), if used for evil they are seen to be 'unbaptized' or 'judias.' As earlier noted, according to Kean Gibson, in Comfa, 'the Terrestrial African spirits can be used for evil deeds', though their use for 'evil deeds are a form of redress' (2001: 79). Also, in Regla de Palo 'ganga' and 'nganga' spirits inhabit the 'prenda or nganga a word that designates not only a spirit or supernatural force but also the object in which the spirit dwells – an iron pot or cauldron and its contents, the fundamento or centering focus of the Palo religious practice'.<sup>31</sup> In Comfa, a *ganda* (notably similar to 'ganga') refers to the sacred ground or an area that has been consecrated (by the pouring of white rum on to it) where the ceremony takes place. Thus syncretically there are some similarities between Comfa and Regla de Palo.

The white candle used in Comfa ceremonies emphasises that the Terrestrials (deities, family friends – ancestors, ethnic spirits) come under the order of the Celestials (God, biblical patriarchs, Jesus and so forth). The point is that God must preside over the ceremonies. In some cases an entire Celestial ceremony is performed before a Terrestrial, in others the Celestials are acknowledged at the beginning of the ceremonies as being its divine head, hence the importance of using the white candle which symbolises purity. This is important because through God's direction messages are delivered to participants by the 'angels, saints and prophets'. They manifest themselves in a form (human, animal) that has been chosen by God. Thus according to Gibson:

since the apostles and prophets died thousands of years ago,  
it is their spirits which are manifested in the form of,  
for example, an African person or a Catholic saint to do  
God's work. Thus a voice may be heard saying "I am St Peter."  
But the manifestation may come in the form of St Theresa  
(an image that one can recognize) on the Celestial platform,

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<sup>29</sup> See *Santeria: African Spirits In America*, Joseph M Murphy, Beacon Press, Boston, 1993, pp.42-43.

<sup>30</sup> 2003, p.79.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, pp.79-80.

Interestingly, for some participants, as well as being regarded as one of the apostles, saints might also be identified as an African King or Queen. For example, Gibson explains that one of her informants had been influenced by the Shango practice owing to her frequent travels to Trinidad and consequently claimed to have St Anthony as her patron saint.<sup>33</sup> This implies that in Comfa there is a degree of flexibility at an individual level. The Comfa practitioner is able to draw from other practices as befits their personal and spiritual requirements. Although saints are 'workers' they operate in 'religious matters' on the 'spiritual plane.' In other words, if a participant dreams of being given a (spiritual) bath or baptism by one of the saints (such as John or Thomas) this would be performed in the physical world (temporally) by a Mother Leader or Elder through the mediation of an 'appropriate ancestral spirit.' The Mother Leader acts as the medium through which the ancestral spirit performs the baptismal (or bathing that might be needed for healing) rite.

Gibson also observes that 'the notion of an ancestral saint is only related to the African entity', in which case the 'work' (of being given a bath by an African saint spiritually – through a dream), has to be done by another entity. It is not explained why this might be the case, but Gibson states that in such situations the work would be done by an 'Indian' spirit.<sup>34</sup> Thus Comfa practitioners have a number of spirits to whom they can refer. Some have at their disposal the seven ethnic spirits as well as a saint or a prophet. Added to this are wandering spirits who 'may embody an individual for a period of time to give a message', attach themselves to an individual for malevolent purposes or to perform a function which one of the seven spirits are unable to make effective.<sup>35</sup>

There are various reasons why ceremonies are held by practitioners of Comfa. A Celestial ceremony might be held as a form of thanksgiving to God for current successes/prosperity in the hope that this might continue. It might also be held as a birthday celebration (usually called a 'thanksgiving' such as the one held for my mother's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday). A Terrestrial ceremony might likewise be held to thank the ancestral spirits for their 'work' in augmenting an individual's success, healing from an illness as well as identifying the cause (sometimes deemed to be malevolent) of the illness. Foods offered at the

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<sup>32</sup> *Comfa Religion*, p.81.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p.82. I think the suggestion is that this was identified through the informant's involvement with the Shango practice rather than an aspect of Comfa. Gibson also notes that another participant of Comfa claims to have St Ann as her saint which was 'given to her by a Catholic priest.'

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p.83.

ceremonies, which is done in most cases, imply that a favour from the spirits is being sought by the host. The following overview of a selection of African Caribbean practices highlights the historical and cultural differences and similarities between these practices and Guyanese Comfa.

### *Cuban Santería*

According to Joseph Murphy, Spanish Creole society in Cuba in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was 'a maze of classes, castes and racial and ethnic groups', of which the category 'negros de nación (slaves born in Africa and belonging to a particular ethnic group) was a part (1993:28). Although the number of these nación (nations) diminished by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the preservation of their ethnicity was possible through the establishment of 'Cabildos' (Havana Social Clubs), which would later become 'Reglas'. It is these 'Cabildos', Murphy argues, that have enabled the survival of the Yoruba religion in Cuba (ibid.) Unlike the dominance of the Church of England in Guyana, the Catholic Church's acceptance of the diversity of the African slaves, and its subsequent institutionalisation of the 'Cabildos' unintentionally ensured the continuity of African derived religious practices in Cuba.

Although the pantheon of African deities in Santería are usually identified as Yoruba, Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert state that Santería (or 'La Regla Ocha- 'rule of the Orisha') benefited from 'the traditional African approach of dynamic borrowing and merging, a resourceful and creative strategy common in Africa where religious ideas travel frequently across ethnic and political boundaries' (2003:24). It was, however, the Yoruba groups who had a dominant influence on the ethnically diverse numbers of African slaves that arrived in Cuba in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Given its susceptibility to cultural transformation, Yoruba mythology experienced fundamental changes on cultural contact with other African religious traditions and Catholicism.

Santería rituals involve the worship of Orisha (Yoruba deities) and their Catholic counterparts. The Orisha act as intermediaries interceding to the Supreme Being on behalf of humans. The Supreme Being is comprised of the Trinity of Olofi ('Sovereign ruler'), Oluddumare ('Almighty One') and Olorun ('Owner or Lord of Heaven'). Whilst the worship of, and dedicated cults for the Orisha is an inherent part of practicing Santería, in Comfa the spirits are honoured but not *worshipped*, nor do they have personal shrines or cults. Worship is permitted only to God (of Judaeo-Christianity) as the Supreme Being and Creator. Having evolved as the worship of the 'Watermamma' spirit from its West African roots of worshipping river gods, it appears that Christian inculcation led practitioners to try to legitimise Comfa in the Biblical

context that instructs against the worship of false gods. This notion is confirmed by Gibson's assertion about the dominance of the Church of England which prohibited the perpetuation of worshipping African gods.

I would also argue that it is probable that invocations to the watermamma spirit were likened to Saul's invoking of the dead spirit of the prophet Samuel in the Old Testament. This is often considered to be a sacrilegious act through which Saul's demise was foretold. In my novella *Thamar* is a Christian who is torn between her Christian faith and her family's traditional/cultural beliefs. She considers whether Saul's invocation of Samuel (essentially a spirit or dead ancestor) is equivalent to dreaming about her ancestors. In this depiction I have associated Saul's consulting the 'witch of Endor' with visiting an obeah woman, an action which would be outwardly frowned upon by some Christians and non-practitioners of Comfa. This is not to say that such persons do not consult obeah practitioners, rather this is done in secret, much like Saul's visit to the 'witch of Endor.'<sup>36</sup>

In *Santería* the Orisha (Yoruba deities) - Eleguá, Ogún, Changó (or Shango), Yemayá, Obatalá, Ochún, Orula, Babaluaye, Osanyin, Oyá and Olurun – have corresponding Catholic Saints.<sup>37</sup> They also have their own 'archetypal' characteristics, not unlike the 'stereotyped' characteristics of the spirits in Comfa, though their personalisation makes this much more defined. The orisha also have their own principle or element, colour, number, favourite food, dance posture or emblem with which they are associated. Interestingly, Osanyin (or Osain, identified with St Joseph) is the deity of the forest, the 'herbalist' and 'healer' and can thus be likened to the African and Amerindian spirits in the Comfa practice. The worship of the Orisha involves divination, sacrifice, trance (possession) and initiation. With the exception of animal sacrifice, these aspects are also found in Comfa. The system of divination is, however, a much more complex activity attributing three methods: 'the coconut or Obi', reading of 'cowries' (shells) and 'Ifá' using the 'ekuele chain or Ifá Table. There is no indication of such remnants of the traditional African divining system in Comfa- that is through the use of these items. But as earlier

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<sup>36</sup> See 1 Samuel: Chapter 28 from the Bible. Saul as King of Israel had banished witches/wizards (those with 'familiar spirits'). But in a desperate moment, he sought the advice of a witch (interestingly he asked her to 'divine unto me by the familiar spirit') to invoke the spirit of Samuel to advise him on a military strategy. Samuel was displeased that he had been invoked ('disquieted'), but he nevertheless forewarned Saul through the mediumship of the 'witch of Endor' that he and his sons would be dead the following day. I once told a cousin of mine about a dream I had of my grandmother. She told me that it was not my grandmother (hers too) that I was dreaming, but it was the devil. She referenced this passage from the Bible as the reason for saying this. She is now a practicing minister in the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

<sup>37</sup> See Joseph M Murphy's chart of corresponding orisha and saints along with their principles, foods, emblems, colours and dance postures in *Santería: African Spirits in America*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1993 [1988], pp.42-43.

outlined in Comfa divination is performed by spiritual 'readers'. Readers are possessed by an ancestral spirit from whom they receive, and in turn, relay messages as directed.

### *Haitian Vodou*

Vodou refers to the system of beliefs and ritual practices of the African derived religion in Haiti.<sup>38</sup> Vodou is the name given to 'ancient primordial spirits or mysterious energies as well as to the exploits and rituals associated with them individually and collectively.'<sup>39</sup> Like Santería, Vodou developed from the commingling of African slaves from different ethnic groups – including Fon, Nago, Dahomean, Igbo - who recognised a commonality between their individual traditional practices. These were combined with both European (Catholicism) and indigenous Indian practices -Taino and Arawak- resulting in the modification of 'older beliefs' in a 'New World' space.

As Herbert Marks writes, although 'much has been lost or changed', traces of the original 'Dahomean' religion is still prevalent. According to Marks, Vodou comprises:

a creator god, all powerful but distant and requiring no personal service a pantheon of anthropomorphic deities, vaguely linked to natural forces and figured as members of an extended family, with all the virtues and vices of mortals; a ritual tradition which emphasizes communal manifestation...possession of the celebrant by the god, dance, percussive music, a chanted liturgy, consecrated feasting and (until recently) human sacrifice; a professional priesthood assisted by initiates devoted to the service of the various major gods; the practice of divination; belief in the efficacy of magic, sustained in part by the wide knowledge of herbalore.<sup>40</sup>

Vodou thus centres on the worship/service of a pantheon of spirits called 'loa' (or lwa), who are identified as African and (indigenous) Indian gods, deified ancestral spirits and syncretized Catholic Saints. The identities of the loa – Damballah, Ezili (Erzulie-Freda), Ogu, Agwe, Legba etc- can be traced to distinct African as well as (indigenous) Indian ethnicities. Again, as with Santería, this distinguishes Vodou from Comfa where the spirits are not identified with an African equivalent deity or one that has been syncretised with a Catholic saint. Although it is not exclusive, in Comfa the spirits tend to

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<sup>38</sup> It is sometimes spelt 'Vodu', 'Vodoun', 'Vodun' and 'Voodoo' (which is the most common spelling and which is generally avoided because of its association with Hollywood's sensationalisation of the practice). I use Vodou, as this tends to be used in reference to the Haitian (that is the Creole) practice.

<sup>39</sup> See Will Coleman, *Tribal Talk*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, USA, 2000, p.4.

<sup>40</sup> Marks, Herbert, 'Voodoo in Haiti' in *Afro Caribbean Religions*, Brian Gates, ed., Ward Lock Educational, London, 1980, p.59.

be nameless. However, the spirits that manifest at Comfa ceremonies might display the characteristics of an ancestor and can be identified as that deceased member of the family. Spirits can be named if they are asked to identify themselves, but this will depend on the organization of the ceremony and the skill of the person discharged with the order of proceedings.

Of the many gods in Haitian Vodou, Damballa-Weda<sup>41</sup> (the fertility god) is believed to be the highest. Legba, who mediates between the world of spirit and human, is the loa most frequently referred to in the practice. This spirit stands at the crossroad between the two worlds and is invoked before ceremonies take place thereby securing successful outcomes, that is, without the interventions of evil spirits. Legba is an old man whose symbol is a wooden stick. In the novella, I hint somewhat that there's a connection between this deity and my depiction of Festus (Pa) Quamina. As he is the head (an ancestral spirit) of the Quamina family, his wife Ineze thinks that he should open the dancing at the Comfa ceremony, but he astutely refuses to do so. Festus has an infirmity which he contracted after his 'encounter' as a child with a 'fairmaid' (watermamma spirit). The infirmity later develops into a stroke for which reason Festus is dependent on the use of a walking stick. Although his refusal to dance is partly hampered by his leg, he is also embittered by the actions of his grandchildren whom he feels have not properly honoured them. He is, however, finally inspired to dance at the ceremony. He takes possession of his granddaughter, Euna and subsequently his leg is healed and he thus realises his ancestral responsibility of assisting his grandchildren.

Furthermore, in Haitian Vodou, the deities are organised into various 'nanchons' ('nations'), (as with Santería – though these are now mostly recognised as 'Regla') – nago, rada (sometimes Arado), Petro (or Petwo), Kongo, Igbo - denoting distinct ethnicities or a fusion of ethnicities. This acknowledgement of ethnic and cultural diversity in the form of individuated 'nations' is found in ritual ceremonies throughout the Caribbean. Thus in *Nation Dance: Identity and Cultural Difference*, Patrick Taylor observes that in Carricou the 'Nation Dance' is:

a ceremony in which the traditions of different dispersed *nations* are celebrated *together* in one sacred space, but in sequence, one after the other, each receiving its due: the Ibo, Cromanti, Congo, Arada, Moko and others. African steps make way for European as the drums welcome the Old Creole Nation.

(2001, p. 2, emphasis in original).

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<sup>41</sup> Weda is also spelt Ouidah and whydah is situated in the Coast of Benin, West Africa. The symbol for Damballa is one or two snakes. See Mitchell, p.29.

Hence Creolization, as will be discussed in Chapter Three, as well as syncretism is an inherent feature of African Caribbean practices. Moreover, according to Dale Bisnauth the 'Petro rites' were the most 'aggressive and violent' in Haitian Vodou. This rite was practiced by maroon slaves who lived in the hills, having escaped the rigours of plantation life.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, some of the Petro deities were indigenous to the Caribbean. Bisnauth states that these were 'Petro, Baron Samedi, Simbi and Azaca' and further that 'Simbi was originally the local Amerindian god of rain and Azacca the Indian deity associated with maize. Samedi and zombie might well have been derived from the Arawak Zemi; both were related to the spirits of the dead.'<sup>43</sup> This of course emphasises the extent of the assimilations and adaptations that African traditional religions underwent in the Caribbean.

In Guyana, the Creole song, which goes 'nation a weh yuh nation, nation a weh dem deh' is often performed at the beginning of cultural ceremonies as a way of inviting the drummers and importantly the ancestral spirits ('African Nations') into the ceremonial space. Evidently the division of slaves into 'nations' on their arrival in the Americas was systematic across the Caribbean. In Haitian Vodou, as Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert observe 'the concept of 'nation' has survived [and serves] to categorize the laws and the rituals based on their origin' (2003:105). But whilst the organisation of the deities into (predominantly African) nations continues to be an aspect of Haitian Vodou and Cuban Santería, in Guyana the nations are no longer simply African but rather an appropriation of Guyana's multi-ethnicity.

Vodou ceremonies are presided over by both male and female priests, respectively called Houngan (or oungan) and Manbo who are divested with spiritual knowledge. They also ensure the loyalty of worshippers whom they provide with spiritual advice and healing remedies for ailments and spiritual attacks (sorcery). This function is not unlike that of the Mother Leader (female) or Elder (Male) who is the head of a Faithist Church. Not all Comfa practitioners attend a Church, however, which means that this function might be given to someone who has gained a reputation for doing 'good work', someone who has a 'spiritual gift' and is able to 'read' and who is known to 'ketch comfa' (become possessed). In Vodou, houngans and manbos must thus be gifted with 'second sight' to ensure the trust of devotees. The gift of second sight is an indication that the houngan/manbo has been chosen by God (through 'visions or dreams') 'as a vessel for supernatural powers.'<sup>44</sup> Similarly, in Comfa, practitioners are 'baptized' into the Faithist Church having received

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<sup>42</sup> *History of Caribbean Religions*, 1996, p.170

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> See Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 2003, p.107.



spiritual messages in the form of dreams or through illness that this is where their destiny lies.

### *The Orisha Religion - Trinidad*

Guyana shares a similar ethnic composition as Trinidad. In both countries, East Indians and Africans comprise the two dominant ethnic groups. The groups are separated in both cases by their religious activities – East Indians are Hindus, whilst Africans are affiliated to one or more of the overall religious complex. However, while in Guyana the Comfa religion continues to be shrouded by a degree of suspicion and secrecy, in Trinidad the Orisha religion is not only practiced openly by mostly Africans, there is suggestion that the religion is becoming increasingly mainstream.<sup>45</sup> The Orisha religion is part of what James T Houk identifies as ‘the African American religious complex’ in Trinidad which is essentially ‘multicultural’ and thus drawn from a number of traditions: Spanish (Catholics), French (Catholics), English (Protestants), Africans (Yoruba), East Indians (Hindus) and Jewish derived Kabbalistic practices introduced to the island by Europeans. This religious complex is broken down into three parts – spiritual Baptist, the Orisha religion and the Kabballah. These three religious groups are interwoven to the extent that members are affiliated with one, two or all of them. Thus, for example, the Orisha religion comprises elements from the other two, including the spirits who manifest at rituals. The Shango Cult is embedded in the Orisha religious framework.

As with Haitian Vodou the major distinction between Comfa and the Orisha religion in Trinidad is the retention of the Yoruba gods. According to Houk the Orisha religion is virtually the same as Haitian Vodou as well as the indigenous African practice. For a number of years Trinidad was controlled by the Spanish who regarded the colony as sort of ‘jewel in the Spanish crown’. The island was, however, wrestled from the Spanish and ceded to the British in 1802. Although this was earlier than the time British gained control of Guyana, Houk writes that ‘the British did not begin to assert themselves socially and culturally until approximately forty years after gaining control’ of the island (1995: 29). Further, in 1838, the year of emancipation, there was a mass immigration of Yoruba slaves to Trinidad. Needless to say, this enabled the continuity of the indigenous practice and for the Yoruba gods to be transplanted almost ‘unscathed’. Thus, in Trinidad the Orishas – Shango, Elegua, Ogun, Osain etc – have more or less the same characteristics and the respective colours, food and attributes as the Orishas in Haitian Vodou and

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<sup>45</sup> This outline of the Orisha religion refers to James T Houk’s account in his book *Spirit, Blood and Drums, the Orisha Religion in Trinidad*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1995.

Cuban Santería. Their Catholic counterparts, with slight exceptions are also mostly the same.

The spirits who manifest at Orisha ceremonies could be from either one of the three traditions interwoven into the religion. According to Houk:

Since worshippers attribute possession to various anthropomorphic spirits, a complex system of interpretation has developed so that particular spirits can be identified. Each spirit has its own character traits, and the association of spirits with distinct behavioural attributes in turn affects dissociative behaviour, which must be somewhat standardized and animated if the possessing agent is to be identified.

(1995: 58)

Thus worshippers are able to identify through this method of interpretation whether the possession is by 'the Holy Spirit' as the Spiritual Baptist would attribute it, by an Orisha or a Kabbalistic spirit. The Kabbalah spirits are considered to be malevolent as they tend to violently toss the individual whom they possess to the ground or remaining still and seemingly heavy.

Orisha rituals, called Ebo' are weeklong feasts 'for the Gods' where it is expected that a number of spiritual manifestations will take place over its course. Preparation for the ebo is a lengthy process –and can be costly as a number of materials are required for the feast (various animals to be sacrificed to the Orisha, for example).<sup>46</sup> The ebo is an elaborate ceremonial ritual, which can sometimes be preceded a week ahead by 'Hindu 'sit down' prayers'. These prayers might be directed by Hindu 'Pundits' who will bless the drums to be used at the ebo, or by 'Leaders or Mothers' from the Spiritual Baptist church. The ebo include song, food, dance, flag raising, libation (using rum, oil or water), coloured candles and divination. The choice of particular materials (such as rum or food) depends on the Orisha being serviced. The structure of the ebo is not too unlike that of some of the more dedicated Comfa ceremonies, though these are perhaps less elaborate. Although the Orisha religion in Trinidad has retained almost in its entirety the traditional African derived practices, this has to be understood in the historical context of their colonisation. This seemed to be less dominant/oppressive than that of Guyana, particularly in terms of the apparent tolerance of their African religions by the Spanish colonisers. Additionally, in Trinidad the late mass introduction of Yoruba slaves, after emancipation, enabled the perpetuation of the indigenous practice and the continued service to the gods.

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<sup>46</sup> Houk breaks down the cost of these materials, which he says can be 'prohibitive' though they can sometimes be jointly funded by more than one 'shrine head' who is expected to be responsible for the whole sum. (1995:157)

The African derived religious practices of Jamaica appear to have much more in common with Guyanese Comfa. Firstly, according to Barry Chevannes, there is little known about such practices. Only 'Rastafari', he says receives attention, whilst of Revival, Kumina and Convince there is nothing recorded in the 1982 census (1995:2). Chevannes suggests that these practices, as we saw with Comfa might be subsumed in the 'other' category of Jamaica's religious complex. Yet another explanation might be that there is dual membership with a mainstream church (Pentecostal, Baptist) and the African derived practices: As Chevannes writes:

Because of their low status, on the one hand, arising from Colonial attempts at suppressing them, and because of the power and influence of European churches, on the other hand, people seek nominal membership in the latter, but active participation in the former. (1992: 2.)

Secondly, therefore, these practices tend to have an 'underground existence' not unlike that of Comfa. Erna Brodber's novel *Myal* sought to recover the ancestral knowledge of Jamaican Myalism, which has inspired my own composition of the novella. Again, as we saw with the *akomfo* (traditional priests), a link was made between the practice of Myal and *obeahmen* during slavery, which has ultimately resulted in the scepticisms that have prevailed over the practice and the many changes it has undergone, seemingly to legitimise itself. It was of course difficult for slave masters to identify a distinction between *obeah* and Myalism since the Myalmen, who were essentially 'anti-*obeah*', performed injurious attacks on them in much the same way as did the *obeahmen*. Rebellions were thus inspired by *akomfo* - Myalmen in Jamaica's context, the most well known of whom was Tacky who led the 1760 uprising. Such men were skilled in the use of herbs, just as the *obayifo* and they used this knowledge to poison planters ultimately as a means to repossess the 'spirit' of their fellow slaves from the bondage of slavery. In other words, the Myalmen saw little difference between the oppression of the planters and the 'duppy conquering' ('spirit thievery') of *obeahmen*. Indeed, according to Monica Schuler Myalists 'believed that all misfortune, not just slavery stemmed from malicious forces embedded in the spirits of the dead and activated by anti-social people.'<sup>47</sup> This is poignantly depicted in Brodber's novel which will be discussed in Chapter Four.

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<sup>47</sup> See "*Alas, Alas, Kongo*": A Social History of Indentured African Immigration into Jamaica 1841-1865, The John Hoplan's University Press, London, 1980, p.32.

One significant distinction between Myal and Comfa is that Myalism is essentially an initiatory practice requiring members to ingest a 'herbal mixture' that produces 'a deathlike state' much like the 'zombification process in Haitian Vodoun'. A second potion is administered to release the 'initiate' from this state.<sup>48</sup> According to Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert Myal dances 'linked the Jamaican slaves worship of a West African Pantheon of gods... which used drums, dancing, dreams and spirit possession' (2003:145), but this did not mean that the gods had survived as was the case with Comfa. Significantly, Comfa and Myal are linked by the element of inclusiveness and cultural unity found in both practices. As Schuler writes about Myal:

Myalism was the first Jamaican religion known to have addressed itself to the affairs of the entire heterogeneous slave society rather than to the narrower concerns of separate ethnic groups. It thus reflected, and perhaps contributed to a new and important spirit of co-operation among enslaved Africans.<sup>49</sup>

In Jamaica the Revivalism movement, of which there is another variant known as 'Zion Revivalism', also has similar links with Guyanese Comfa. It began in the 1950s, the same time that the worship of the Watermamma spirit stopped in Guyana, when perhaps African roots were making way for Christian evangelism across the Caribbean. Barry Chevannes explains that in rural areas in Jamaica, small groups of people wearing white head ties proceeded through village communities accompanied by the 'Revival band' beating drums, bearing flowers and carrying lanterns. When they arrived at a particular point they would stop and sing 'Sankeys' (as noted above in my discussion of Comfa) (1995:3). The movement was influenced primarily by Myalism but increasingly took on Christian elements, and like Comfa incorporates 'God, the angels, archangels, saints, apostles and Prophets.'<sup>50</sup> The links with Comfa are especially evident when we consider that:

[Revivalist] spirits...demand that they be fed regularly... with each spirit having specific preferences for certain foods, colours and music...[The] spirits act as personal guides to the worshipers they embrace or adopt, their loyalty, protection and advice being contingent on the worshiper's ritualistic feeding, and his or her wearing of specific colours as outward signs of devotion.<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps with the exception of the devotee wearing colours assigned to particular spirits, the fundamentals here are not much different than those in

<sup>48</sup> Fernández Olmos, M and Paravisini-Gebert, L, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean, An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo*, New York University Press, 2003, 145.

<sup>49</sup> "Alas, Alas, Kongo", 1980, p.33.

<sup>50</sup> Op. cit. p. 147.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

the Comfa practice. The wearing of specific colours in Comfa is attributed to the movement up the Faithist Church hierarchy. Ordinary members wear white robes, perhaps in keeping with their Jordanite origins.<sup>52</sup>

Kumina is essentially the transference of the traditional African derived Myalist practice and is thus also linked to Revivalism. According to Chevannes (1995:6), Kumina rituals are sometimes referred to as 'dancing Myal' and possession as 'getting Myal' (like 'ketching Comfa'). The practice, though predominantly 'African centred' does have some Christian elements that were absorbed by the indentured African slaves (post emancipation) who were brought to Jamaica from the Kongo in Central Africa.<sup>53</sup> This practice is monotheistic, practitioners worship 'King Zambi or Zambi', a deity which is traced to the Kongo. Kumina and Revivalism and Zion Revivalism are separated by their different absorption of Christianity. Chevannes explains that both Revival practices worship 'sky-bound' spirits' (God, angels and archangels etc) but Zionists worship only the apostles and the prophets. Kumina practitioners pay homage to the fallen angels the satanic spirits (as with the Kabballah aspect of the Orisha religion in Trinidad), though this latter aspect is now rarely practiced (1995:8).

#### *Winti and Ndyuka –Suriname*

Suriname is one of Guyana's bordering neighbours, lying centrally to the three 'Guianas' at the top of South America. These 'three Guianas' are considered 'non-latino'. For whilst Guyana is reputed to be the only English speaking country in South America, Suriname and French Guiana were respectively colonised by the Dutch and French. African derived religious practices in Suriname are largely confined to the maroon communities. The most well known groups in terms of their African religious practices are the Ndyuka (or Djuka) and the Winti (also called Kwinti). The Ndyuka were the first of six black tribes to be accorded 'independent' (maroon) status by the Dutch colonial government in 1760.<sup>54</sup> This followed a period when large numbers of enslaved Africans escaped into the interior to establish themselves as 'free blacks'.<sup>55</sup> For the purpose of this Chapter I will briefly outline the practices of the Ndyuka and Kwinti groups.

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<sup>52</sup> There's an elaborate colour scheme in the Church hierarchy. According to Gibson men and women do not always wear the same colours. For a detailed list of the colours worn by members of the Church see in *Comfa Religion* pp.68-69.

<sup>53</sup> Op. cit. 148.

<sup>54</sup> See *In the Shadow of the Oracle: Religion as Politics in a Suriname Maroon Society*, 2004, p.1.

<sup>55</sup> They were also called 'runaways' or 'Bush negroes' before being later identified by the more favourable term of 'maroon.' In Guyana, a distinction is not made between the different groups -all maroons are referred thought to be Ndyuka. The other four maroon groups, noted by Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering are the Matawai, Saamaka, Aluku and Pamaka.

Although they have a similar ethnic composition – especially of Amerindians – the maroon status marks a significant distinction between the Ndyuka and Kwinti practices and Guyanese Comfa. Maroon groups were not only able to retain their African traditions but they were also at liberty to adapt them as befitted their ‘new world’ circumstances. For example, according to Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering, although the maroon groups have quite different cultures they share the ‘unusual trait of reckoning their kinship through female links only’ (2004, 13). Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering argue that this is generally uncommon in West Africa, but it was practiced by the Ashanti from the Gold Coast (now Ghana). Again, unlike Comfa, a number of African derived gods are included in the religious pantheon of Surinamese maroon societies.

In her essay ‘Communicating with our Gods: the Language of Winti’, Petronella Breinburg, looks at the various languages used by the ‘sub-cultural’ groups that comprise the Winti community (such as the Banja and Lakoe) to assess the ways they communicate with the Winti gods, demi-gods and ancestral spirits. There is an emphasis on ‘talking in tongues’ which has transcended from African ancestors and which is a feature of their ceremonies.<sup>56</sup> The language of Sranan, widely spoken by the Winti Community is of Surinamese origin, though there are African, Indian, Spanish, Portuguese and English influences. Citing Henri Stephen, Breinburg observes that ‘mainly West African religious belief systems, and lexical items are used in’ the Winti ceremonies (2001:34).

In the Winti community children are identified by an African name, depending on the day they were born. They also have Catholic names. The list of gendered African names are found in Ghana, ‘Kwasi, Kwamina, Yaw’ etc. Breinburg explains that:

For the person in the Winti culture, these names are important and must be used in all ceremonies, including initiations into womanhood or manhood, planting of the umbilical cord, and the birthday child. In all these cases the person is addressed by his/her African name in order to keep the close link with the gods and the spirits of the ancestors.  
(2001:34)

The head ancestral spirit is known as ‘Kabra’ and each Winti family has a ‘Kabra’. Kabra is also used as a prefix for dances and prayers. Thus ‘Kabrasus’

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<sup>56</sup> Breinburg offers a critique of Western interpretation of the aspect of ‘talking in tongues’, arguing that it is sometimes ‘sensationalised’ and misunderstood. But she compares the practice with the Latin chants used by Catholics which would be incomprehensible to non-Latin speaking congregants, many of whom are part of the Caribbean community. See her essay in *Nation Dance: Religion, Identity, and Cultural Difference in the Caribbean*, ed., Patrick Taylor, Ian Randle Publishers, Kingston, 2001:pp.33-39.

refers to a ceremonial dance linked to the spirits and particularly to the head spirit. The prefix 'kr' is used to define the names of spirits, hence 'kromantiwinti', who according to Breinburg, is one of the most respected gods in the religion' (2001:35). The 'kr' also designates elements such as 'Krawatra', referring to water used in special ceremonies.

Adepts of the Winti religion are simultaneously embraced by one or more divine power. This is because the 'akra' (soul) is thought to contain several guiding spirits called 'agago'.<sup>57</sup> Each adept has three deities that they entertain: 'Aisa – a female earth deity; a male deity – Kromanti or African - Comfa also identifies the African spirit as Kromanti and also Kongo and Ingi (Amerindian, Buck in Comfa). There is also a pantheon of lesser gods that must be acknowledged. The Bakru (a demon spirit), believed to be an ancestral inheritance/curse much like the Guyanese Bacoo is also part of the Pantheon, as it is in the Ndyuka practices which I now discuss.

Like the Winti, the Ndyuka also have a distinct language called 'Ndyukatongo' which has Amerindian, European and African influences. Ndyuka settlement is in the Tapanahoni region closely bordering French Guiana. Their religious beliefs are quite complex consisting of a number of gods whom they consider to be 'powerful and immortal.' There is a three tiered hierarchy at the top of which resides 'Masaa Gadu', presumably equivalent to the Christian Lord God (or Creator God). Below 'Masaa Gadu' are the deities ('his assistants') – first of which is 'Gaan Tata' (Great Father), followed by the equally ranked 'Ogii' (danger) and 'Agedeonsu' ('deity of the Ndyuka').<sup>58</sup> Like the Orisha in Haitian Vodou and Cuban Santería these deities 'intervene directly in human affairs, take sides in conflicts, and punish humans for their sins.'<sup>59</sup> Masaa Gadu on the other hand only intervenes in human affairs when there is disorder in the community. This is done through his envoy 'yeye' who restores order when chaos and corruption arise.

The third tier has a number of other gods- minor deities, most of which have the potential to be 'invading spirits.' Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering argue that four pantheons (of minor deities) were recognised by the Ndyukas until around 1970: 'the *Yooka* (ancestors), *Papagadu* or *Vodu* (reptile spirits), *Ampuku* (forest spirits) and *Kumanti* (warrior spirits residing in celestial phenomena such as thunder and lightning, carrion birds and other animals of

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<sup>57</sup> See Wilhelmina Van Wetering's essay *Demon in a Garbage Chute: Surinamese Creole Women's Discourse on Possession and Therapy*, in *Rastafari and other African Caribbean Worldviews*, ed., Barry Chevannes, Macmillan Press Ltd, 1995, pp.212-232. Here she is citing Wooding 1973:125.

<sup>58</sup> See H.U.E Thoden van Velzen and W. Van Wetering, 2004, p.24.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

prey' (2004, 25)<sup>60</sup>. Although it is not an absolute correspondence this third tier can be compared to the Terrestrial and the Earthworker realms of the Comfa practice. The demon spirit or 'Bakuu' is also included in this tier as a 'subsidiary of the forest spirits.' According to Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering mediums who have a Bakuu spirit can initially expect their assistance (for the acquisition of wealth) but eventually the demon 'will corrupt its human vessel and become a threat to the lives of the medium's relatives' (2004, 25). This is the basis for my depiction of the spiritual rape of Maya by the Bacoo spirit in the novella. It's worthwhile therefore to focus some attention on the function of this demon spirit.

Bakuu spirits, like the folkloric 'genie' found in a bottle are believed to bring economic prosperity to their owners ('masters'). Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering note that during the 1970s successful migrants (those who moved from the rural areas to Suriname's capital Paramaribo) were thought to have contracted a demon (Bakuu) in order to promote their business or 'eliminate rivals.'<sup>61</sup> Equating economic prosperity with ownership of a Bakuu is a widespread belief in Guyana. The Bakuu spirit 'works' for its owner in exchange for dainties (sweets, bananas) but they may also make 'unexpected demands' of their owner such as the desire to take a human life. In Guyana children killed in road accidents (or other sudden accidental deaths) are thought to have been 'sold' in this way to a demon spirit for economic gain. The Bakuu are capable of propagation; they are sometimes bought as a male/female pair. Their owner or medium will dispose of them among unsuspecting members of their family who will fall victim of demonic possession and seizures.<sup>62</sup>

Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering relate a case in which a young pregnant woman called 'Erna' was believed to be possessed by a Bakuu. An exorcism ritual establishes that the young woman had been neglected by her mother, referred to as 'denial of breast milk' as well as her mother's love. The spirit revealed that it had killed a number of people and was now intent on 'devouring' the 'beautiful black child' (the young woman's unborn baby). The Bakuu was pressed for its name,<sup>63</sup> which it gave ('Jeannette') and also

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<sup>60</sup> From my conversations with a Surinamese spiritual 'practitioner' (I am unable say to which group he belongs because it doesn't appear to be so prescriptive; he carries out spiritual readings and spiritual baths/cleansings, but he doesn't identify himself as a Djuka per se) there are a number of overlaps between the Winti and Djuka pantheon which is quite complex. He's currently preparing a booklet which lists the pantheon identified in both Winti and Djuka but this does not seem to suggest they belong definitively to either. They rather seem to be inherently part of a collective maroon worldview. His list includes those noted by Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering but many more including a range of (Amer)Indian deities.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>63</sup> This was done whilst the young woman was in trance – as she was the medium of the bakuu spirit.



explained that it worked with another evil spirit. Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering observe that Erna, posed as the Bakuu speaks 'disdainfully', expressing the 'contempt' she has for 'bush people'. Furthermore, they write that:

her mouth was twisted, she watched the company [those gathered at the ritual] surreptitiously, she spoke Sranantongo, the Creole of Paramaribo. It was plain to all that Erna had studied city manners and taught herself the Creole of city people. For the time being this would be her last chance to flaunt the demon's arrogant attitudes. "*Mi lasi kaba*" (I have already lost), the demon stated.<sup>64</sup>

This fascinating account is the inspiration for my depiction of the Bacoo spirit in the novella by whom Maya is possessed. Her possession by this spirit is the underlying cause of her erratic behaviour. In the above case, the spirit was identified as a Bakuu by a ritual expert primarily because Erna began to 'giggle' when she was invited to speak. Ancestor spirits are believed to 'weep' rather than laugh when consulted by practitioners.<sup>65</sup> The aim of the exorcism ritual was to ensure the safe delivery of Erna's child. In my novella, although the young girl Maya is pregnant with twins, a termination is imminent because it is an ill conception. This is not least because of her possession by the demon spirit, but she has also been sexually molested by an older cousin, Kurt. Maya's pregnancy is also a metaphoric representation of the divisiveness that stigmatises Guyanese society.

Regretfully there's insufficient space in this work to do justice to the complexity of African derived practices in Suriname. One thing must be stressed, however, is that there appears to be no ambivalence by Surinamese about their ancestral traditions. Thus as Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering Ndyuka regard 'obiya' as an unknown and underused power that exists in the universe. Such power can be enormously beneficial to humans although they can also be harmful in some situations. Obiya is therefore conceived as a force by which humans can be possessed as with other minor deities. It is a force that is nurtured and developed over time. In Suriname to be possessed by an obiya is something to be revered, unlike in Guyana where there is widespread ambivalence and scorn about *obeahism*.

In summary, Guyanese Comfa shares many of the characteristics found in other African Caribbean practices. In most cases, however, the distinction is that Comfa is monotheistic (acknowledging one Supreme/Almighty God) and has not therefore retained the lesser African gods/deities from any particular area of Africa. The influence of Christianity throughout the territories under

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 235.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

British control, such as Jamaica and Guyana appears to be the main reason for this. Although Trinidad was also a British colony, the prior influence of Spanish and French Catholics appear to have benefited the syncretism with African gods. The Spanish Church also played a crucial role in the survival of Santería in Cuba, since it had institutionalised the functions of the 'Cabillos' (later 'Regla') and recognised the diversity among the Africans. Thus in slave communities where the Yoruba groups dominated, especially in Spanish controlled territories - Cuba, Trinidad, Haiti- it was possible to syncretize the gods with Catholic saints. Furthermore, unlike many of these Caribbean islands, Guyana does not appear to have had a mass post emancipation influx of Yoruba slaves, though there were a number of indentured African slaves who were brought to the country.<sup>66</sup> But it was in some cases this mass influx that made the survival of the African gods in other areas of the Caribbean possible.

Importantly, however, African Guyanese, whilst forced to adapt their religious practices embraced their new home as a truly Creole space in which the spirits of different ethnicities interact. And if this decision was not consciously made by the practitioners of the African inspired religion of Comfa, it was perhaps demanded by the spirits themselves whose ethnicised manifestations guaranteed them a distinct yet unified place in Guyana's multi-ethnic complex. They inverted the European 'divide and rule' method of separating the (African) nations, by recognising the wider 'nations' that were historically associated with Guyana. Therefore Comfa's absorption of seven ethnic spirits reflects a culturally specific redefinition and reconstitution of the traditional African derived religious practices in Guyana. Chapter Two provides a closer analysis of Comfa rituals and the significance of 'ketching comfa'. The Chapter will also consider the role obeah plays in the practice.

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<sup>66</sup> See Monica Schuler, *The 1991 Elsa Goveia Memorial Lecture: Liberated Africans in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Guyana*, Department of History, the University of the West Indies, 1991, p.2.

## Chapter Two

### Ketching Comfa: Spirit Possession in Guyana

Despite the exotic fascination it still exerts on Westerners, spirit possession, like magic or witchcraft, represents no archaic past. While some cults have existed since the sixteenth century...or are the product of the colonial encounter, spirit possession is not a pre-modern or 'traditional' phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

I.M. Lewis's *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (1971) though generally contentious, is still referred to by anthropologists as a 'classic' study on spirit possession. He has been criticised for emphasising that spirit possession enabled the marginalized, primarily women, to be given agency, voicing their concerns through spiritual mediation. In his review article, 'The idiom of Spirit: Possession and *Ngoma* in Africa', which looks at two recent books relating to spirit possession, Matthew Engelke explains that Lewis's 'functionalist approach', does not attribute meaning to what is taking place nor does he concern himself with cultural specificity or 'local knowledge.'<sup>2</sup> This position, focusing on the function, form, and processes of spirit possession has traditionally been the emphasis given to the subject by anthropologists.

In her essay 'It's all to do with words: an Analysis of spirit possession in the Venezuelan cult of Maria Lionza' Barbara Placido contends that anthropologists have tended to view 'humans who become possessed by spirits' as 'ill, distressed, lacking power, control and agency', and 'their experience [as being] one of loss.' Anthropologists, she argues, whilst focusing on the form of possession episodes, leave unclear the dialogic exchange between medium and the spirit; in other words that which is being communicated during the trance state. Placido observes that there has been a recent shift in anthropology towards cultural interpretation, by which anthropologists recognise the cultural specificity of spirit possession. However, she contends that this still leaves unaccounted what is 'literally' being expressed during possession episodes. The consequence of this is that the association of spirit possession as forms of distress is upheld. Thus she writes that:

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<sup>1</sup> See Behrend, Heike and Luig Ute, eds., *Spirit Possession Modernity and Power in Africa*, James Currey Ltd, Oxford, 1999, xiv.

<sup>2</sup> See Matthew Engelke, 'Review Article – The Idiom of Spirit: Possession and *Ngoma* in Africa in *African Affairs* (2001), pg.144.

to avoid this, we should see it [spirit possession] as text, as constituting a system of communication, whether or not one is by Western definitions, distressed; we should create a model of spirit possession which focuses 'on the product rather than on the process of production'.<sup>3</sup>

Form and content – what is actually being said and done notwithstanding, for me, the shift toward cultural interpretation of spirit possession is an important one. In *Comfa Religion* Kean Gibson uses Victor Turner's model of 'processual symbolic analysis' to interpret the cultural significance of Comfa. This Chapter provides an analysis of Comfa as presented by Gibson. The aim is to consider the ways in which spirit possession (ketching Comfa) inform the lives of practitioners and enable them to interpret their social and cultural experiences. I provide an overview of the historical basis for the hierarchic organisation of the ethnic spirits in Comfa, as well as a detailed consideration of obeahism as an element of the practice. Gibson outlines the functions of a number of comfa ceremonies which she observed in the capital Georgetown and some of the coastal villages of Guyana. I focus my consideration on the 'Drum work' ceremony, which forms the basis for the novella. As reflected in the above quotation this Chapter also aims to highlight that spirit possession is not only connected to traditional cultural experiences (to an ancestral past, say), but is part of the lived, every day experiences of Caribbean peoples.

In *Spirits, Blood and Drums: The Orisha Religion in Trinidad* (1995) James T Houk poses the question - 'what is the etiology of spirit possession?' Drawing on Bourguignon (1973), he argues that:

Spirit possession is one specific type of broader category commonly referred to as "altered states of consciousness." These occur universally, but the forms that specific manifestations take are culture bound: "it must be stressed that although the capacity to experience altered states of consciousness is a psychobiological capacity of the species and thus universal, its utilization, institutionalisation, and patterning are, indeed, features of culture, and thus variable."<sup>4</sup>

Of the various positions held by social scientists and anthropologists on the subject of spirit possession, I consider this cultural specificity to be relevant to my purpose. I also acknowledge the importance of trying to

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<sup>3</sup> See Barbara Placido, 'It's all to do with words: An Analysis of Spirit Possession in the Venezuelan Cult of Maria Lionza', published by Dept of Social Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, p.209. Placido takes up M. Lambek's (1980) suggestion to consider not just the form but also the content of spirit possession - that is 'what is actually done and said'.

<sup>4</sup> See James T Houk, who cites Bourguignon, in *Spirits, Blood and Drums: The Orisha Religion in Trinidad*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1995, p.116.

understand/finding a way to interpret what is being communicated during possession episodes, as argued by Barbara Placido. As outlined in Chapter One, Comfa shares many of the characteristics found in other African-derived religious/cultural practices. But in its adaptation from the indigenous African culture, the pantheon of spirits in Comfa form a hierarchy in relation to the perceived contribution of each group to Guyana's economic, social and cultural development. It's worthwhile to proceed with a brief look at the historical basis that is the suggested rationale for this hierarchy.

The Amerindian population are indigenous to Guyana. The main tribes were Caribs and Arawaks who fought bitter contests with Europeans. Although a significant number remain in Guyana, contact with Europeans resulted in the genocidal demise of many indigenous tribes throughout the Caribbean. The Spanish were the first Europeans to attempt to settle Guyana, but in 1581, it was the Dutch who made a more sustained settlement. However, by 1596, enticed by the publication of Sir Walter Raleigh's *The Discoverie of Guiana*, the British became interested in exploring Guyana's natural resources, particularly the gold of the fabled city of Eldorado. This interest by the British spurred the Dutch to 'force trade' by way of the Dutch West India Company, resulting in the development of the plantation system for the production of coffee, sugar and cotton. This was a labour intensive readily accommodated under the brutal system of the transatlantic slave trade. For a number of years control for the colonies of Berbice, Essequibo and Demerara was fought between the Dutch, British and French before finally falling to the British in 1803. The three regions were unified as 'British Guiana', which became 'Guyana' when the country gained independence in 1966.

Following emancipation in 1838 plantation workers moved away from the plantations to establish villages and become independent landowners and farmers. The labour shortage on the plantations was supplemented by indentured East Indians and later by Portuguese and Chinese migrants. According to Brian L Moore:

the emphasis during the post-emancipation years was not on keeping alive the native population, but rather on importing labour from wherever in the world it was most readily obtainable [...] By 1900 a total of 270, 448 immigrants, nearly three times the native population of 1838 were brought into the colony at public expense: from Madeira 32,216, although not many of those were required to work on plantations [which indicates] how public money was misspent; from India 210,639, from Africa 14,060 and from China 13, 533.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See in *Cultural Power, Resistance and Pluralism, Colonial Guyana 1838-1900*, The Press University of the West Indies, 1995, p.8.

Some of the Africans who migrated to Guyana under the system of indentureship were 'Kru' from Sierra Leone and Liberia, but most were Kongos from Central Africa and Yorubas from Nigeria.<sup>6</sup> Kean Gibson argues that the predominance of Central Africans is significant because it is they who 'seemed to have made an impact on African [religious/cultural] retentions in Guyana' (2001, pp. 3-4).

The status and position accorded to each migrant group transformed Guyana into a racially stratified/hierarchical society along economic lines. As Moore argues 'one of the most striking consequences of [the] short-sighted and narrowly focused economic policies' was that it fostered 'the growth of suspicion and hostility among the several ethnic groups' (1995, 11). This hostility was the consequence of competition between these groups for scarce resources. Certain occupations became identified with particular ethnic groups. The British, the most dominant ethnic group in terms of economic output were the plantation owners, managers, attorneys, senior civil servants and senior clergymen and so forth. The Portuguese dominated the retail trade and were also small farmers; East Indians and Chinese were peasant farmers and shop keepers; the 'Creoles' (mainly Africans)<sup>7</sup> were mostly small farmers, unskilled urban workers, teachers, low ranking policemen and junior ranking government clerks (Moore, 1995, 12).

The status of the Amerindians was associated with the assistance they gave the Dutch and later British in 'hunting down the black fugitives and...the crushing of sporadic revolts' (Gibson, 2001, 7). For this assistance they were annually awarded presents and allowances, a privilege that was suspended after abolition. Gibson cites Webber's (1931) observation that 'the [Amer]Indians were not regarded as part of the body politic, or to be embraced in any scheme of labour, colonisation or development' (ibid.). Gibson argues, however, that it is a misrepresentation that the Amerindians held no other function than as a 'security force' since they were also used by the Dutch as 'boatmen, pilots, guides and labourers.' Yet instead of integrating them into the coastal economic society<sup>8</sup>, funds were spent on the mass importation of cheaper labourers for the plantations. Thus with reference to Williams (1991) Gibson asserts that the Amerindians were 'stereotyped as idle, indolent, non-contributing peoples in need of paternal guidance' (2001, 8).

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<sup>6</sup> See Monica Schuler, *Liberated Africans in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Guyana*, The 1991 Elsa Goveia Memorial Lecture, Department of History, University of the West Indies, 1992, pp.2-5.

<sup>7</sup> Moore refers to the 'native black and coloured population' of Guyana as 'Creoles or Afro-Creoles.'

<sup>8</sup> The majority of Amerindians live in the interior (the hinterland) in Guyana.

The social ordering was thus rationalised by the Anglo-elite who:

not only saw themselves as the ones who made the colony and it therefore ought to exist for them, but they also saw themselves as culturally and intellectually superior to all other groups, which meant that they were also racially superior. [By] the same logic, the successes and failures of the other ethnic groups based on their manipulated economic roles, were justified on their alleged racial and cultural inferiority.

(Gibson, 2001, 7)

This exemplifies the process by which the social order of Guyanese society has been historically defined. Although Gibson argues that the contribution made by the Amerindians was much greater than they have been credited with, this historical process is the basis for the hierarchy of ethnic spirits found in Guyanese Comfa. There had been evidence to suggest the erosion of pluralism in Guyanese society, but according to Brian Moore 'many of the scars of ethnic segmentation still persisted' and were 'reinforced by cultural differences' (1995, 15). Individuals and groups therefore sought to define themselves and their place in society with 'a body of beliefs, values and customs which identified them as different' and sometimes 'better than other groups or individuals' (ibid.). It must be stressed that the hostilities and suspicion of the post emancipation period persists in the post independence era but this is mainly between the two dominant ethnic groups, Africans and East Indians who compete for political autonomy.

Comfa was traditionally associated with the worship of the 'Watermamma spirit', an assumed translation from a West African tradition of worshipping water spirits. Comfa ceremonies were held in honour of the Watermamma spirit and involved a dance which was interchangeably referred to as 'cabango', 'cumfo' (or cumfoe) or 'catamarrha'.<sup>9</sup> Descriptions of these dances vary, but invariably they led to some form of spirit possession at the beating of drums:

[t]he performer would throw himself in various tumbles and foam at the mouth while the participant/audience would follow him with song. When the performance reached a sufficient degree of frenzy special worshippers were beaten with a bush or root plant to punish them for their neglect of the Watermamma. (Gibson 2001, 29)

According to Gibson, worship of the "Watermamma" spirit stopped sometime during the 1950s. She refers to one of her informants whose mother gave up the practice in 1944 to become a Roman Catholic. The daughter explained that her mother felt that "this thing being a traditional African this

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<sup>9</sup> See Brian L Moore, *Cultural Power, Resistance and Pluralism: Colonial Guyana 1838–1900*, The Press University of the West Indies, Jamaica, 1995, p.140.

and that...embarrassed" her mother because she felt that it was inappropriate to "this modern sort of society." Consequently, her mother suffered periodic 'sickness'; she "actually went mad and she had to go back to fasting and feasting so as to appease the water spirits...to get herself back to a normal lifestyle." She regretted the decision to give up the worship of the "Watermamma" because the daughter explains that:

"she [her mother] didn't know at the time the value of perpetuating the traditional African culture, the spiritual culture. Because now she realises that whatever religion, they have their own particular motive. The priest has his own motive. Whatever he wants to inflict in the minds of the people, they do it, rather than actually being consciously involved in the spirit movement and being spiritually possessed."  
(2001, 31)

What is interesting about this is the notion of a dichotomy between modernity and traditional practices. It seems that this stems from the colonial context which encouraged cultural assimilation of the dominant (British elite) culture for social advancement.<sup>10</sup> However, as reflected in a number of the essays in *Spirit Possession: Modernity and Power in Africa* (1999) various African communities contextualise contemporary social, political and economic concerns within the framework of their traditional/ancestral/cultural practices. Similarly, in *Nation Dance* Patrick Taylor argues that in African Caribbean societies modernity and traditional practices are not oppositional:

[a]nthropologically speaking, the Nation Dance [traditional/cultural practice] is an Eastern Caribbean ancestral ceremony in which a community of people pay their respects to their ancestors and retrieve from them the knowledge of the past that will sustain the present and the future: the Nation Dance is an ancestral redemption of the present for the salvation of the future.<sup>11</sup>

Traditional practices are therefore a *necessary* aspect of life for Caribbean peoples because they enable them to reinforce their ancestral cultural values and to interpret and contextualise contemporary experiences.

In Guyana the watermamma spirit was invoked to provide solutions to problems, to 'remove evil or to divulge information' but a link was made between the invocation of the spirit and the practice of obeahism. It is arguably this connection with obeah which led to the eventual loss of the 'watermamma' aspect of the Comfa practice.<sup>12</sup> Further, Moore argues from as

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.15.

<sup>11</sup> Patrick Taylor, *Nation Dance: Religion, Identity and Cultural Difference*, Ian Randle Publishers, Jamaica, 2001, p.2.

<sup>12</sup> Moore, 1995, 139.



early as emancipation African Guyanese were encouraged to pursue 'social respectability' by denouncing the Comfa practice as something 'inherently barbaric' (1995, 142). Invariably, the practice was marginalized while Christianity was elevated as the ideal – the religion of the civilised. For this reason some participants of Comfa are also members of one of the many Christian churches. Others only attend the Faithist Church or do not attend any church but participate in Comfa ceremonies.

Definitions about the meaning of obeah vary throughout the Caribbean. Moore suggests a Twi (Ghanaian dialect) derivation from the word 'obeye'. The 'obeye' is considered to be the 'won' entity that witches have, something effective though invisible (1995, 142-43). This reminds me of the way the Surinamese Ndyukas conceive of obeah (or Obiya) as a kind of enormous power that exists in the universe and which can be manipulated for good and bad. Dale Bisnauth identifies 'obeah' with 'obayifo', an Akan word meaning witch or wizard. The role of obayifo contrasted with that of the okomfo (traditional Ghanaian priest). The social function of okomfo was to challenge and condemn the activities of obayifo, who were associated with 'sasabonsam' (the devil).<sup>13</sup> Thus in Akan belief, obayifo were considered evil and they functioned merely to disturb the peace of village communities.

The distinct functions of 'akomfo' and 'obayifo' were, however, conflated in the colonial context since men who were akomfo were called upon to 'injure the whites' using the methods of obayifo. Indeed it was those men who were associated with obeahism, such as Tacky of the 1760 rebellion in Jamaica and Cuffy of the 1763 revolt in Guyana, who had inspired various slave uprisings throughout the Caribbean. Consequently, obeah practices were outlawed by the British colonial government throughout its colonies forcing it and other associated practices underground. This 'underground' existence prevails in the Caribbean and perhaps contributes to the attitudes of suspicion about traditional cultural practices.

It remains to be said, however, that obeah is an aspect of Caribbean cultural identity that is misunderstood and incomprehensible to both insiders and outsiders of the Caribbean. A 'reader' or fortuneteller, a person who dresses in a certain way (particularly in African clothing and/or with white head ties) might be identified as an 'obeahman' or 'obeahwoman'. Such persons are believed to be knowledgeable in the uses of herbs, magic/trickery, poisons etc to manifest an outcome -usually perceived as evil. But as Kean Gibson observes:

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<sup>13</sup> See Bisnauth, *History of Religions in the Caribbean*, 1995, p.89

In Africa, the priests, ritual elders, diviners and medicine men are the trained people who conduct religious matters such as ceremonies, prayers, divination etc. In Guyana, these are the Elders and Mothers who are commonly known as "obeahmen" and "obeahwomen". These are the people who know the beliefs of the system – i.e. topics relating to God, spirits, magic. They know how to perform rituals and ceremonies.<sup>14</sup>

This means of course that some obeahmen and women are also the genuine practitioners of folk medicine who are consulted for the purpose of healing remedies. The cultural misalignment of obeahism must also be understood as a reflection of 'the British mind during the romantic period' when it [obeahism] 'held much the same connotations as voodoo inspires now...[as] a mysterious cult of obscure African provenance, associated with fetishes, witchcraft and poison, with secrecy and midnight rituals, with magic potions, exoticism and revenge.'<sup>15</sup> And naturally anything practiced in secrecy, in the dark of night and by Africans must by deduction be savage and evil. But it is essentially obeah's connection to slave revolts and 'British anxieties about' its power that continues to equate the practice with savage African customs and barbarity, 'superstitious nonsense' and 'mumbo jumbo.'<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, although it is often argued as the power of the imagination that legitimises obeah's effects, in the Caribbean these effects are regarded as powerful and tenable realities. Thus Kean Gibson claims that due to the economic deprivations in Guyana, 'some people [who continue to refer to obeahism] have turned to the dramatic means their ancestors used for solving their everyday problems' (2001, 19). Quite frankly, emancipation and independence did not suppress the need for cultural empowerment and economic betterment. This need persists in the post/neo colonial context in which new forms of cultural and economic domination, new imperialism (such as the dominance of North America) permeate developing countries such as Guyana.

Obeah is predominantly an African-Caribbean cultural perspective, but it does have overlaps with other ethnic groups. For example, Gibson argues that 'there was collaboration between the African practice of obeah and Amerindian belief in magic' (2001, 18). She cites Dance's (1881) claim that 'when Blacks did not receive the expected aid from their obeahmen, they would resort to the Peaiman; likewise when the Amerindians failed to get relief from their doctors, they would resort to the Black Bush doctor' (ibid.). Indian Guyanese also held beliefs in magic and witchcraft. Their practices,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, pp.197-198.

<sup>15</sup> See Alan Richardson, 'Obeah and British Culture 1797-1807', in *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santéria, Obeah and the Caribbean*, edited by Marguerite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, The State University Press, Rutgers, 1997, p.173.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp175-178.

according to Gibson, were similar to that of obeah, manifesting good and evil consequences. Gibson therefore argues that contrary to a general perception, 'the workings of obeah is not confined to Africans,' because obeah also constitutes a belief in spirits, magic, witchcraft and naturally such belief is shared by other ethnic groups in Guyana.

Moreover, there are some links between Faithism and the Kali Mai religious perspective, an aspect of Hinduism brought to Guyana by East Indians. Gibson claims that both systems rely on the use of spirits for healing and problem solving and [they function] as essentially religions of the powerless' (2001, 27). Thus Hindu deities such as the water entity "Ganga Mai", "Durga" (Earth Goddess), Kali Mata's (the supreme Deity of the Kali Mai religion) sentinel, "Khaal Bhairo" and "Lakshmi" (the Goddess of wealth) are incorporated in the Terrestrial realm in Faithism. These Hindu spiritual entities represent symbolic elements such as water, Mother Earth, the acquisition of wealth that are important aspects of the Faithist religion.

Frederick Case in his essay 'The Intersemiotics of Obeah and Kali Mai in Guyana' illustrates the interdependence of 'cultural aspects of belief originally expressed, separately by two different ethnic groups united in their poverty and political impotence.'<sup>17</sup> 'Intersemiotics', which Case prefers as an alternative to 'syncretic', takes into account the 'dynamic intersection of different cultural codes' and how these impact, in this instance, on Guyanese cultural identity. Thus both Comfa and Kali Mai are misunderstood cultural vestiges of Guyana that have, as Case argues, 'come into conflict with Christianity and its diverse orthodoxies.'<sup>18</sup>

Importantly, these practices – Comfa, Kali Mai and obeah - are available and adhered to by 'persons of all ethnicities and religious affiliations' whether this is openly acknowledged or not. It must be said, however, that the use of obeah to manifest evil (though considered effective) is generally denounced. A comfa ceremony might be held when an evil (through obeah) is the only explanation for a series of disasters and tragedies within a family. But more often a ceremony is held when the 'orderliness' or interrelatedness of the spiritual and physical world has been breached. The following outline and analysis of the 'Drum Work' ceremony demonstrates the significance of the ritual of spirit possession ('ketching comfa') when this breach occurs.

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<sup>17</sup> Frederick Ivor Case, 'The Intersemiotics of Obeah and Kali Mai in Guyana', in *Nation Dance: Religion, Identity and Cultural Difference in the Caribbean*, ed., Patrick Taylor, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis, 2001, pp.40-53.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 43

As outlined by Kean Gibson in *Comfa Religion*, a 'Drum Work' ritual was held by four sisters to appease their father whom they had buried without the drumming traditionally performed in honouring their ancestors. Sometime during the 1960s their father had promised to upkeep such traditional ceremonies after his sister died (she had formerly upheld the ancestral practices). His wife, however, did not 'believe in the traditions' and objected to continuing with them. After he died, his daughters also neglected the tradition of ritually honouring their ancestors. Consequently, they did not receive any assistance from their father and ancestors. Their failure to maintain the ancestral practices was seen as a breach between the physical and spiritual order. The ancestors were believed to be responsible for breaking the neck of one of the sisters' children. Other inexplicable deaths and continuing hardships were foretold unless the ancestors were appeased. The sisters were advised by an obeahwoman that the child had died "indebted to drums" and this was the cause of the troubles the sisters and their children were currently experiencing (Gibson 2001, 91-92).

At a ceremony, held by their aunt's children, their father's spirit manifested saying:

"I have given my girl children my blessings, and they take it and put it under their feet and trampling on it. Oh my children and grandchildren. They're going to float in the river like shit."

(Ibid.)

Although it was felt that the father had not shown the sisters how to maintain the tradition, the 'Drum Work' was intended to appease him in the hope that he would give guidance and assistance to his grandsons, whose lives were severely troubled and lacking prosperity. The ceremony was attended by the four sisters and their two brothers, their children, relatives, friends and "Mother Leader" (from the Faithist Church who would conduct the proceedings) and two of her assistants. For the first part of the ceremony the sisters and others in attendance wore ordinary ('house') clothes. Various Anglican hymns were sung at the outset. The spirit of their dead mother manifested in one of the sisters and proceeded to chastise an errant grandson who had been rude, discourteous and disrespectful to his mother. He had also refused to abstain from sexual intercourse the night before the ceremony as he had been instructed to do by his sisters. This part of the ceremony ended with an embrace between mother and son, seemingly to emphasise a new bond would be formed between them.

The sisters changed clothing for the second part of the ceremony, wearing white clothes and head ties to indicate that the Celestial spirits would be entertained. The aim of this part of the ceremony was the 'renewing of family

unity.' A table was laid with candles, glass bowls with various items (barley, sweets, water), breadrolls, cakes, fruits, flowers etc. At the beginning of the service, the Mother Leader spoke in a non-lexical language<sup>19</sup> to emphasise communication with the Celestials. More hymns were sung and prayers said and this part of the ceremony closed with participants singing 'God save Guyana.' The reason for this is not made explicit, but I think it suggests that prayers to the Celestials were for the broader Guyanese community as well as for the family hosting the ceremony.

The final phase of the ceremony was the 'African aspect' which was held outside in the yard. The intended outcome of this part of the service was 'healing', that is 'the process of getting rid of evil spirits that are causing disruption...the function associated with African spirits.'<sup>20</sup> The sisters again changed clothing to wear 'African printed' fabrics. This was to indicate that this section was for the entertainment of the African spirits. A small table was laid with items associated with the African spirits (coloured cloth, red candle for the Kongo tribe, green for other African tribes, a bottle of High Wine (a strong Guyanese liquor), a coin to pay ancestors for their presence and so forth). The Mother Leader blessed the area outside the house, called the 'ganda' by sprinkling black water, drawn from a black water creek believed to be the 'home of African ancestors'. The drummers were welcomed into the ganda by the four sisters. The head drummer sprinkled High Wine (used for African and Amerindian spirits) over the drums, the sisters and other drummers by way of 'blessing the spirits.' The sisters walked backwards from the gate where the drummers were toward the ceremonial space as a sign of welcoming the drummers and ancestors to enter.<sup>21</sup>

Drumming was focused on entertaining the African spirits. A 13 year old granddaughter of one of the sisters began to dance and roll around on the floor. Her behaviour had been erratic and it was hoped that she would be cured at the ceremony. To try to rid her of the 'evil spirit' by whom she was believed to be possessed, the Leader poured High Wine and broke seven eggs on the girl's head. The use of eggs caused some confusion – some disturbance of ritual procedure during the ceremony. Another person began to manifest the spirit of the sisters' aunt who seemed to object to the manner in which the young girl was being dealt with. Eventually the girl was led away to wash off the eggs. The outcome of the ceremony was not felt to be successful, but there had not been a repeat, because it was costly. Thus, according to Gibson the

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<sup>19</sup> This is referred to as 'speaking in tongues' – as a language, 'which only God can understand'. *Comfa Religion*, p.99.

<sup>20</sup> Gibson, 2001, 103.

<sup>21</sup> I've seen this done at a number of ceremonies where drumming takes place as a way of welcoming the spirits. The reason for this is that the spirit world is believed to be the reverse of the physical. See Gibson, p.104.

familial crisis had not been resolved. To the extent that the 'Drum Work' had taken place, albeit without the resolution the family had hoped for, Gibson draws on Victor Turner's model of 'processual symbolic analysis' in order to examine the meaning and symbols inherent in the ritual.

'Processual symbolic analysis' is a term used by the anthropologist Victor Turner to interpret cultural symbols and rituals. For Turner, ritual is conceived as "drama" – as a "transformative performance" that has the "transformative power to generate social change" (1967, 20). A 'symbol', Gibson notes, is the 'smallest unit of ritual analysis' and represents something similar, other or more than it appears to mean – or the "thing signified" (2001, 170). It is socially constructed (by the community) and modified by individuals who bring their own meanings to it. The symbol is thus a 'social phenomenon' that is determined by ritual in a given relationship and 'stereotyped representation' for which the end result is social action (Turner, 1968, 273). Hence Comfa rituals are performative and dramatic means ('transformative power') that bring changes to the lives of practitioners.

Focusing particularly on the Drum Work, Gibson uses Turner's concepts of *liminality* and *communitas* to explain the structure of rituals in Comfa ceremonies. Liminality refers to the space 'where the work of the spirits takes place [and is] betwixt and between ordinary social life' (2001, 178). It is within the order of the Comfa ceremonies. *Communitas*<sup>22</sup> is the social antistructure. In other words, it is not consistent with the sociocultural structure of the real world, for it results in the 'temporary statusless bonding that holds a society together after the ritual' is complete.<sup>23</sup> Ritual drama was evident in the 'Drum Work' and the other ceremonies Gibson observed. Within the main plot of a drama, there are other (*sub*)plots. In the 'Drum Work' the 'main plot' was the appeasement of ancestors, particularly the dead father of the four sisters. One of the subplots was the reunification of a mother and her disrespectful son. Therefore in terms of liminality and *communitas*, the ceremony (in the antistructural space) was successful inasmuch as it enabled the son and mother to reconcile their relationship. The reconciliation was, however, short lived because the son returned to his former ways – *outside the world of communitas*.

Drama, as with ritual, is also symbolic. Victor Turner makes a distinction between 'dominant' and 'instrumental' symbols. Dominant symbols are explicitly desired goals that are achieved through instrumental symbols. According to Turner, each goal is associated with "powerful conscious and

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<sup>22</sup> A Latin word for community.

<sup>23</sup> See Robert Fischer's use of Victor Turner's model for his discussion of Akan religious practices, 1998, p.14.

unconscious emotions" (1967, 32). In Comfa, the dominant symbol is the 'belief in spirits and interpretation of behaviour' (Gibson 2001, 175). The instrumental symbols are the offerings (foods, particular coloured candles, drinks, music etc.) used to entice the spirits and bring about possession and ultimately to achieve social action. An 'ideological' meaning of the main symbol implies social cohesion and harmony, though Gibson observes that the Comfa symbol 'is not normative or ethical'. Comfa does, however, present pragmatic resolutions to social problems (Gibson, 2001, 175).

Furthermore, in Gibson's assessment, the 'liminal ordering' of the hierarchical sociocultural structure of the spirits in Comfa reflects that of the colonial period (2001, 178) as earlier outlined in this Chapter. In liminality, this is not problematic, given that participants are seeking assistance from those who died in the 'distant and unspecified' past. Notably, in the liminal context of Comfa (that is betwixt and between ordinary social life) it is the Spanish and not the Portuguese ethnic group that is given prominence. This seems paradoxical because, as noted earlier, the Spanish attempt to settle Guyana was only slightly impressionable – at least when compared with the later economic involvement of the Portuguese immigrants. Gibson argues, therefore, that the comfa data should not be interpreted as a static reflection of Guyanese society (2001, 169). One reason for this is that the ethnic pantheon in the Comfa religion does not accurately reflect those who contributed to the formation of Guyana. Although the Portuguese are part of Guyanese society, in Comfa they have been subsumed by the English ethnic group. This demonstrates that 'liminal phenomenon may portray the inversion [substitution of Portuguese for Spanish in Comfa] or reversal of secular and social structure.'<sup>24</sup>

It is also interesting that the 'symbol of colonialism' as the basis for the hierarchical structure of the ethnic groups is maintained in the Comfa religion. The reason for this Gibson argues is that:

[Comfa practitioners] have subverted the colonial process [by which they were formerly suppressed]...to empower themselves. Thus a poor individual can become wealthy by having an English or Indian force working on their behalf or they can have status [as a Mother leader or Elder, that is in the Faithist Church] by having an English priest.<sup>25</sup>

The implication here is that social lack is satisfied in liminality. Thus in Turner's analysis, the 'structurally inferior aspire to symbolic structural

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<sup>24</sup> See *Comfa Religion*, p.179.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

superiority' (1969, 203). Brian Moore presents a similar analysis of spirit possession when he argues that:

[Comfa ceremonies may have firstly enabled] the possessed individual to cast off socially imposed inhibitions. Secondly [they served] as therapy for mental illness and to soothe certain physical ailments. Thirdly, they may have offered temporary measure of prestige for persons of low status.

(Moore 1995, 142)

I would argue, however, that Moore's interpretive framework relocates and perhaps reduces the nature of spirit possession to that posited by earlier anthropologists as I outlined at the beginning of the Chapter. Certainly, those who participate in Comfa ceremonies tend to be working class – of 'low [economic] status', many of whom are female. And of course the religion is not widely (perhaps I should say openly) practiced because it is shrouded in colonialist notions about the backwardness of traditional African derived practices. But perhaps the thrust toward social advancement and 'respectability' coupled with the 'underground' nature of such practices mean that there is no substantive evidence to support the assumption (and in fact popular belief) that local elites do participate in Comfa ceremonies.

Thus, as Gibson observes in *Comfa Religion*, the late Prime Minister Forbes Burnham sanctioned the practice of obeah having contended in a newspaper article that 'the worst form of imperialism was "cultural imperialism"' which denied people the right to worship as they did traditionally. According to Gibson:

This gave him [Burnham] the freedom to attend ceremonies and [visit] obeah practitioners. It is rumoured that he was a client of the famous obeahwoman in Georgetown named Mother Monica.... But it is also known that he attended Comfa ceremonies at the home of obeah practitioner Elouise Soloman-Stephen. She also gave ceremonies on his behalf.

(2001, 19)

I do not suggest that Burnham ever became possessed at these ceremonies, but my point is that spirit possession and a belief in spirits does not necessarily affect *only* those persons of 'low [economic] status.' It is perhaps the apparent lack of (or clandestine) participation in comfa ceremonies that makes possession episodes by Guyanese elites improbable. In *Spirit Possession Modernity and Power in Africa* Lesley A. Sharp's essay looks at the way in which the *Tromba* spirits (of Madagascar) and their female mediums contribute to the political and economic development of the country in relation to 'the former colonial and current national regimes.' Sharp argues that the involvement of medium and spirit in the Malagasy political system



'challenge[s] anthropological assumptions about the relevance of religious experience and gender to the dynamics of power.'<sup>26</sup> The same of course can be argued for Burnham's sanctioning of the ancestral practice of obeah by visiting 'Mother Monica.'

Furthermore, the concept of liminality also involves 'spontaneity and freedom', and therefore the unpredictability of knowing who will dance (become possessed). Therefore whilst it appears that possession episodes (ketching comfa) provides momentary prestige to persons of 'low status', spirit possession *might* also affect persons of 'higher' social status were they to participate (at least more openly) in and attend comfa ceremonies. In the same way as persons of 'low economic status', persons of 'higher' or 'elite status' might not attend a Comfa ceremony because of this very unpredictable aspect of spirit possession. According to Gibson, spontaneity and freedom allowed Mother Leaders, Matrons and Elders to interrupt/disrupt the order of the Comfa ceremonies she attended (2001, 183). This is seen as an innovation that brings about ritual change. In this way, certain elements are revisited, renewed, 'discarded' or 'accepted' (ibid.). Thus, as Turner argues, the concept of liminality offers a 'spring of pure possibility' (1974, 2002), which calls to mind Harris's 'unpredictable intuitive resources' as will be shown in the following chapter. Indeed, because of this inherent unpredictability and spontaneity in Comfa some of my cousins in Guyana are reluctant to attend ceremonies where drums will be played because they fear the *possibility* that they might 'ketch comfa.'

Spontaneity can, however, be a precarious aspect of liminality. There are certain prohibitions and adherents that need to be acknowledged in the Faithist belief system and when dealing with matters of spirit. Gibson cites Turner's (1969) argument that 'from the perspectival viewpoint of those concerned with the maintenance of "structure", all sustained manifestations of *communitas* must appear as dangerous and anarchical and have to be hedged around with prescriptions, prohibitions and conditions' (2001, 183). In the 'Drum Work' account, ritual procedure had been interrupted when, for example, the son of one of the sisters had not complied with the prohibition of sexual abstinence before the ceremony. This was one of the reasons why he was admonished by the manifesting spirit of his grandmother during the ritual. The ritual prohibitions emphasise the boundaries between the spirit and physical world. Breaching these boundaries are taken seriously. Hence the reason Gibson emphasises that with the ritual process comes a 'feeling of danger' which makes it 'necessary for participants to begin ceremonies by

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<sup>26</sup> Lesley A. Sharp, 'The Power of Possession in Northwest Madagascar: Contesting Colonial and National Hegemonies' in *Spirit Possession: Modernity and Power in Africa*, Heike Behrend and Ute Luig, eds. James Currey Ltd, Oxford, 1999, p.3

asking *God* for health, strength and protection' (2001, 184, my italics). The emphasis on God is because he is the overseer; he is the omnipotent guiding influence of the ceremony. The importance of this is that some ceremonies (such as 'Terrestrial' or 'Earthwork') are regarded as "dirty" (or ground) work where all spirits (such as grave yard or the immediate dead) are invoked.<sup>27</sup>

As a linguist Gibson examines Guyanese Creole for a comparative analysis of the Comfa data. She uses the 'continuum model' proposed by the English linguist Derek Bickerton (1973; 1975) for her analysis of Creole. For Bickerton the 'variation and change' exhibited in Guyanese Creole indicates that there is a movement towards Standard English. The implication is that the dominant use of Standard English means that Guyanese Creole will be *decreolised* (Gibson 2001, 191). Similarly, as Comfa endorses elements from other cultures, the assumption, based on Bickerton's theory would imply movement towards (say) Christianity. But Gibson rightly argues that the variation and change in Comfa from the earlier worship of Watermamma and immediate ancestral spirits to the entertainment of ethnic spirits that influenced Guyana's political and economic development means that the religion is about 'renewal and expansion within the Creole system.' Hindus and Muslims take part in Comfa rituals, but there is no suggestion that Hinduism and Islam will move towards Comfa. Rather, Comfa rituals are seen as a means to experience a better *Guyanese* life or identity. Significantly, Gibson argues that the Comfa data exemplifies that 'peoples of the Caribbean are in a constant state of liminality - betwixt and between various cultures, inventing and reinventing themselves' (2001, 219). The aspect of unpredictability in Comfa implies, therefore, that there is room for creativity in the way Comfa practitioners interpret the experience of 'ketching comfa.'

Thus Gibson opposes Bickerton's 'Eurocentric' view of Guyanese Creole, and the consequent implications for Comfa. Her analysis is based on Guyanese identity and sense of self, which she sees as 'Guyanacentric'. For me this highlights the importance of cultural specificity in understanding the variability of spirit possession. Participants of Comfa believe that although they are (predominantly) African Guyanese, they may have had ancestors from other ethnicities at one time in their past. They therefore construct a 'biological narrative' (sense of self/identity) as befitting 'the Guyanese multiethnic complex' (Gibson, 2001, 222). The source of origin for Comfa is nonetheless African, which allows participants to maintain a 'sense of personal and social continuity' with their ancestors. Participants also assume an ethnic spirit on the basis of what they believe that spirit (stereotypically) is

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<sup>27</sup> I think the suggestion is that these spirits can be used to for evil manipulations, especially selfish material gains.

able to do for them. In the Comfa system, then, identity symbols are the sources of power and motivation. Having an English spirit confers a degree of prestige because the English are associated with the acquisition of wealth and high status.

In Gibson's analysis of the Comfa data the high status of the English is connected to the way Bantu are believed to perceive Europeans. Gibson draws on Placide Tempels's (1954) research in his book *Bantu Philosophy* to argue that Comfa is of Bantu origin. The word Bantu is a European word meaning 'people' and therefore refers to several hundred different ethnic groups in Africa who share a common language base and cultural customs. People from the Congo, for example, would be defined as 'Bantu'. According to Tempels Europeans were incorporated in Bantu ontology owing to their technological prowess, which in Gibson's analysis accounts for the 'god-like' status of the English in the Comfa religion. But given Gibson's rejection of Derek Bickerton's Eurocentric view of Guyanese Creole and its implications for the Comfa data, it is surprising that she refers to Tempels's Eurocentric framing of 'Bantu philosophy,'<sup>28</sup> for 'understanding the belief system' of Comfa practitioners. It might appear that by conceptualising Comfa as Bantu, Gibson is effectively saying that it is 'African' or of African 'people' and can thus be traced to a great many number of African ethnicities.

However, Gibson asserts that 'although the spiritual world of Faithists may seem complex, it still bears the outward simplicity of *Kongo* religion' (2001, 149, my italics). This of course gives it specificity within the broad Bantu context. Gibson uses Tempels's research to explain that Bantu ontology is based on the 'vital power or the inherent vital rank' of spirit forces. Like Comfa, in the Bantu philosophy God instructs the lower forces from the top of the hierarchy. The lower forces are comprised of the founders (of various clans/tribes - the first humans); the dead (tribal ancestors) and those living on earth; animals; plants and minerals. It is a hierarchy, Gibson argues that 'has been transformed to Guyana' as was outlined in the first Chapter where:

at the top [of the Comfa hierarchy] is God, and [where] the first fathers have been replaced by the twelve tribes of Israel. These are followed by the angels, prophets and saints. The English are in the Terrestrial realm, but they are ranked above the other Terrestrial forces participating to a certain degree in the Celestial realm. The notion of rank according to vital force is the basis of the ranking of the ethnic groups. The Amerindians do not have political nor

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<sup>28</sup> In his book *Bantu Philosophy*, Placide Tempels called his first chapter 'In Search of Bantu Philosophy' which I think presupposes that there was either no such African religious philosophy or if there was it was elusive to Western/European observers. In terms of the imperialist mission this precipitated mass conversion of Africans to a more dogmatic Catholic (European) and an inherently superior religion.

economic power in Guyanese society and thus are at the bottom of the scale. They do not have the force to influence the lives of others.  
(2001, pp149-150)

This ultimately reveals the impact of colonialist impositions and assumptions about traditional religious and cultural practices in ethnically diverse communities such as Guyana. And I would say that here also lies the complexity of defining cultural identity in the wider African Caribbean context. In *African Origins of the major Western Religions*, Yosef Ben-Jochannan contends that Reverend Placide Tempels and other European and European-American Christians are enthralled by the pretence that 'their own prejudices can be scholarly subdued sufficiently to make 'impartial' analysis of Africa's traditional religions.'<sup>29</sup> This contention is based on Tempels's self-proclaimed 'impartiality' in his study of Bantu philosophy. But indeed how 'impartial' can Tempels be when in the final analysis he merely upholds racist notions of European superiority? Similarly, Robert Fischer refers to Masolo (1994) to make the point that 'Tempels, while claiming some similarities with Western philosophy...reduced the Bantu notion of being and...of God to a form of "primitive, unscientific" mode of thought. Hence the Bantu must advance to a superior or more fulfilling form of humanity by accepting Christian civilization.'<sup>30</sup>

Gibson's use of Tempels to understand the belief system of Comfa practitioners raises the question of whether Comfa is outwardly a defining symbol of colonialism or a symbol of Guyanese cultural identity that has been contextualised within colonialist ideology. It is beyond the purpose of this work to resolve this issue but clearly it highlights the complexity of defining cultural identity in the post colonial Guyanese context. In any case, it must be remembered that even at an 'English banquet' (intended to entertain an English spirit) provision has to be made for all other ethnic spirits, lest they manifest and be offended, thereby enforcing a breach between the spiritual and physical order.

Ketching Comfa – spirit possession - represents transformative power. During the period of liminality, possession serves as a dramatic symbol through which social change is derived. Within the social antistructure (communitas) the main plot and sub plot of the ritual drama is enacted as a sort of prequel to the renewing, reviewing and redressing of social order. Spirit possession is an inevitable, if unpredictable, outcome of Comfa ceremonies and indeed to cultural practices that are not formally identified

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<sup>29</sup> Yosef A.A. ben-Jochannan, *African Origins of the Major 'Western Religions'*, Black Classic Press, Baltimore, 1970, p.17. Jochannan argues that the opening of Tempels book exhibits 'the same type of gross racism and religious bigotry his work was supposedly correcting.'

<sup>30</sup> See in *West African Religious Traditions*, 1998, p.134.

within the Faithist religion. Ketching Comfa links practitioners to an ancestral past but it is not simply *of the past* (or 'archaic'). It is a religious activity that allows practitioners to find solutions to their everyday problems. Comfa is therefore a culturally specific symbol that gives meaning to the everyday lives of participants and is the means by which they perceive their place in the broader Guyanese social context. It represents a means by which they interpret their individual and collective experiences. Here we might think of Comfa as a symbol of cultural identity which can be defined as a variable of the imagination. Thus the following Chapter extends the foregoing social analysis of Comfa in the context of Wilson Harris's 'arts of imagination.'

## Chapter Three

### Comfa as '*Arts of Imagination*'

If we succumb to blackhearted stasis- to enclosures of fear we may destroy ourselves; on the other hand, if we begin to immerse ourselves in a new capacity or treaty of sensibility between alien cultures – we will bring into play a new variable imagination or renaissance of sensibility steeped in caveats of the necessary diversity and unity of man. In short, we won't oversimplify or crudify similarities or differences, but will seek ...however difficult...to bring all perspectives available to us into an art of the imagination.<sup>1</sup>

Guyana is often represented as a country divided by racial tensions between the dominant African and East Indian ethnic groups. It is also identifiable as the location of the 1978 Jonestown tragedy in which over 900 people committed the world's largest mass murder-suicide. These two aspects depict an image of ruin and despair, of a country with a despicable and tragic history, and one that is unable to reconcile the complexities of being a multi-ethnic society. Consequently, the 'differences' and the 'similarities' between Guyana's ethnic groups are problematised or 'oversimplified' as reflected in the above citation. As a Guyanese I am aware of the prevalent violence, economic despair and apparent non-productivity in Guyana. However, my contention is that the focus on these persisting elements of Guyanese experience overrides the prospect (should I say the envisioning) of cultural and economic advancement through a genuine proclivity for healing, racial unity and reconciliation.

In this Chapter I use Wilson Harris's essay *History, Fable and Myth* as a framework to consider the Comfa perspective as myth and art.<sup>2</sup> In his essay, Harris emphasises the importance of reconstructing Caribbean identity through imagination, through memory and mythology. Although Harris does not mention Comfa specifically, I have found his ideas useful in considering the significance of syncretic religious practices to Caribbean cultural identity. Harris contends that historians (both colonial and the colonial stewards who became the 'new historians' after independence) overlooked these aspects as culturally significant to the Caribbean. However, for Harris ancestral knowledges, neglected traditions and ancient myths can be recovered through what he calls

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson Harris, 'The Amerindian Legacy' in *History Fable and Myth*, which is the title of 3 transcribed lectures he presented at the (Edgar) Mittleholzer series in 1970, p.19.

'arts of imagination'. 'Arts of imagination' can be seen as a process through which we contemplate cultural sensibilities. It is therefore an *intuitive* engagement with cultural perspectives, such as Haitian Vodou, Limbo, and for me, Comfa that look beneath the surface, 'beyond the apparently real world', as Harris articulates in *History, Fable and Myth*.<sup>3</sup> In Guyana the 'apparently real world' is the prevailing scenes of violence related to ethnic division and the holocaustic tragedy of Jonestown. Therefore my use of Harris for my consideration of the Comfa as myth and art attempts to identify an empowering cross-cultural Guyanese aesthetic which facilitates a counter-discursive consideration of Guyanese cultural identity.

The Chapter also refers to the work of Edward Brathwaite, Stuart Hall and Antonio Benítez Rojo. These writers have responded to earlier notions of the Caribbean as a place where nothing was ever created. They have instead argued that there are vestiges of creativity within the heterogeneous cultural framework of the Caribbean. As post colonial/cultural critics<sup>4</sup>, I feel that their work usefully contributes to the critical focus on aspects of Caribbean religious practices and their significance to Caribbean cultural identity. I will also provide a brief account of the link I have made with the dance of Akom in Ghana which I hope will support my view that Comfa has a wider cultural significance that is yet to be acknowledged. Given the extent to which it impacts Guyanese cultural psyche a brief outline of Guyana's political history is required. This will be followed by a look at the way in which the tragedy of Jonestown is upheld as an important moment in Guyana's history before I proceed with my analysis of Comfa as arts of imagination.

As I outlined in the previous chapter, the suspicion and hostility between ethnic groups were fostered during the post emancipation period as the various groups fought for economic dominance. But the current hostilities between the African and East Indian groups in Guyana, I think represent a post-independence phenomenon. The seemingly incarnate hostility and suspicion of the post emancipation period were fostered by the political motivations of two charismatic leaders, L.F.S Burnham (of African descent) and Cheddi Jagan (East Indian) who competed for political dominance leading up to independence in 1966. 'Machinations' (election rigging and stoking labor violence through trade unions) by the British colonial government, the US President Kennedy, and the CIA who supported Burnham's socialist politics, denied Jagan, a 'pro-Moscow

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.8.

<sup>4</sup> Brathwaite and Benitez-Rojo are also creative writers.

communist' and supporter of Fidel Castro, victory in the 1964 election.<sup>5</sup> This election was the forerunner to the country achieving independence in May 1966. The two leaders were 'founder members' of the People's Progressive Party (PPP). But, as Seecharan argues, their split was an inevitable consequence of the 'mutual African-Indian suspicion permeating the wider colonial environment.'<sup>6</sup>

Although it was aligned with Marxist dogma genuine racial unity within the PPP had not been achieved leading up to the first general election in 1953.<sup>7</sup> The PPP won the 1953 election, but fearing the subversion of democracy by the pro-communist leader Jagan, the constitution was soon suspended by the British colonial government.<sup>8</sup> This provided Burnham with the opportunity to set up his own party, the PNC (People's National Congress) which joined forces with another political party, UF (United Force)<sup>9</sup> to lead Guyana to independence. The PNC government, characterised by election rigging and corruption remained in power for 28 years. In 1992, an international delegation oversaw the election, dubbed 'free and fair' which returned Jagan to head the Government where the PPP (led by Bharrat Jagdeo) still remains.

The unresolved ethnic differences related to specific periods in Guyana's political history continue to centralise discussions about Guyanese cultural identity. Thus, as Brackette Williams contends, the consequence of slavery, indentureship and colonialism implies that history for Guyanese becomes 'a siren that simultaneously calls them, on the one hand, to construct and maintain distinctive group identities, while, on the other, it encourages them to engage in a nation-building process through which to dissolve those same identities into a homogenous national identity.'<sup>10</sup> This exemplifies the inherent complexity of reconciling ethnic differences that persist in Guyana. Racial polarity therefore continues to undermine Guyana's social, cultural and economic development.

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<sup>5</sup> See Clem Seecharan, 'Whose Freedom at Midnight? Machinations towards Guyana's Independence, May 1966' in *The Round Table*, Vol.97, No 398, 1998, pp.717-720.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Seecharan cites Eusi Kwayana, another founder member of the PPP who advised Burnham and Jagan that the party should aim to forge 'genuine ethnic unity' before attempting to win the 1953 election. Kwayana feared the 'escalation of racial rivalry' within the party because the country was not properly united. Seecharan argues that Kwayana was right because although the PPP won the election the undercurrent ethnic rivalry began to etch its way into Guyanese politics.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Members of this party were Portuguese and coloured (mixed race).

<sup>10</sup> See in *Stains on My Name, War in my Veins: Guyana and the Politics of Cultural Struggle*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1991, pp. Xiii-xiv.



Along with this image of a racially polarised country is the spectre of Jonestown. On November 18<sup>th</sup> 1978, the 'Jonestown' tragedy, which took place in a remote North West hinterland area of Guyana, was memorialised as the location of the world's largest mass murder-suicide. Over 900 followers of religious cult leader James (Jim) Jones, the American founder of the Peoples Temple Church, were either shot dead or forced to commit suicide by ingesting a lethal fruit drink containing cyanide.<sup>11</sup> Nothing physically remains of this site but the memory of this tragedy is imprinted on the collective Guyanese psyche and is often referred to as a 'Guyanese tragedy'. In the perpetual struggle for economic independence there is a periodic debate in Guyana about whether or not to use the Jonestown site for tourism. The debate has often been covered in letters to *Stabroek News*, one of Guyana's National newspapers. I am highlighting some of these letters to show the currency of the Joneswtown debate which for some represents a moment in Guyana's history that is worthy to be memorialised. In one such letter to *Stabroek News*, Jaswant Dyal writes:

I have noted with marked attention the newspaper reports of Minister Manniram Prashad and others who visited the Jonestown massacre site. I have also looked at the interview the Minister had with aggrieved stakeholders who initially intended to develop the site either into planting grounds or a tourism site. This comes as a surprise along with a breath of fresh air. For too long we have sat down and done nothing but talk about how to develop Guyana and do absolutely nothing to develop this beautiful land. This pioneering step by the Minister of Tourism must be commended since this is exactly what Guyana needs right now, to attract more visitors who will come and visit our beautiful land. To the ordinary individual who has not had the opportunity to travel abroad and seen how the Europeans and Americans make money out of nothing but a small meaningless place that they call a tourist site, this might mean nothing [ but] for us who have [had] that chance, Jonestown is more significant in the world's eyes than many other sites. The amount of business that this Jonestown tourism site can generate will be able to fully support the local growing craft industry as well as handsomely reward the citizens of the area. Continue to blaze new trails Hon. Minister, Guyana is on the upward move. We need more minds like you in the ministries to operate like the private sector.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> There are numerous accounts of the Jonestown tragedy. It's not my intention to outline what happened but to reflect on how this tragedy continues to be perpetuated as a 'Guyanese tragedy' when most of the victims were African Americans. Jim Jones was an American who leased acres of land from the Guyana Government of the day (PNC under Forbes Burnham) to use as a base for a racism free, socially inclusive agricultural community. Members of his Peoples Temple Church in Indianapolis followed Jones to the remote North West area in Guyana, where they were essentially 'mind controlled' and imprisoned by Jones and his guards until the tragic murder suicide event on November 18<sup>th</sup> 1978.

<sup>12</sup> Dyal, Jaswant, 'Jonestown can be a popular tourist site' *Stabroek News* August 23<sup>rd</sup> 2007.  
<http://www.stabroeknews.com/index.pl/article?id=56527393>

His views were opposed by Michael Gilkes, who argued that:

[p]erhaps he [Jaswant Dyal] is a very young man, hasn't done his research and therefore may be unaware of the stench of death, murder and political intrigue still surrounding Jonestown. He may even be unaware of the yet officially uninvestigated massacre of the 900 faithful ordered by the pathologically insane evangelist Jim Jones. That is the scenario for which Guyana is now best known abroad. Films have been made and novels written about it. Our country has already been made infamous by that horrific place of needless slaughter... Jonestown, unlike Pompei ( Italy), Masada (Israel) or Le Morne de Sauter ( Grenada ) and other famous sites of death and catastrophe, was neither a natural disaster nor an heroic event. It was a man-made, ugly and pointless massacre, the inspiration of a deranged American religious leader. If any reason exists for inviting visitors to Jonestown, then it could (and should) be only as a gesture of expiation, a pilgrimage to a place of penance; a reminder of the dangerous excesses of religious fanaticism and political insensitivity. It should not be touted as an attraction for ghoulish voyeurs. In that way it might one day also become a sad, permanent memorial to those deluded innocents who died there unnoticed, nameless and forgotten as felled trees.<sup>13</sup>

Michael Gilkes's letter was also rebutted, by one of his former students who countered that:

tourism, like history, does not restrict its focus or scope to things noble, heroic or of good report. Indeed many of the world's most visited attractions are in fact based upon some of the worst atrocities and tragedies of mankind - the Nazi death camps of Auschwitz or Dachau, the slave routes of West Africa, Ground Zero in Manhattan, the Massada, and the macabre list goes on. In fact many attractions which appear innocuous or sanitized do in fact conceal harsh and ugly historical realities. For example the sugar museums of the Caribbean seldom reflect the brutalities that were part of the early historical experience of sugar production in the Caribbean... *In Guyana there seems to be a cultivated amnesia, almost an "anti-history" that lets the past sleep, even die instead of nurturing it through restoration, reconstruction and memorial.*<sup>14</sup>  
(My italics)

I have reprinted these letters at length to emphasise that when the *question of Guyana* (its location, its culture) is raised by outsiders and some 'insiders', 'Jonestown', an undeniable blight in Guyanese history, appears to have primacy, as if it is the single most defining event and point of identification. The first letter

<sup>13</sup> Gilkes, Michael, 'Jonestown should not become a 'tourist product'', *Stabroek News*, August 25<sup>th</sup> 2007, <http://www.stabroeknews.com/index.pl/article?id=56527553>.

<sup>14</sup> Sinclair, Donald, 'Contrary to my former professor Michael Gilkes I believe Jonestown could be a legitimate Tourist Product', *Stabroek News*, August 28<sup>th</sup> 2007, <http://www.stabroeknews.com/index.pl/article?id=56527756>

writer, Jaswant Dyal, expresses an ambiguity, which on the one hand depicts Guyana as 'this beautiful land', and on the other as one in which the site of the Jonestown tragedy would have more economic significance than any other. Why should this be the case? Although Michael Gilkes's letter attempts to put the tragedy into comparative historical context it doesn't seem explicitly to suggest an alternative perspective from which the country might derive some cultural and economic liberation. It is, however, to the last letter that I would like to give some deeper consideration. I think the point might be well made by the writer that in Guyana there is 'a cultivated amnesia, almost an "anti-history" whereby the past is not allowed 'restoration, reconstruction and memorial.' It's not my belief, however, that this is the case with Jonestown. The very fact that there are periodic discussions about Jonestown in the Country's national newspapers suggests that this aspect of Guyana's history is still a prevailing focus.

The event was also the inspiration for Wilson Harris's novel, *Jonestown*, which forebodingly identifies the massacre with the periodic conquests of the Americas that impacted on indigenous cultures. The novel warns against ill-conceived ideologies that are disastrously perpetuated through time and space. Essentially the novel is an indictment of colonialism, particularly in Guyana. So undoubtedly Jonestown has claimed a place in the Guyanese imagination. Most Guyanese know about it, even if they find it difficult to acknowledge it. It is lodged in my memory as something frightening, a spectre of evil that haunted me as a child growing up in Guyana after hearing the shocking news reports of a kind of silent massacre that took place in the interior – the interior itself being perceived then as this remote, dark and terrifying place.

I would argue, however, that the 'cultivated amnesia' mentioned in the last letter is related to some of the cultural aspects of Guyana, particularly when we consider that most Guyanese do not know, or claim not to know about Comfa. I say 'claim' because I believe it is a regressed memory, especially for African Guyanese, which might be traced back to the period when African derived traditional practices were considered dangerous, dark and frightening. As a child when I heard grown ups talking about obeah, Ole Higue and Jumbie, I was terrified by these apparently effective spiritual entities. This fear, I would argue, has in truth created a 'cultivated amnesia' about aspects of Guyana's cultural identity. So whilst the last letter speaks of reconstructing, restoring and memorialising the Jonestown tragedy as a Guyanese site for tourism, I argue that this 'renaissance' needs to be explored in terms of the cultural traditions that better reflect the Guyanese subconscious imagination.

Furthermore, I would suggest that this 'cultural amnesia' is perhaps a latter day postcolonial condition. I say this because it must be noted that during the immediate post independence period the socialist PNC government developed a cultural policy which was intended to 'ensure the creation of a national culture' based on the country's diverse folk traditions. As A.J.Seymour writes:

With independence has come a desire to allow all submerged and recessive cultural forms – some surviving in Comfah, obeah and other traditional religious mysteries to find their own levels in the new society.<sup>15</sup>

It was shown in the previous chapter that Burnham's open visits to obeah practitioners gave elite sanction to the cultural practice of obeahism. As part of his 'nation building' programme to promote Guyanese culture, Burnham announced that his government would amend the part of the constitution that 'made it a specific offense to practice obeah' though in addendum measures would be taken to ensure against the practice being used for fraudulent gains. Burnham saw the outlawing of obeah by the former colonial masters as a form of cultural castration which his government sought to revert.<sup>16</sup>

Cultural policy in the post independence period therefore focused on developing Guyanese 'folk traditions and their artistic expression.' One of the principles of the policy states that:

In order to raise the level of consciousness of the people in cultural matters and to prepare them for an improvement in the quality of life, the policy should imitate and develop a lifelong education in the arts, enhancing the cultural content in education; it should encourage the vocation for the creation and the cultivation and appreciation of art in all its forms. Special attention should be paid to the development of the creative artist.<sup>17</sup>

Having achieved independence in 1966, Guyana became a Republic in 1970. Establishing cultural and national pride was a timely process of decolonisation through the promotion of all things Guyanese. Creative writers were encouraged to promote this cultural pride in their work. Indeed Michael Gilkes's play *Couvade*, which I discuss in the following chapter, was commissioned by the PNC

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<sup>15</sup> See in *Cultural Policy in Guyana: Studies and Documents on Cultural Policies*, UNESCO, France, 1997, p.18.

<sup>16</sup> See Gibson, 2001, p.18. She argues that contrary to popular belief Burnham did not 'repeal' this part of the constitution because the new constitution of 1966 gave freedom to all religious practices in any case so there was nothing to repeal.

<sup>17</sup> Op.cit. p.19.

Government to be performed at the first Caribbean Festival of the Arts event (Carifesta) in 1972. This festival was hosted in Guyana and credited to the vision of Burnham of bringing together artists, musicians and so forth from various parts of the Caribbean.<sup>18</sup> A series of memorial lectures to note the contribution of one of Guyana's first novelists Edgar Mittelholzer was instituted by the government. It's out of this initiative that Wilson Harris's *History Fable and Myth* came in 1970. National holidays were introduced in recognition of the dominant faiths – Christianity (Christmas, Easter), Hinduism (Phagwah, Diwali) and Islam (Eid, Youman Nabi) with the aim of promoting mutual understanding of the respective faiths and ethnicities. Institutions such as the National School of Dance opened in 1974 and the National Cultural Centre in 1976 as part of the thrust toward cultural development. So unquestionably post independence was a fervent period in Guyana's cultural development. Some of these cultural activities (like Mashramani, Phagwah and 1st August celebrations to mark emancipation) are still experienced by Guyanese. But perhaps the thrust of modernity has meant that generally a number of other cultural forms like Comfa and the pre-wedding 'Queh Queh' rituals are not as prevalent as they once were.

I would venture also that something much more pernicious might be the cause. The socialist vision of Forbes Burnham during the post independence period was evidently blighted by the catastrophic event of Jonestown in 1978. He agreed to lease land for Jim Jones to develop a commune promoting the socialist ideals of economic, social and racial equality. Burnham rated this socialist model as an alternative to the imperialism from which Guyana had recently evolved as a republic. Of course the holocaustic deaths of more than 900 people bear bitter testimony that this was an ill-conceived 'vision'. I am inclined to think that the PNC's political dominance of Guyana confirmed Burnham as a demagogue prepared to maintain his leadership by any means.<sup>19</sup> This is despite the positive and apparently genuine efforts toward the promotion of a Guyanese national culture. Arguably, the disturbing, controversial politics under the Burnham regime dissolved the primacy of cultural productivity and artistic expression to the earlier suspicion and racial disunity which surface at election time. And after the violent disturbances have simmered what remains is the spectre of mutual incomprehension, like the spectral Jonestown tragedy, foregrounded in the

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<sup>18</sup> According to A.J.Seymour at the inauguration of Guyana as a Co-operative Republic Burnham announced to the 'gatherings of Caribbean authors and artists' that he hoped there would be an annual Caribbean Arts festival. The festival would bring together 'Guyanese and Caribbean authors and artists whose work in poetry, paintings and sculpture would project the dreams and visions of the region and help to foster a Caribbean personality.' See *Cultural Policy*, 1977, p.59.

<sup>19</sup> One notably is the assassination of Walther Rodney in 1980, one of Guyana's foremost scholars whom Burnham saw as a political opponent.

Guyanese psyche. The following discussion of Wilson Harris demonstrates that Comfa reflects an alternative to the image of despair and disunity impacting this psyche

Wilson Harris begins *History, Fable and Myth* by highlighting the way in which the Caribbean has been confined to 'historical stasis' by historians, such as J.J. Thomas and James A. Froude. He considers Thomas's rebuttal of Froude's defence of 'slave property'<sup>20</sup> and exposes both historians as 'prisoners of their age'. Froude believed that the Anglo-West Indian society was a 'workable' and beneficial economic system that should therefore remain unchanged. Harris argues that for such historians:

the world of objects (the property of slavery and the colonial system),  
the world of achievement... in its ornamental stasis was fortuitous,  
dicey (and therefore fundamentally inclined to be wasteful or purposeless)  
(1970, p.6)

According to Harris, Thomas sought to denounce Froude's defence of slave property by opposing Froude's notion of history as 'fortuitous' and 'dicey'. Thomas argues instead for a 'controlling law' of history by which every experience and achievement is determined. Without this controlling law history is nonsense ('dicey', 'accidental'). Thomas's argument is based on a defence of governorships and magistracy who were able to 'control' the slave system. Thus, Harris argues, that although Thomas sought to denounce Froude's defence of slave property, he merely affirms its existence as long as it was better managed and if it did not ultimately embed racism. This argument does not provide an alternative to the wastefulness/purposelessness of the West Indies. In fact this argument advocates slavery, but with set criteria. Therefore Harris observes that although he was passionate about the 'objects of injustice', Thomas could not supply a 'figurative meaning beyond the deplorable conditions of slavery' (1970, p.8). Harris argues that both Thomas and Froude were thus 'children of the 19<sup>th</sup> century' neither of whom 'possessed the genius to penetrate intuitively or otherwise the ironic trap of the ornament [of slavery], of the prison of the wasteland' (1970, p.8). Harris was writing out of that period of seeking a more hopeful vision for Guyana. I argue that this hope for a new vision for Guyana can be applied more urgently now to the Comfa practice.

Thus I contend that this intuitive penetration is also wanting in the above letters that ultimately seek to rehabilitate (reconstruct) the tragedy of Jonestown as a

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<sup>20</sup> This is outlined in Thomas' book *Froudacity*.

viable economic option for developing Guyana. It's also this deeper intuitive penetration that was lacking in Burnham's demagogic socialist politics despite aspiring to find an alternative to imperialism and capitalism. For Harris, this 'ironic trap' or 'prison of history' (slavery, imperialism, colonialism) can be unlocked by contemplating our (collective Caribbean) inner sensibilities, as opposed to the 'outer desolation' – what appears to be at the surface (or superficial) level. Thus in Guyana Comfa practitioners as well as those outside the religion refer to the ancestral practice of obeahism to solve their everyday problems. For me this represents a substitution of an outer (desolate) condition with an 'inner time' – that is a 'figurative meaning' by which the 'condition' (of despair/desolation) can be surpassed. I interpret this 'inner time' to which Harris refers as the liminal space of the Comfa ceremonies where the ethnic spirits manifest by way of facilitating social redress in the lives of practitioners. The practitioners' *return*, if you like, from this point of liminality enables them to review and renew their lives in order to make necessary and beneficial social changes.

In *History, Fable and Myth*, Harris considers Haitian Vodou and the limbo perspective to be 'part and parcel of the arts of imagination' wherein lies the 'possibility... to become involved in perspectives of renaissance' (1970,p.8). By 'perspectives of renaissance' Harris refers to acts of cultural recovery ('imaginative rediscovery') involved in practices such as Limbo and Haitian Vodou. Harris argues that historians such as Froude and J.J Thomas 'consolidated an intellectual censorship' of these vestiges of the [Caribbean] subconscious imagination', and regarded them as 'primitive manifestations' (1970, 8). Indeed, as was argued in the previous chapter, in Guyana practices such as Comfa were discredited as being 'inherently barbaric' by a fearful colonial order (Moore 1995, 152). However, as a 'renascent perspective' Comfa can be reccredited as an ancestral practice that is integral to our understanding of a complex multi-ethnic society such as Guyana.

'Arts of imagination' for me reflects the intuitive acts of recreativity by which the reservoir of cultural images and experiences are *realised* manifestations of the subconscious. It is an activation of spirit through rituals like Comfa. To this extent it also refers to the way in which these cultural images and experiences are utilised as cultural resources, for example in literature. 'Arts of imagination' then is accommodated in the Comfa practice by Victor Turner's concepts of liminality and *communitas*. The liminal is the space of ritual, an aspect of time that is outside ordinary life. In the context of Harris's essay this is referred to as the "unconscious/subconscious", which I identify as being at once in a dream

state and not yet sleeping. *Communitas* represents a social anti structure insofar as it is inconsistent with the real world (a recreation of structure/order during rituals). Liminality and *communitas* therefore enable the inversion of a real object (or experience) for a figurative one – a meaning other than what it appears to be. It is thereby possible to invert or substitute identity symbols. Hence, the complementary variables of imagination and reality inherent in the Comfa perspective. Identity is not an already established fact. As such, Gibson argues therefore that Comfa does not represent a ‘static’ reflection of Guyanese society (2001, 169); this would ultimately be an ‘oversimplification’. The seven ethnic spirits that are recognised in the Comfa religious pantheon reflect an inherent homogeneity and heterogeneity and therefore a complex, dynamic expression of Guyanese cultural identity.

Harris sees both Limbo and Haitian Vodou as archetypes of the Caribbean unconscious, but argues that the Limbo perspective has ‘undergone metamorphosis’ whilst Haitian Vodou seems to have a more direct link with Africa. For Harris the Limbo dance constitutes ‘a re-trace of the Middle Passage from Africa and the West Indies’ and reflects a ‘kind of gateway to or threshold of a new world and the dislocation of a chain of miles’. Furthermore, it reflects an ‘art of compensation which seeks to re-play a dismemberment of tribes’ that should not be ‘equated with a uniform sum’ (1970, p.11). I understand this to mean that Limbo represents a recreated, transformed cultural object born aboard the ships transporting enslaved Africans across the Middle Passage. Limbo thus expresses a (re)creation of the contortion enslaved Africans were forced to endure in the cramped conditions of the slave ships. Essentially, out of this wretchedness the Limbo dance was created as a manifestation of the Caribbean subconscious imagination. As Harris writes Limbo:

was not the total recall of an African past – limbo was rather  
the renaissance of a new corpus of sensibility that could  
translate and accommodate African and other legacies with a  
new architecture of cultures. (1970, p.10)

This is significant to our consideration of Comfa as a symbol of the Guyanese subconscious. The ethnic spirits in Comfa represent ‘those waves of migration’, as Harris observes with limbo, which ‘have hit the shores of the Americas century after century, possessing at times ‘the stamp of the spider metamorphosis’<sup>21</sup> of renewal, heterogeneity, diversity and unity, which I feel

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<sup>21</sup> Harris, 1970, p.9.



express a significant aspect of the Guyanese (and by extension Caribbean) multi-ethnic complex.

Although it is traced to African (Dahomean particularly)<sup>22</sup> cosmology, Haitian Vodou is recreated within the cultural framework of the Caribbean. The identification of spirits as deities (the loas – Legba, Agwe, Danbala) though translated (syncretised) in the Caribbean context directly connects Haitian Vodou with African Vodou. Harris considers the two forms of Vodou (African and Haitian), and observes that although the aspect of trance possession makes them similar, for him the *functions* of the trance are different. In African Vodou possession trances are attributed to deities who perform functions for the 'supreme being' from whom 'they were all derived.'<sup>23</sup> But for Harris Haitian Vodou, like the limbo perspective 'is intent on a curious re-assembly of the god or gods' (1970, p.9). By this, I think Harris means that the re-assembly of the gods in the Caribbean cultural context constitutes a *novel* re-enactment of an ancient perspective – hence *renascence*. This was a necessary recreation and syncretism<sup>24</sup> given that the enslaved Africans were now forced to develop a new worldview. In considering the significance of the reassembly of gods in Haitian Vodou, Harris ponders whether this implies:

a necessary continuation of a matrix of association which had not fulfilled itself in the old world of Africa. If so that fulfilment would be in itself not an imitation of the past – much as it is indebted to the past – but a new and daring creative conception in itself.  
(1970, p.14)

Harris suggests that the possession trance in Haitian Vodou takes on a new meaning in the Caribbean context. Something particular and perhaps peculiar happens in this new context which, for me reflects a new genesis, a kind of rebirth. As Harris puts it:

the dancer [in Haitian Vodou] dances into a posture wherein [his/her] leg is drawn up into the womb of space ... [Thereby] *all conventional memory* is erased and yet in this trance of overlapping spheres or reflection a primordial or deeper function of memory begins to exercise itself in the bloodstream of space.  
(my emphasis, 1970, p.15)

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<sup>22</sup> Harris acknowledges that Vodou (he spells it Vodun) in Haiti is difficult to trace to one particular area of Africa. In his essay he refers to the works of Pierre Verger -*Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa* and Harold Courlander's *Vodun in Haitian Culture* to note that Haitian Vodou developed historically from the commingling of various African groups. See pp.14-16 in *History Fable and Myth*.

<sup>23</sup> See Bisnauth, 1996, p.86.

<sup>24</sup> Harris doesn't use this term in his discussion.

'Conventional memory' might mean the former, original source from which Haitian Vodou is derived. It could also refer to that which is simple or superficial (the apparently real) as opposed to that which has an artistically figurative meaning – the 'deeper function of memory'. I'm not sure that this 'conventional memory' (the original) can be totally erased if this is Harris's absolute meaning. What I think is suggested, however, is that there is at once a connection or continuity with and disconnection (or dislocation, as we saw with Limbo) from the original Vodou dance. For me the Haitian Vodou dance thereby expresses a re-originating metaphysic transformation or translation of African Vodou. This re-originating translation is evident in Comfa. Its absorption of ethnic spirits, instead of African deities means that Comfa represents a transformative engagement of the subconscious which effectively broadens the art and significance of 'ketching Comfa' within the Guyanese cultural context.

Moreover, the dancer in Haitian Vodou and for me the manifesting spirits in Comfa act (perform) as 'dramatic agent(s) of subconsciousness' (Harris 1970, 15). They can be used purposefully to uncover (re-cover/reinscribe/rewrite) the narrative of myth that would facilitate the resolution of psychological and physical problems. This, it seems to me is the deeper function of 'ketching Comfa' and the dance in Haitian Vodou. Harris puts it better when he says that this is the way in which the 'life from within and the life from without truly overlap. That is the intention of the dance, the riddle of the dancer' (1970, p.15.). The dancer thereby expresses the reality or realness of sleeping things – and thus reinscribes (restores, reconstructs) the function/significance of the ancestral experiences. The possession trance is, in a sense, a re-enactment of a psychological split or splitting of self, the ultimate consequence of slavery and colonialism. But the dance *re-members* and reconciles this split self and reactivates the unconscious body.

For me, this activation of spirit through dance gives Comfa its culturally artistic significance. Here, a link can be made with the Akom practice in Ghana where possession trances are performed as artistic cultural expressions. Unfortunately, as with Comfa, there is very little written about Akom. There is a brief account of the dance in Robert Fischer's study of the Akan of Ghana where he describes Akom as:

a series of dances *performed* to aid the priests [akomfo] at a certain deity's shrine either to work themselves into a trance or to release them from it. During the trance they communicate with the deity

and with those who have approached for some personal need[...]  
The priest is an expert in the *art of dancing*, and so the drums  
intensify while the singing of the other [participants] is intensified.  
The priest dances with spins and turns for more than half-hour and  
is worked into a frenzy as the shrine deity takes possession.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, like Haitian Vodou and the indigenous African practice, the similarities between the Akom dance and Comfa are apparent primarily in the form of the dances. When the spirits manifest in Comfa, the dancer/practitioner, as with the *akomfo*, also dances with spins and turns. But in Comfa there are no shrines to deities per se. Comfa practitioners intuitively know who their dominant (ethnic) spirit is and it is to honour that spirit (whether African, English, East Indian and so forth) that they may organise a ceremony/service. I am interested in the performance of Akom, however, because it does not only refer to possession, it also encompasses the performing arts that surround spirit possession. When I visited Ghana I observed dancers *performing* Akom as a kind of cultural resource for the benefit of tourists. Performers, attired in the *akomfa* (traditional priests) outfits, dance Akom which may or may not involve actual possession. The Comfa perspective could likewise be appropriated as a cultural resource in Guyana.

Moreover, in his consideration of Haitian Vodou, Harris observes that there is 'an absorption of new elements, which he argues 'breaks the tribal monolith of the past and re-assembles an inter-tribal or cross-cultural community of families' (1970, p.15.). This cross culturality - and I would say *inter-racial* community - is represented by the seven ethnic spirits in Comfa. Further, I would argue that this cross-culturality in the Creole context provides a response to Derek Bickerton's Eurocentric view of analysing Guyanese Creole as discussed in the previous Chapter. Bickerton's argument that the variations and changes in Guyanese Creole suggest that the language would eventually move towards Standard English is somewhat reductive. It is an oversimplification which I feel discredits the creative possibilities that exist within the Creole framework. Kean Gibson responds to Bickerton by emphasising that Comfa renews and expands itself within the Creole system. I would go further by arguing that Bickerton overlooks the creative and culturally liberating possibilities of 'creolization' as proposed by Edward Brathwaite to which I now turn my focus. This discussion will be followed by the ideas of Stuart Hall and Antonio Benítez Rojo to further explore the cultural significance of the Comfa practice.

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<sup>25</sup> See the Chapter, 'In the Beginning was the Dance' in *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1998, pp.17-18. Emphasis added.

In *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica* creolization is defined as

a cultural action – material, psychological and spiritual-  
based upon the stimulus/response of individuals in the  
society to their environment and as white/black culturally  
discrete groups to each other. (Brathwaite, 1971, 308)

There is a natural exchange that takes place when cultures interact/come together. In the historic context of the Caribbean this has been evident despite the apparent dichotomy of dominant (coloniser)/subordinate (colonised). Indeed Brathwaite argues that there were creative possibilities, even under the system of slavery and colonialism that failed to be apprehended by both black and white Creoles. White Jamaicans, Brathwaite argues, in seeking to uphold or justify slavery, 'refused to recognise their black labourers as human beings and so 'preferred a bastard metropolitanism' (the desire to be 'little Englishers') as opposed to embracing the possibilities of creolization (1971, pp.307-308). The black Creoles (especially the elite) on the other hand who were 'blinded by the wretchedness of their situation' did not make 'conscious use of their own rich folk culture...and so failed to command the chance of becoming self conscious and cohesive as a group' to liberate themselves as their 'Haitian cousins had done' (1971, 308). Of course historical and geographical differences need to be taken into account. As was outlined in Chapter One, slavery and colonisation was different in the Hispanic, Francophone and Anglophone Caribbean. Catholicism enabled the syncretism between African deities and Saints, but there were more subtle reconfigurations under the dominance of the Church of England.

So although in various parts of the Caribbean, such as Trinidad, Suriname, Cuba and indeed Haiti, there is a thriving continuation of ancestral practices, in Guyana these cultural traditions remain shrouded in fear and incomprehension. Perhaps in Guyana the ambivalence about traditional practices might be explained by the pursuit of social respectability, which is rooted in colonial inculcation. Indeed, as Brian Moore observes:

the desirability of inculcating European cultural values, customs and beliefs was stressed [from as early as emancipation] and the rewards for this was social respectability and upliftment. The insatiable hunger for those rewards played a critical role in encouraging the [African Guyanese] Creoles to shun their Afro-Creole cultural heritage. (1995, 152)

Despite the post independence initiatives for cultural development, I would argue that the failure of apprehending the 'chance to become self conscious and cohesive' as Brathwaite writes of post emancipation Jamaicans, seems apparent in a Guyanese society that is unable to perceive the richness and diversity of its folk culture. According to Brathwaite, the black middle class (of emancipated Jamaicans) chose to be seen 'through the lenses of their masters' already uncertain vision as a form of 'greyness' – an imitation of an imitation' (1971, 308). The Afro-Creoles mimicked the White Creoles who were mimicking the metropolitan cultures (hence 'imitation of an imitation'). This ultimately resulted in self-distortion and the dispensation with traditional practices. Similarly in his study of Guyanese Afro-Creoles, Brian Moore argues, that although this mimicry was encouraged (by the dominant British), in the colonial situation cultural assimilation was 'never intended to produce social equality' (1995, 152).

Arguably this mimicry, (the 'inculcation of European cultural values') prevails in the desperate economic and neo colonial context of Guyana. In this context, the spectre of Jonestown seems economically viable to meet the overwhelming demands of globalisation. By mimicking Europe's 'dark tourism' Jonestown is thus considered to be a veritable option to stimulate Guyana's depressed economy. This kind of mimicry suggests that cultural identity would be defined from without. But perhaps a cultural renaissance of hitherto discredited ancestral practices might derive an alternate means of a self-sustaining cultural and economic independence. This would involve an apprehension of Guyana's cultural resources, thereby defining cultural identity from within. However, as I have been highlighting this apprehension of Guyana's cultural resources is lacking because it requires a more intuitive consideration of the complexity of Guyanese cultural identity. It is also lacking because of the apparent dichotomy within Guyanese society. This dichotomy was also evident in post emancipation Jamaican society as observed by Edward Brathwaite. He argues that rather than embracing an 'unrestricted creolization', the English Creole in their dependence to metropolitan England created a 'pervasive dichotomy' between themselves and the majority African Creoles in Jamaica (1971, 309). Consequently, this led to the 'formulation of the concept of a plural society' in Jamaica. But Brathwaite argues that:

the classic plural society paradigm is based on an apprehension of cultural polarity, on either/or principle, on the idea of people sharing common divisions instead of increasingly common values. [However] from their several cultural bases people in the West Indies

tend towards certain directions, positions, assumptions and directions.  
But nothing is really fixed or monolithic. Although there is white/brown/  
black, there are infinite possibilities within these distinctions and many  
ways of asserting identity. (1971, p.310)

Thus Brathwaite's concept of creolization confirms Kean Gibson's observations about Comfa's ability to renew and expand itself within the Creole system. Similarly, in his study of Afro-Creole society in Guyana during the immediate post-emancipation period, Brian Moore observes that the cultural exchanges between (Afro) Creoles, Amerindians and new immigrant cultures meant that Afro-Creole culture was constantly adapting to new influences. Moore further suggests that as a result Afro-Creole culture was 'rendered more dynamic and creative' (1995, 153). The cross-culturality and multiplicity of identities in Guyana and throughout the Caribbean cannot therefore be over stated. Indeed it is on this premise of cross-culturality and multiplicity of identities that Stuart Hall bases his discussion of Caribbean cultural identity, which I now consider.

In 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' Hall argues that cross culturality in the Caribbean means that the search for 'lost origins', for an 'essential identity' is a symbolic journey.<sup>26</sup> It is a journey in which the visit to the original sources is necessarily circular. The pursuit of an essential identity or lost origins is not so much futile, but rather it is 'always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth.'<sup>27</sup> In short, identity is transformative and re-originatees through mythic recreativity. Again, as was illustrated in my discussion of Harris, this points to the deeper function of memory. Such is the significance of cultural symbols like Comfa, Haitian Vodou and limbo. They represent the transformative power of identity. Thus cultural identity is dynamic, given to unpredictability and change, and should be seen as something that is continuously renewing and adapting as opposed to something that is static.

Indeed, Stuart Hall considers two ways by which cultural identity can be defined. Firstly, Hall suggests that cultural identity can be defined in terms of 'one true self hiding inside the many other, more superficial selves, which people with a shared history have in common'.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, as well as this 'oneness', Caribbean cultural identity can be defined in terms of 'difference' – that is 'what they [Caribbean peoples] have become since history has intervened'. This 'difference', Hall argues, is significant –*it matters*. As noted in the opening

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<sup>26</sup> In *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, Patrick William and Laura Chrisman, Harvester-Wheatsheaf, Hertfordshire, 1993, pp.394-395.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, pp.392-394.

citation this 'difference' is reflective of the 'necessary diversity' about which Harris writes. Importantly, in the Comfa practice, difference is not problematised given that each ethnic spirit is accorded a place, however tenuous in its hierarchised pantheon. Comfa practitioners might therefore become possessed at any time by any one of the ethnic spirits and in some cases by all of them (taking turns) during a given ritual.<sup>29</sup> Hence allowances are made for all the ethnic spirits (such as the provision of stereotypical foods, for example) even when a ceremony is held primarily to entertain one. It is a precautionary accommodation because it is not always predictable which ethnic spirits are likely to manifest. The significance of this is also featured in my novella as will be discussed in the Commentary in Chapter Five.

For me the precautionary accommodation implies that although African Guyanese might have a different point of reference from (East) Indian Guyanese and Amerindian Guyanese, as non-Westerners or non-Europeans of an underdeveloped country, they share a national identity. A national Guyanese identity means that Emancipation (1<sup>st</sup> of August), Independence, the achievement of Republicanism (marked by Mashramani), as well as national holidays, such as Phagwah and Diwali, are generally celebrated by Guyanese regardless of their ethnicity. Furthermore, a homogenous identity is reflected in the foods that are considered national dishes, such as the Amerindian pepperpot; African-Creole dishes like 'cook-up rice'; the East Indian curry and roti along with pastries (cheese rolls and pine tarts) that are part of the European heritage. To this can be added the variety of music styles, such as reggae, soca, folk songs that are enjoyed by all Guyanese. The European tradition of waltzing is part of what Guyanese call 'oldies' and is something in which Guyanese across ethnicities participate. Therefore as Lloyd Seerwar puts it:

Much of what is distinctly Guyanese is a mixture of styles and influences. That is indeed the source of its strength and richness. The great flowerings of the human spirit in the arts, in thought and ways of living have been the results of mixtures and meetings... in the Athenian City state where Africa, Europe and Asia met, in the cities of Renaissance Italy, in Elizabethan England and in Mughal India.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> In *Comfa Religion*, this is identified as 'serial possession'. At one of the ceremonies Gibson observed, a host is possessed 9 times by different cultural entities. Once possessed, she is dressed in the clothing that are stereotypically associated with the ethnic spirit (a sari, for example, to represent an East Indian woman). See pictorial inserts between pages 118-119.

<sup>30</sup> See in *Guyana and the World*, Barton Scotland, ed., Guyana Publications incorporated, Guyana, 2007, p.17.

Thus Guyanese and by extension Caribbean cultural identity is both homogenous and heterogeneous. Stuart Hall identifies three 'presences' that he considers to be significant to understanding/interpreting Caribbean cultural identity.<sup>31</sup> Firstly, Hall argues there is the African presence, which is evident in forms of art, food, music, dance and religious practices. The African presence is everywhere, and 'is the site of the repressed.' Secondly, there is the European presence, which in opposition to the repressions and silences of the African presence 'is always speaking' and is about 'exclusion' and 'expropriation' and thus introduces the 'question of power'. The third presence is that of the New World (the 'Americas') which represents 'the juncture-point where the many cultural tributaries meet...[and is] the space where the creolizations and assimilations and syncretisms were negotiated.'<sup>32</sup> For Stuart Hall these interdependent 'presences'/cultural influences disrupt the notion of a fixed, authentic or essential identity. This is significant to Comfa because as an object of Guyanese cultural identity Comfa is not easily authenticated. Its authority or origin is displaced, to which extent it has *become something other* – a 'signified' (cultural object) that accommodates "difference" (heterogeneity) within the Guyanese cultural framework. It is a symbol which is traced to the worship of the 'Watermamma' as a translation of the water deities– (Yemaya for example), somewhere (an unspecified past) in West Africa; and one which is (possibly) syncretised with the myth of the European mermaid (the 'fairmaid' in Guyana) that returns to Guyana in the form of seven ethnicities that contributed to its economic, political and cultural development.

Indeed as we saw with Limbo and Haitian Vodou, Comfa has also undergone metamorphosis from its original association with the West African "Watermamma" spirit. As a displaced cultural object, Comfa can be interpreted as 'supersyncretic', a term used by the Cuban writer Antonio Benítez-Rojo to describe Caribbean culture:

[Caribbean culture arises] out of the collision of European, African and Asian components within the plantation. And its syncretisms flows along working with ethnological machines that are quite distant in space and remote in time ... that one would have to look for in the subsoils of all the continents. (1992, 12)

<sup>31</sup> He borrows these from Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor's 'Présence Africaine', 'Présence Européenne' and 'Présence Américaine' to 'position/reposition' Caribbean cultural identities. See Cultural Identity, in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* p.398.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 400-401.



Therefore Benítez-Rojo argues that monoculturalist theories are inappropriate to the study and understanding of 'Caribbeanness'. Benítez-Rojo identifies 'Caribbeanness' with the objectives of Chaos. Chaos, writes Benítez-Rojo 'looks toward everything that repeats, reproduces, grows, decays, unfolds, flows, spins, vibrates, seethes' (1992, 2-3). Thus Caribbean Culture is complex, paradoxical; it is eruptive, given to unpredictable change. This is also observed by Kean Gibson when she says that Caribbean culture would look contradictory to academics and those outside the region who are seeking uniformity and 'one pure culture' (2001, XIV). These contradictions might also be met by Guyanese who cannot perceive the 'necessary diversity and unity' which at an intuitive level better reflect the distinctiveness of their cultural identity.

Benítez-Rojo's use of the theory of Chaos effectively demonstrates the environment from which Caribbean people are seeking to make a selection to live a better life. Importantly, Benítez-Rojo argues that understanding/re-reading of Caribbean cultural identity and experiences implies a visit to the 'sources' that contributed to its formation. But the Caribbean is a place of 'shifting signifiers':

because as soon as we succeed in establishing and identifying  
as separate any of the supersyncretic manifestations that we're  
studying, there comes a moment of erratic displacement of its  
signifiers toward other spatio-temporal points-Europe, Africa  
Asia or America, or in all these continents at once. (1992, 3)

Benítez-Rojo traces the (Cuban) Cult of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre to these various 'spatio-temporal points' by way of emphasising the importance of the displaced signifiers to our understanding of Caribbean cultural identity. Thus in the Comfa practice we find Benítez Rojo's 'spatio-temporal points' of Europe (the English, Spanish, Dutch spirits, Christian prophets); Asia (Indian spirits, the deities "Durga" and "Lakshmi"); Africa (Kongo and Kromanti spirits, the Comfa drums, and the obeah perspective); America/New World (the Amerindian spirits and the practitioners' referral to the "peiman"), as well as the three 'presences' (African, Europe and New World) identified by Stuart Hall. Ultimately, as Benítez-Rojo urges, it is time to reread the Caribbean and indeed Guyana; to do the kind of rereading in 'which every text reveals its own textuality'. This 'textuality' refers to the diversities, paradoxes, complexities, heterogeneity and homogeneity that constitute Caribbean cultural identity (1992, 10). But importantly, reconciliation of the differences and diversities will not yield a 'Euclidean coherence' given the syncretic and 'supersyncretic' culture that is the Caribbean.

It remains finally for me to say that the prevailing emphasis on tragedy, violence, racial disunity and economic deprivations in Guyana reflect what is at the surface level of a country trying to culturally define itself. Consequently Guyana has been defined by those 'apparently real' cultural aspects that persist for various political reasons. My consideration of Comfa in this chapter has been to provide a counter discourse to this depiction of Guyana. Beneath the surface of what is 'apparently real' in Guyana Comfa reveals itself to be a much more formidable transmission of the behaviour of Guyanese People. I see Comfa as a 'renascent perspective' that has yet to be apprehended collectively by the Guyanese cultural psyche. As such, it represents an empowering symbol of decolonisation that intuitively inscribes the significance of 'one people, one nation, one destiny'.<sup>33</sup> This 'oneness', however, must be understood (intuitively) in the context of the 'necessary diversity and unity' within Guyana's multi-ethnic complex. Diversity (heterogeneity) and unity (homogeneity) are significant variables of Guyanese (and Caribbean) cultural identity. First or finalising (superficial/surface) readings are therefore analogous to defining Caribbean and Guyanese cultural identity. For no sooner are we certain that we know what the frame is than the signifiers are displaced. This is because the signifiers are forever influx; they are neither fixed nor monolithic.

Comfa penetrates (surpasses) the stigma (or condition) of the hostile environment of racial division, violence and the economic blight that have become Guyanese mantras. It is a daring creative perspective that embodies a dynamic sense of the nation that better reflects and reconciles the complexities of Guyanese cultural identity. My engagement with the perspective as 'arts of imagination' has demonstrated that it is possible to become culturally conscious by recovering/reinscribing and recrediting Guyanese (and by extension Caribbean) cultural/traditional practices. This process begins with a contemplation of our 'inner sensibilities'. In this way we might be able to apprehend untold narratives of the subconscious and thereby as Wilson Harris suggests 'bring all perspectives available to us into an art of the imagination.' Guyanese national destiny as 'one people' is not merely the desire of economic independence, but it is also to become culturally liberated and thus to be properly healed as a nation. And it is this need of cultural liberation, healing and reconciliation that gives significance to traditional cultural practices. In the following chapter I consider the ways in which these practices are used in Caribbean fiction as literary aesthetic and thus as culturally liberating resources.

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<sup>33</sup> This is inscribed as an emblem on the Guyanese Coat of Arms.

## Chapter Four

### Myth, Ritual, Trance: Spirituality as literary aesthetic in four texts by Caribbean writers

When Wilson Harris writes that the 'historical stasis' that has blighted the Caribbean 'may only be breached in complex creative perspectives,'<sup>1</sup> he is proposing the necessary development of a distinct Caribbean literary aesthetic. Indeed, as Kenneth Ramchand observes:

Harris' disregard for the usual conventions (time, character. Social realism) in the novel arises from an almost literal-minded obsession with expressing intuition about 'the person' and the structure of societies men have built up for themselves through the ages. [Harris] sees these intuitions, however, as being of particular and immediate concern in the West Indies.<sup>2</sup>

These 'intuitions' we might perceptibly regard as relating to spirit and spirituality. In all societies there is an exterior (the collective, communal, or national) and interior (the individual, personal) perception of experiences. The Caribbean experience has been one of conquest, slavery, indentureship, colonialism, sporadic political violence and economic instability, but it has also been one of a surviving, culturally, socially and psychically embedded spirituality. So far, I have provided a contextual comparison of comfa with other African Caribbean spiritual/religious practices. I have outlined the sociological perspective of Comfa as observed by Kean Gibson. I used Wilson Harris's essay *History Fable and Myth* and the ideas of Edward Brathwaite, Stuart Hall and Antonio Benítez-Rojo to critically analyse the significance of Comfa to Guyanese cultural identity. My final consideration, before proceeding to the Commentary on the novella, will be to explore Caribbean spiritual practices as they appear in literature. Focusing primarily on the theme of spirit possession, my aim is to broaden the Comfa perspective and to underscore its potential as a cultural and literary resource.

Comfa as a culturally embedded spiritual practice in Guyana tends to be implicit in Guyanese literature. For this reason it is centralised as the theme of the novella. Taking my lead from the title of Brodber's novel *Myal*, I have titled my novella *Comfa* to make explicit that I'm using the perspective as a literary aesthetic. My aim is to align my writing with other Guyanese and

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<sup>1</sup> *History, Fable and Myth*, 1970, p.8.

<sup>2</sup> *The West Indian Novel and its Background*, Faber and Faber, London, 1970, p.10.

Caribbean writers who have made use of spiritual, cultural and ancestral traditions in their work. As a Guyanese, Wilson Harris's work is of special interest to me because it represents a spiritual, metaphysical meddling of personal and collective identities in formation; identities on a quest for immortality or transmutability. However, I'm interested in the way spirit possession, trance or altered states of consciousness and ritual processes, as we see in Comfa, are represented in literature. These themes have not been particularly reflected in Guyanese literature.

Before I proceed I would like to provide a brief overview of some other Caribbean fiction where spirituality and spiritual practices function as literary aesthetic. I regard the use of these spiritual traditions in literature as a way of conjuring the ancestral Caribbean spirits to recount, in their own way, the complexity of Caribbean experiences and ultimately Caribbean cultural identity. In her essay 'Another Poor Devil of a Human Being: Jean Rhys and the Novel as Obeah', Elaine Savory makes a similar observation when she suggests that Rhys 'thought of writing as summoning spirits or drawing on a level of consciousness far beyond the logical or rational.'<sup>3</sup> Savory's essay, however, proceeds to assess Rhys's concerns with devilishness, with demons and a haunting darkness which I think might express a particular understanding of obeah, but as was noted in Chapter Two, obeah is much more indiscernible. Nevertheless Rhys's account of obeah in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) expresses an essential contribution to the understanding of Caribbean experiences. More recently, some forty years later I should add, the practice of obeah in Dominica has been given further literary exploration in Marie-Elena John's novel *Unburnable* (2006). This novel depicts how obeah continues to be shrouded in uncertainty, incomprehension and fear. It also reminds us of the historic demonization of obeah practitioners and their clandestine existence against the threat of legal sanctions which was portrayed by Rhys's characterisation of Christophine in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Maryse Condé's *I Tituba Black Witch of Salem* (2000) invokes the spirit of Tituba, a slave from Barbados who was put on trial for practicing witchcraft. Following the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, from which she was exonerated against the accusation of practicing witchcraft, Tituba seemed to have vanished from history. Maryse Condé reconstitutes the ancestral figure of Tituba by giving her a powerfully subjective 'I' with which to (re)claim the 'high science' of obeahism (or witchcraft) and also to tell her story. Again a later novel, lamentably titled *Tutuoba, Salem's Black Shango Slave Queen* (2005) by Prince Justice is another invocation of the ancestral spirit of Tituba. This

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<sup>3</sup> See in *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah and the Caribbean*, Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, eds., Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1997, p.217.

time her reincarnation is not metaphoric; it is a literal theme of the novel. Here she is reincarnated as the daughter of the Yoruba deity Shango. Set in the year 2010, Tituba<sup>4</sup> is reborn in Nigeria and returns to America (intending to practice law there) the scene of her former incarnation when accused of practicing witchcraft in Salem. As a modern, independent young woman, she has to remember who she is because she has no physical recollection of that earlier 17<sup>th</sup> Century incarnation. Whilst Condé's narrative takes up Tituba's story from her arrival in Barbados, Justice charts her story from her birth in Nigeria and her brutal capture and enslavement in the Caribbean. Justice's version of Tituba's story with its unfortunate sexualised front cover is written for popular appeal and would hardly be given academic consideration. But I think that it is no mere coincidence that two writers, one Caribbean, the other British (Nigerian) found the story of Tituba so compelling. I am hinting at the idea that this compulsion is, in a sense, a form of possession by the ancestral figure of Tituba which enabled Condé and Justice to create their respective narratives of reincarnation.<sup>5</sup>

Other works that use Caribbean spiritual traditions or spiritual worldview as literary aesthetic include Opal Palmer Adisa's *It Begins with Tears* (1997) which, like Brodber's *Myal*, refers to the African derived folk practices for psychological healing that involves the entire community. There's no identifiable religious practice in *It Begins with Tears*. The female centred narrative draws instead upon an awareness of ancestral memory to perform the ritual of cathartic healing, cleansing and spiritual recuperation, albeit within an underplayed Christianised frame. In fact, as also depicted in my novella, Christianity is always an overarching frame in Caribbean literature where African derived practices serve as aesthetic. Earl Lovelace's *The Wine of Astonishment* (1982) is one such narrative which depicts the struggle of a Trinidadian Spiritual Baptist community to practice their religion despite an ordinance by the Colonial Government in 1917 prohibiting the practice. As argued by Wilson Harris these practices were regarded as 'rowdy manifestations' by colonial authorities and they were therefore censored.<sup>6</sup> Of course it's hardly the Christian influence that the authorities wanted to censor. Rather it was the African derived aspects that they intended to

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<sup>4</sup> Justice calls her Tutu Oba which is a Yoruba name meaning 'calm or cool' (Tutu) and Oba which 'meant King or leader'. See in *Tutuoba Salem's Black Shango Slave Queen*, Booksurge, 2005, p.61.

<sup>5</sup> Some years after reading Condé's *Tituba*, I noticed Justice's book with its overlong title and sensational front cover. I dismissed it out of hand having scanned the front page I condemned it as disfiguring the historical integrity of Tituba. However, months later, I met the author and asked him why he'd used the sexual front cover. It was really for commercial purposes, he said. I decided to read the book and found its content intriguing and detailed, intuitively and plausibly filling some of the imagined gaps of the historical account of Tituba. He informed me that he had not read (still had not) Condé's novel and had he known there was another novel about this historical figure, he would never have written his.

<sup>6</sup> *History Fable and Myth*, p.11.

discredit. The African influence was linked to rebellion, revolution, physical and psychological resilience and the fight for freedom and independence as portrayed by the character Bolo in Lovelace's novel.

Another Trinidadian writer, Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell also draws on Spiritual Baptist rituals for her novel *When Rocks Dance* (1986). One of the novel's characters undertakes the Mourning ritual to journey through the spirit world in search of healing wisdoms that benefit both individual and community. Mourning is an initiatory ritual of 'self denial and sensory deprivation' and involves prayers and meditation, the outcome of which is the 'unfolding of mysteries of the [spiritual Baptist Faith], learning about the various symbols, the spirit, good and evil.'<sup>7</sup> The above mentioned novels are not selected in preference to any others that draw on spiritual practices. But space does not allow me to outline other such works that use the theme of Caribbean spirituality as an aesthetic. I have provided this brief overview to emphasise that Caribbean spirituality is an emergent area of interest in Caribbean writing.

In this Chapter I explore four texts to consider how spirituality and spiritual traditions are used as a literary aesthetic to express Caribbean experiences. As I highlighted in Chapter One there are some historic similarities between Guyana and Jamaica that relate to their respective traditional African derived practices. For example, these practices reflect the dominant influence of the Church of England, unlike in Cuba and Haiti where Spanish Catholicism enabled syncretism with African deities. Although Trinidad was also colonised by England, the influence of its former colonisation by Spain had penetrated religious experience in a way similar to Haiti and Cuba by the time England took over the colony. Spain's influence, at least religiously, on both Guyana and Jamaica appears to be marginal. I have therefore selected two texts by Jamaican writers and two by Guyanese writers for the purpose of this chapter.

Jamaica and Guyana are, however, linked to the other African derived religious practices by rituals involving spirit possession. As was outlined in Chapter Two ritual is expressed as drama. Therefore ritual involving spirit possession is characterised as a drama - Victor Turner's 'transformative performance' through which social change is generated (1967, 20). Likewise, Wilson Harris sees the dancer in Haitian Vodou as a 'dramatic agent' whose performance represents the function of memory that gives (transformative) power to ancestral traditions. My consideration of two plays is based on the

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<sup>7</sup> See Maarit Laitinen *Marching to Zion: Creolisation in Spiritual Baptist Rituals and Cosmology*, Helsinki University Press, 2002, p.144.

dramatisation of ritual, on the *trance*-formative power of possession. Rituals are necessarily mediated by action (performance) and transmission (or interpretation) of their dominant symbols. Possession causes a medium to dramatise the spirit's identity and purpose for manifesting in the space of liminality. Narrative extends the interpretation of the ritual symbols that are made expedient (through action and performance) by drama. As with ritual, in both prose fiction and drama there is a main plot that is often underpinned by subplots. In Drama, plot is exteriorised to engage an audience sharing the performance. Fiction allows greater intimacy in which the unfolding of plot is a much more internal and individual interpretive experience. I regard both forms as complementary variables of the art of imagination that facilitate transmission of spiritual, psychical, social and cultural experience. For this reason I have chosen two plays, a novel and a short story to discuss in this chapter.

The theme of spirit possession is aesthetically dramatised in Dennis Scott's play *An Echo in the Bone* (1985). My interest here is in the way spirit possession is used as a means of recounting social and cultural history. I am also interested in the way Caribbean spiritual perspectives can be used for healing, recuperation and as resistance to colonialism as depicted in Erna Brodber's novel *Myal* (1988). *Myal* also highlights the misappropriation of Caribbean spiritual phenomena and shows how this can be countered by drawing upon the collective community force and the ancestral practice of Myalism to reclaim the dispossessed spirit. Michael Gilkes's dream play *Couvade* (published 1974) and Pauline Melville's short story 'English Table Wuk' (1998) will be analysed to consider the use of spiritual traditions specifically related to Guyanese cultural identity. Although Melville's story does not involve spirit possession it provides an account of the way an aspect of the Comfa ritual is practiced in an ordinary, every day setting.

My interest in these texts is ultimately in their stylistic and formal experimentation. It should be noted that, perhaps with the exception of Melville's 'English Table Wuk', these texts depart from the realist forms adopted by the above mentioned novels. This is particularly with regard to linearity - a realist convention which I feel bears little significance to perceptions of reality, space and time as experienced/understood by non-western societies. I think also that the departure is made necessary by the culturally specific *experiences of spirit* on which these texts are respectively centred. This underlies their complex creative strategies and attempts thereby to develop original models of writing as suggested by Harris in *History, Fable and Myth*. These texts therefore express the *unboundedness* of spirit and its yet *embeddedness* in Caribbean consciousness. Their representation of time, history, cultural/individual/communal self and psyche move beyond

materiality into 'cosmospiritual dimensions.' The reader and by that token the individual self and collective community is hereby exposed to a 'psychical terrain of spirit' wherein lies the potent and intuitive forces of cultural liberation.<sup>8</sup>

In Jamaica, where Dennis Scott's play *An Echo in the Bone* is set, the 'Nine-Night' ritual is observed by Pocomania practitioners and other Revivalist religions.<sup>9</sup> The purpose of the ritual is to assure the deceased that all is well and thereby to encourage their transition into the after life to join their ancestors. The ritual is based on the belief that the spirit of the deceased will return to its home on the ninth night after death. A ceremony held in honour or memory of the deceased is also in keeping with African funeral rites and observances which slaves brought with them to the West Indies. According to Marimba Ani, in African worldview the universe is conceived as a 'unified spiritual totality' which reflects the interrelatedness of spirit and matter or life and death. This represents a 'metaphysical reality' in which communication between the living and the dead is possible.<sup>10</sup>

Thus it is believed in some African communities, such as the Akan of Ghana, that failure to remember the dead may account for a series of disasters within the community or family. But whilst the memorialisation of the dead is important, death itself is unwelcome. This is because it is not always possible to know whether the death was due to natural causes or *supernatural* forces. In *An Echo* there are two deaths for which an account is needed. One is the murder of a white estate owner in a post emancipation Jamaican community. Crew, a peasant farmer, is suspected of the murder, although he has disappeared and is also believed to be dead.

In acknowledgement of her religious/cultural beliefs, Crew's wife, Rachel, organises a Nine-night ritual during which Crew's spirit manifests. The ritual involves singing, dancing to the beating of drums and smoking marijuana/tobacco. As with Comfa ceremonies a table is laid with various symbolic spiritual items – water, flowers, candles – and serves as a ceremonial altar. An important element of the ritual is the pouring of libation by way of consecrating the ground. Dennis Scott subscribes to the ritual of pouring libation, which is common among various West-African ethnic groups. Libation is performed to acknowledge the everpresentness of invisible things

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<sup>8</sup> See Melvin B Rahming, 'Towards a Critical Theory of Spirit: The Insistent Demands of Erna Brodber's *Myal*, in *Revista/Review Interamericana*, Vol.31, 1-4, Jan-Dec 2001. Published online, <http://www.sg.inter.edu/revista-ciscla/volume31/rahming.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> See in the introduction to the play, p10. In some cases the 40<sup>th</sup> day/night is also recognised. This ritual is also practiced in Guyana and other Caribbean countries and Africa.

<sup>10</sup> See Marimba Ani (formerly Donna Richards) *Let The Circle Be Broken: The Implications of African-American Spirituality*, Nkonimfo Publications, New York, 1997, pp5-7.



(God, Mother Earth and ancestors).<sup>11</sup> However, the pouring of libation in *An Echo*, is an intuitive action caused by the playful struggle between the 'hard-drinking' Dreamboat and the 'mute' drummer, Rattler. Although seemingly 'purposeless', both characters represent important symbols of the ritual. Dreamboat's alcoholism, which would otherwise (in the 'apparently real world') render him worthless, is inverted as an instrument of libation. Thus in the struggle for a bottle of rum between himself, Rattler and P, he tells them: 'I say don't interfere with me', shortly after which, 'the bottle falls, breaks, pouring rum out on the floor' (p.80).

Scott's dramatisation of the pouring of ritual libation through Dream's character identifies Victor Turner's notion that in liminality the 'structurally inferior aspire to symbolic structural superiority' (1969, 203). Thus Dreamboat, the 'hard-drinking, womanising peasant' is the means of ensuring that libation is poured before the ritual can begin. Once the ground has been consecrated by the rum, Dream is the first of the characters to become possessed:

Dream in the silence, pants loud and fast. The others watch him motionless. His head begins to swivel on his head, slowly till the whole body is weaving on the spot. His feet shuffle a little... (p. 80)

The Nine Night ritual is trance-formed 'betwixt and between' ordinary life into the space of liminality. The dance of possession establishes the boundaries of 'anti-structure' (communitas). As was discussed in Chapter Two, in liminality, any one of the characters may become possessed, but their roles (or status) do not remain as they are in 'ordinary' life or in the present structure of society. Thus, in the introduction to the play, we are told that the possessed individual 'receives oracular powers' and is therefore able to reveal 'hidden truths' (p.10).

As in the Comfa practice the drum is also important to the Nine Night ritual. It is used as the means of invoking the spirits to possess the characters and is also used to signal the various transitions (scene movements) in the play. Rattler's muteness, as with Dreamboat's alcoholism, might also render him worthless or insignificant. However, it is not necessary for Rattler to speak because, as the drummer, he represents another potent means of communication. Robert Fischer observes that the 'drummer [in West African traditions] stands for knowledge, for he knows the history and lore of the community and he recites it on his talking drum [the Atumpan]'.

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<sup>11</sup> See Robert Fischer's *West African Religious Traditions: A Focus on Akan of Ghana*, Orbis Books, New York, 1998, pp.36-37. It's quite common in African-Caribbean communities also to pour some liquid (usually alcoholic, but it can also be water) on the floor to invoke the presence or remember ancestors.

Furthermore, Fischer writes that 'the drum instils pride, and fear too, for in its deep rumblings the ancestors speak.'<sup>12</sup> As an obvious 'rowdy manifestation' then the drum was banned by colonial authorities because they announced over great distances European military campaigns. Missionaries considered them 'liberative symbols of satanic forces.'<sup>13</sup> The drums, however, are used for a number of religious and cultural activities. Their continued use throughout the Caribbean reflects an obvious link with Africa. In *An Echo*, the drum is used as an instrument of mediation and transition, signalling all the major dramatic aspects of the play.

There is another account given for Rattler's muteness. In the in-between context of liminality Rattler is inverted as a proud, vocally commanding African. A scuffle ensues between himself and 'Jacko' (another African), which intuitively the inter-tribal conflict often referred to as the context of complicity in which Africans played a part in slavery. Stone (one of the ship's crew responsible for the slaves) orders them to stop fighting, as they are both 'private [slave] property'. Rattler responds by spitting on Stone, to which Scott gives us this direction:

STONE....Knife Danny – The knife is placed in his hand. He shoves  
Rattler on to his back, P [Danny] presses the gun into Rattler's belly,  
Stone kicks Rattler in the head. Rattler *relaxes into unconsciousness*.  
Stone reaches in his open mouth pulls at his tongue, straddling  
Rattler's body. Slices it in one movement.

(pp.92-93, my emphasis)

This is a powerful dramatisation of the loss of their tribal languages which enslaved Africans suffered under the system of slavery/imperialism. With the loss of language, there was also the loss of knowledge ('unconsciousness'), not least because in *An Echo*, Rattler (as drum/drummer) embodies cultural repository.

Shortly after Dream has become possessed we're told that 'Rattler crouches over the drum, picks up the beat slowly, moaning a little with concentration' (p.80). This ensures the manifestation of Crew's spirit, which instigates the 'journey into the communal psyche' to reconcile the mystery of the murdered estate owner. The mystery is not whether Crew actually committed the murder but how and why. His disappearance also needs reconciliation. Although Rachel is certain that her husband is dead, she does not know how nor what became of his body. The intention of the Nine-Night ritual is to resolve these uncertainties and to locate answers, which as we're told in the introduction, 'lie deep within racial memory [echoing] in the bone' (p.10). The

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.34.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

answers are part of the collective subconscious of the community, microcosmically represented by the ten characters. It is necessary to invoke the immediate and distant past as a means to reconcile social, cultural and historical events. The act of spirit possession enables the tran(ce)migration of all the characters back to the period of slavery, post emancipation and various times shortly before the murder.

Following the initial possession of Dream, the characters discuss the virtues of the deceased man and consider the significance of his death; P tells us:

Is a terrible thing to go out like a fire that the rain put out.  
This is what a man must live for, eh? You can cut down the  
canes for a lifetime, every year you drag the sweetness out of  
the ground with you bare hands and pray the next season will  
be easy. Three hundred years crying into the whiteman's ground,  
to make the cane green, and nothing to show.

(p.86)

The reference to 'three hundred years' conflates history, the present and the recent past which suggests that nothing has changed. Although slavery has been abolished, the memory of it lingers as part of the collective subconscious of the characters; hence Rachel says that 'thirty years long like three hundred' (p.87). In Gibson's analysis of the 'Drum Work', it was noted that in ritual there is a main plot and there are subplots. In *An Echo* the main plot is the reconciliation/recovery of recent social events, but this reconciliation is not possible without reference to history as a subplot of the ritual. The subplot establishes the need to rewrite history and thereby to 'confront [the] multiple layers of traumatic memories and the original trauma of the Middle Passage in which [Caribbean/diasporic] identity is rooted.'<sup>14</sup> The act of spirit possession can thus be described as a 'ritual of rememory'<sup>15</sup> (to borrow Pin-Chia Feng's phrase) wherein it is possible to locate a healing remedy of the *dis-possessed* self, and thereby *re-possessing the spirit* from the psychological trauma of slavery and colonialism. In *An Echo*, the trauma of slavery and colonialism has to be confronted before it is possible to envision a future unhindered by the burdens of the past.

However, such a future cannot be envisioned until an account is given of the death of Crew and the estate owner. Both characters represent the order of slavery/colonialism and the slave-slave master/ colonised/coloniser binarism. The fact that they are dead from the outset of the play symbolises the dying

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<sup>14</sup> See Pin-Chia Feng – 'Rituals of Rememory: Afro-Caribbean religions in *Myal* and *It Begins with Tears*, in *Melus*, Vol.27, No.1, Spring 2002, p.14.

<sup>15</sup> 'Rememory' is a term used by Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved* to refer to the preservation of the images of the past – so that, for example, 'if a house burns down, its gone, but the place, the picture of it stays...out there, in the world' (1997, 36).

order of colonialism and slavery. Crew's roaming spirit embodies a ship of slaves moored across the Atlantic to the Caribbean. Having possessed Sonson (his eldest son), Crew confesses to those gathered at the ritual that he had to kill the estate owner because 'the earth was calling out for his blood for what he do to us' (p.87). The murder, which in other circumstances would be considered a brutal act of violence is symbolic of purification and healing. This is an instance of Fanonian decolonisation. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argues that the first encounter between the coloniser and the colonised was 'marked by violence'. Decolonisation, as Fanon further argues, 'will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists' [the coloniser and colonised].<sup>16</sup> In *An Echo*, Crew and Mr Charles are two opposing (liminal) protagonists whose meeting was a fated (and *fateful*) precursor of decolonisation. As if in anticipation of the response to Crew's admission of violence, there is a seamless trance-formation to the scene aboard a slave ship to evince the barbaric treatment of enslaved Africans bound for the Caribbean Islands.

Given Turner's concepts of liminality and *communitas*, the ritual enables the characters to adopt new personalities aboard the slave ship. P is trance-lated as a slave trader in charge of the captive Africans (the other characters), who we are told are 'in the hold...crouched, sitting tight packed.' (p.89). Standing on the crow's nest above the slaves, P contemplates the gains he has made from the 'three voyages' of transporting slaves. 'All that money saved', he tell us, 'if I add my *share* to this *venture*, I could buy me a young black and settle in the islands. Hire her out maybe – then retire for a quiet old age, and *nothing to do*' (p.88, emphases added). The words 'share', 'venture' and 'hire' are evidence of the commodification of Africans for the Transatlantic Slave Trade. P is not otherwise interested in the 'too richness' and 'greenness' of the islands only the economic opportunities to be gained by the trade in human cargo – or 'heathen brutes', as he calls them. His dream of having 'nothing to do' on retiring from the trade highlights Harris's observation that slave property, 'in its ornamental stasis was fortuitous, dicey and thus... inclined to be wasteful or purposeless.'<sup>17</sup>

The ideology of slavery and imperialism is replicated through P's character in several shifting, liminal scenes throughout the play. The effect is a powerful depiction of the archetypal slavemaster and colonial whose spirit continues to impose itself on the lives of the community. This complicates our understanding of Caribbean experiences because, as will be shown in my analysis of Pauline Melville's 'English Table Wuk', the remaining spirits of the Caribbean are not only Africans and Amerindians, they are also Europeans.

<sup>16</sup> *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1967, p.28.

<sup>17</sup> *History, Fable and Myth*, p.6.

During the dialogue between Rachel and Mr Charles, we learn that the two had previously had a sexual affair – or rather, that Mr Charles had seduced Rachel. Having spent a number of years in England, Mr Charles has returned to the Island to rebuild/maintain his estate. He tries to persuade Rachel to work for him as his ‘housekeeper’. Rachel rejects his request, but Mr Charles is not deterred and tells Rachel: ‘you’ll have a staff of about four...it’s a big old house, though I’ll probably close down half of it. Maybe make it into a museum. There’s some fine stuff in there...solid stuff. Enduring’ (p.118). The Great House symbolises the ornament of slavery. Mr Charles’ intention is to make Rachel part of that ornament – to retain her services which would confine her to slavery.

This scene is interlinked/juxtaposed with another in which an ancestor of Mr Charles (also called ‘Mr Charles’) is cared for by a young female slave. It is obvious that he has several times bedded the ‘girl’ (she is not called anything else) although he outwardly despises her. Scott’s skilful dramatisation of these two scenes conveys the sense that the exploitation of slaves through imperialism is incarnate, repetitive and far-reaching. The exploitation is tran(ce)migrated in the spatial/liminal incarnations of ‘Mr Charles’ as slave master/coloniser. The will to exploit and oppress is perpetuated because it is the natural ideology of imperialism.

Thus when Mr Charles’s ancestor (who owns the Great House) receives a visit from a young doctor informing him of the imminence of abolition, his response is that ‘freedom’ would be useless to the slaves – ‘what would they do without me?’ (p.123). As with the former incarnation of P as slave trader, Mr Charles’s ancestor, as slave master, believes that black people are innately consignable to oppression. And, as if by that same natural order, white people are righteously divined to be burdened with slaves, for ‘who will feed them and look after them when they get sick?’ the proprietor asks the young doctor, (p.123). However, the proprietor later urges the doctor not to remain on the island because, he tells him, ‘it catches you’. P’s monologue at the end of this scene beautifully captures the feminisation of the Caribbean islands:

[The island is] young and green and fertile. It’s so rich so rich. It works its way into your blood like the drums, and you think it’s yours. It belongs to you, you sweat for it and love it and form it to what you want. And the years pass, and you won’t admit it but you belong to it. It claims you, bends under you, and smiles, but you stay a stranger. You never really understand it...And you dare not admit that you know how much she hates you. Smiling and fighting you every inch of the way. And then one day you’re old, you look around and it’s still so young, so green. You want to give in, to say how much she means to you, but she just smiles

through you, and there's no way to touch her. That's the lonely  
part. Then you know how strong she is. And it was all such a  
waste.....Girl!  
(p.124)

This protracted speech is a lyrical and poetic expression of the imperialist mission by which the islands of the Caribbean were feminised and brutalised. The richness and fertility of the island is economically alluring, but it is not otherwise possible to appreciate its beauty and to become immersed in its cultural possibilities. The lyrical description of the island embodies a rhythm to the system of the plantation, a complexity that remains part and parcel of Caribbean experience. Although the island, as with the 'girl' and Rachel is objectified and brutalised by patriarchal and imperialist aggression, its spirit (its fertility/greenness and strength) remains. This underlies the psychic survival of the enslaved Africans in the Caribbean. Interestingly, the proprietor appears to be *possessed* by the island, although he had believed that he had a natural right to *possess* it.

As with the tran(ce)migration of the spirit of imperialism, the spirit of resistance is also incarnated in Crew's descendant Sonson. The inevitability of the murder is foregrounded by Sonson when he describes the encounter with Mr Charles: 'I have the machete in my hand and little more I would a chop him with it', he tells Rachel (p.111). The machete is one of three recurrent symbols of the play; the drum and the chains that dominate the centre of the stage. Essentially they represent various elements of diasporic identity: the knife/machete for the necessary violence of decolonisation and the struggle for freedom/independence; the drum for continuity with African traditions/communication and mediation of cultural identity and the chains represent the shackles of slavery that link Caribbean identity to the plantation. The chains also point to the need to unlock the prison of history, the trauma of slavery that continues to dismember the communal psyche.

Sonson, as the spirit of Crew, represents the revolutionary oppositional force (a 'crew') to imperialist ideology. Thus he tells us:

They [white people] go on like the Lord put them on the earth to  
walk over the rest of us. From slavery days them don't change,  
they still think they better than the rest.

(p.112)

Sonson is *haunted* (one could say) by the trauma of slavery and *possessed* by the spirit of rebellion. He identifies Mr Charles with the system of oppression; 'I feel in my bones he [Mr Charles] carry trouble with him' (p.112.). This is a premonition that cleverly foretells the narrative of history.

Effectively, Sonson is rewriting the text of the murder, of which the audience is already aware from the outset of the play.

Scott juxtaposes the scene with the proprietor and the scene between Rachel and Crew ('Sonson') to implicate the 'estate' (the ornament of slavery/imperialism) as the cause of their current economic distress. Crew's land has dried up because the owner of the estate (the current 'Mr Charles') has 'turn[ed] the river round the hill'. Nothing can grow on Crew's farm without the water. 'You don't see the earth dry up since August,' he tells Rachel (p.127). It's a poignant reference to the fact that despite emancipation (which was granted in the month of August), the freed slaves continued to be wilfully disenfranchised. But there is also a tantalising suggestion that the freed slaves may not have made the most of the opportunities available to them after emancipation. Thus Rachel reprimands Crew:

And what are you doing about it. Every day you come out here  
and lie down, drink the stinking rum, and when day get too hot,  
you go to sleep, like you have all the time in the world to spare.  
(p.127)

For Rachel, it is not enough to lament about the desolation but to identify alternatives where possible. Crew, being 'tied' to the land cannot foresee a future that does not only depend on working it, which suggests a mental or psychological enslavement:

I born by it and marry by it and maybe one day it going to  
kill me. Maybe even now, but is what I know, it is what  
nothing will change. [...] I only can trace the line here in the  
hard dirt, see? And the line going from here to there, and this  
end is where them bring my great grandfather, here, and this  
is me. If you take away the line from the ground I am nothing.  
I am nobody. (p.128)

This is an interesting inversion of P's earlier monologue as the proprietor of the Great House. Crew's attachment to the land, though more natural and compassionate, is also in some ways ornamental because it does not enable him to imagine other economic possibilities to assist his family. His perspective is fixed and it therefore fixes the order of the plantation. His death was imminent because he cannot move with the 'changing times'. His pride clouds his judgement, for which reason he is angry at the prospect of Rachel working, albeit for the estate owner. He decides to go to the Great House to reason with Mr Charles to let some of the river's water run through his land. Mr Charles humiliates him, firstly by insisting he goes to the back of the house, and then by refusing to grant his request. This account is tran(ce)mitted to the characters by Sonson, as the liminal incarnation of Crew.

He re-enacts the scene of his father's confrontation with Mr Charles – the necessary 'meeting of two opposing forces' as Fanon articulates in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967, p.27). Crew confesses that he killed Mr Charles and although it is not explicit, it appears that he fell to his own death after climbing to the top of the Great House to escape.

With this ritualised revelation the characters are able to embrace the (re)newness of life, signalled by Brigit's pregnancy. There is also a familial reconciliation between Sonson and Jacko, rival siblings of Brigit's affection. Although the death of the estate owner is a signal that 'new times coming', the characters are uncertain how these changes will benefit them since 'the new owner going to put in new machines all over' (p.86). The suggestion is that this will be a new system, a new form of enslavement because it will mean working for the new estate owner. However, the idea of change also suggests the possibility for advancement, of progress that, in any case, 'better must come' and must therefore be embraced no matter how painstaking.

The Nine-night ritual and the theme of spirit possession in *An Echo* is used by Scott as a literary aesthetic to dramatise their cultural significance to Caribbean experiences. Thus Scott's use of the phenomenon of spirit possession is an effective medium to represent social and cultural history through the arts of imagination.

Resistance writing, what Fanon calls 'literature of combat' must be all embracing. This literature of combat calls for resistance, for the people to 'fight for their existence.' Such resistance would precipitate a conscious awakening, a rebirthing of self and the reclamation of spirit. Literature of combat, Fanon argues 'moulds...national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons [and] assumes responsibility.'<sup>18</sup> Of course resistance to cultural imperialism is complicated by the ambivalent relationship between the coloniser and colonised. The relationship between coloniser and colonised cannot be simplified in binarist terms such as dominant/inferior, master/slave, evil coloniser/good colonised. In his essay 'Fighting the Spirit Thieves: Dismantling Cultural Binarisms in Erna Brodber's *Myal*' Kevin Hutchings argues that 'the enemy cannot be identified solely as an external Other.' He further writes that 'Spirit thievery [principally colonialism] cannot be fought...through the implementation of a politics which polarizes "us" and "them", it must be dealt with using a much more complex and sophisticated strategy of resistance and self-empowerment.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Penguin, London, 1967, p.193.

<sup>19</sup> See Kevin D. Hutchings essay 'Fighting the Spirit Thieves: Dismantling Cultural Binarisms in Erna Brodber's *Myal*', in *World Literature Written in English*, Vol.32.2, 1996, p. 109.



Such a 'sophisticated strategy of resistance [writing] and self-empowerment' is powerfully demonstrated by Erna Brodber in her second novel *Myal*. In the colonial context the Grove Town community is creolised. Creolisation is therefore absorbed in Brodber's all embracing writing of resistance. Oral societies such as the Grove Town community in *Myal* are like mythical worlds without end. In such worlds nothing dies, but revolves in a continuing recreative, regenerative motion. Therefore characteristically of Erna Brodber's writing, *Myal* rejects linearity of European convention and disrupts our expectations of what constitutes a beginning and ending of a story. In so doing a complex narrative strategy is created through the aesthetic use of the Myal ritual.

The theme of *Myal* is spiritual theft or 'spirit thievery.' Of equal importance to the plot is the resistance to 'spirit thievery' by the novel's (Myal) community. There are, however, two concurrent plots in *Myal*. One entails the spirit theft of Anita by Mass Levi (one of the members of the community) and the other is the spirit theft of Ella through cultural imperialism. Mass Levi's spirit thievery is in the form of the misappropriation of the cultural practice of 'Obeahism'. The spirit thievery of colonialism is manifest in the inculcation of Ella O'Grady's mind through colonial education. The use of the term 'spirit thievery' implies that both Ella and Anita are *victims* of spirit thievery as opposed to the participatory nature of spirit possession/trance discussed throughout this work.

The novel opens with passages that mirror the creation story of Genesis, the Good Friday storm 'when the saviour of the world was lynched' and the apocalyptic ending of Revelation (pp.1-3). This conveys both the severity of Ella's condition and the precarious nature of the community in the colonial context. Both Ella and Anita are teenage virgins when they are subjected to spirit thievery. Brodber's novel therefore references the double oppression of the black female through sexual and racial exploitation. This nullifies any easy remedies for the healing and recuperation of both females as signalled by the calamitous storm. Having 'tripped out' in foreign, Ella O'Grady is brought to Mass Cyrus, the Myal herbalist to be healed. It seems that he is the only one who is able to heal her *particular* illness, thus enlisting his god-like status. She will be healed, he tells us in 'six days time' (p.1). But six days is not enough to complete the cure. Mass Cyrus tells us that 'a man has a right to protect his world' against the 'stinkiest, dirtiest ball to come out of a body since creation...[o]n the *seventh day* it will pass from her but not in my grove'(p.2, my emphasis). We might assume that Mass Cyrus wants to *rest* on the seventh day after re-creating Ella, as the God of the Biblical text did when the world was created. There are, however, other reasons for his reserve.

The 'stinkiest, dirtiest ball' has turned Ella into a 'staring, silent female.' And further, 'the mass of grey muck' contained in her body has made her 'stiff and straight.' Her healing, Mass Cyrus tells us 'will short-circuit the whole of creation' (p.4). Mass Cyrus does not want to witness the 'bam-bam' (calamity) that will take place when the healing process ends. This is the signal of a drastic change in consciousness, not only for Ella but also for the community. Hence for Mass Cyrus: '[c]uring the body is nothing. Touching the peace of those she must touch and those who must touch her is the hard part'. We first read these lines at the beginning of the novel (p.1) when Ella is brought to Mass Cyrus; it's repeated towards the end (p.93), which disrupts our expectations of the novel form. Thus Brodber's narrative technique foregrounds the healing of Ella in the opening of the novel, but this actually occurs at the end.

Although he is prepared to heal her Mass Cyrus does not want his world (where he is 'rooted') to become infected with the same disease which has zombified Ella. His world it seems is separate from the world of colonialism – an inference perhaps to the maroon community. If we are in any doubt as to the cause of Ella's condition Brodber shifts the narrative from the opening calamity to her recital of a Kipling poem five years earlier. Prior to this, we're told that 'it was August 1919'. This is a doubling signification of liberation and resistance; August is synonymous with the month of Emancipation and the year 1919 saw labour strikes in Jamaica as a period of resistance heightened by the growing influence of Marcus Garvey.<sup>20</sup> At this time, 13 year old Ella is not conscious that she is engaged in a war of different worlds and worldviews.

When he hears her reading the Kipling poem, Reverend Simpson, a colonial administrator says 'nice choice of poem what with the war about to begin and all that. And well executed too' (p.5). His use of the word 'executed' and then 'executionist' suggests that Ella is reading to prescription. She is doing and acting as she is *expected/enlisted* to do. This is what happens when one is zombified. Later in the novel we read that zombification occurs when a person's knowledge of their 'original and natural world is taken away from them. They are left as 'empty shells-duppies, zombies, living deads capable only of receiving orders from someone and carrying them out' (p.107). To turn someone into a living dead, a zombie, an obeah practitioner uses a poisonous concoction of powders. The most potent toxin used is tetrodotoxin which is extracted from poisonous fish. It affects the nervous system and

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<sup>20</sup> See the *Selected Writings and Speeches of Marcus Garvey*, ed. Bob Blaisdell, Dover Publications Inc, New York, 2004, p.v.

eventually produces the symptoms that resemble death.<sup>21</sup> There is however an antidote to zombification, which I will discuss shortly.

Furthermore, the use of the words 'executed' and 'executionist' also seems to imply that Ella is responsible for her own spiritual death on the one hand and the victim of it on the other. In other words, is Ella both complicit and resistant? This is the suggestion of Grove Town's only white resident, Mrs Brassington when she says 'is not all the time is somebody do something; sometimes is you do you own self something' (p.94). This is not impartial, however, because Mrs Brassington is trying to evade some of the responsibility for Ella's condition. Mrs Brassington becomes enchanted by Ella when she hears her reading the Kipling poem. She perceives a *difference* in Ella from the other Grove Town community and decides that the child belonged in another world or is *other worldly*, perhaps angelic:

[T]hat little girl looked as if she was flying. Totally separated from the platform and from the people around her. Not just by colour but as an angel in those Sunday School cards is separated from the people below. Swimming in the sky, or flying or whatever, in that ethereal fashion over all below.

(p.17)

Being 'Othered' in this hyperbolic way by Mrs Brassington is partly the cause of Ella's alienation from the community. Mrs Brassington does not make the connection between Ella's reading of the Kipling poem and her state of zombification because she sees her self as a 'well meaning' colonial. For her, the reading of colonialist texts such as Kipling's is superlative to anything natural to Ella's sense of self and place. She regards Ella as a little white angel whose position in life is to be above the lesser 'others'. Indeed, Ella's 'difference' – being mixed race is the cause of much of the hostilities levelled against her throughout the novel. Ella has twin ancestry, African (black) and European (white) *and* she belongs to the Caribbean. She is the archetypal hybrid of the Caribbean, embodying its ethnic diversities and thus Stuart Hall's three 'presences'.

Ella finds comfort in the world of colonial texts and befriends characters such as Peter Pan, Lucy Gray and Dairy Maid. This world of fairy tale is alien, but feels *real* because she *looks* like the characters. Invariably, it results in a splitting and doubling of Ella's self. This split – a literal break with reality becomes more apparent when she marries Selwyn Langley, the racist American chemist (a type of obeah man practicing *western* science). We're told

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<sup>21</sup> Antonio Benítez-Rojo gives this much more time than I have space to do here. See in *The Repeating Island*, Duke University Press, London 1992p.164.

that 'it was Selwyn who explained to her [Ella] in simple terms that she is coloured, mulatto and what that meant, taking her innocence with her hymen in return for guidance through the confusing fair that was America. Ella was hooked on the drug' (p.43). This drug, no doubt, is like tetrodotoxin that turns people into living deads. Ella eventually becomes increasingly distanced from her self, but the distance makes her see clearly the familiar 'others' she left behind in Grove Town. Paradoxically, a space is being made for the spirit thievery of Ella as well as for her recuperation: 'with her hymen and a couple of months of marriage gone, there was a clean, clear passage from Ella's head through her middle right down to outside' (p.80). This evinces gendered and racial oppression. Brodber's consistent references to 'middle' and 'passage' effectively reflect Selwyn's neo colonialist domination of Ella.

Selwyn is, nonetheless, both drug *and* antidote. His re-invented story of the Grove Town community makes Ella realise that 'it didn't go so' before she 'trips out.' (p.84). Ella is fated to return to Grove Town to begin the healing process. Her split psyche can only be re-membered when she learns to take pride in the Grove Town community of which she is part. Under the guidance of the Myal men and women, Ella learns to find her own antidote. She understands that although she must read (and now teach) colonialist texts, she has to bring her own meaning to them. This is the resistance and subversion that will lead to a drastic change in consciousness ('bam bam') that will involve the entire community. These changes will be especially significant to the Brassingtons who thought the best place for Ella was outside of Grove Town.

Mrs Brassington and her husband resemble the type of (particularly white) Creoles that Edward Brathwaite is critical of in *Creolisation in Jamaica* as I discussed in the previous chapter. The Brassingtons have two boys who have been sent to England to be educated, having become 'accustomed to certain styles of life' (p.25). Mrs Brassington seems to regret this. She says that [o]ne problem with [them going to school in Britain] is that there is so much about Jamaica...that they do not know.' Why then, we may wonder, does she agree to send Ella to America? Ironically, she is critical of her husband, the Methodist Reverend Brassington (mixed race like Ella) of 'emptying' the spirit of his church members (p.18). She says 'I wouldn't like that power,' yet she wastes no time manipulating the process of adopting Ella. Her position as the pastor's wife *and* the fact that she is white is what gives her power to 'tek people pickney fi practice pon' (p.20).

However, Mrs Brassington strives to become a fully integrated member of the community. She achieves this through her openness to the cultural practices of the Grove Town community. Miss Gatha (Mother Hen) later initiates her

into Myal as 'White Hen'. Mr Brassington also comes to an understanding of the unavoidability of syncretism within the community of Grove Town. This is further evidence of Brodber's all-embracing narrative of resistance that rewrites cultural histories. The point is that the Grove Town community must embrace creolisation which offers the potential for recreating a liberating national consciousness. This would culminate in the healing of the nation and not only for those individuals who are outwardly zombified.

Mass Cyrus, Ole African and Reverend Simpson are part of a trio of male myalists who have been in mythic/telephathic communication for centuries. They are the incarnated spiritual ancestors of Africa. They possess the ancestral knowledge that is necessary to revive the spirit from thievery: 'Ole African only went where there was a spirit let loose needing to be cut and cleared' (p.34). Their stories are 'the half that has never been told'. Thus Brodber's novel uncovers the forgotten histories of elders in rural Jamaica; such was the inspiration for a later novel *Lousiana*.

In one of the many psychic conversations between Ole African (mythically-'Willie') and Reverend Simpson ('Dan'), we're told that slavery was an act of betrayal by (African) 'conjure men, voodoo men, wizards and priests': 'they gave them our sound, then sold their own souls' (p.66). The gender significance is hardly subtle. Mass Levi is part of the Grove Town community but his knowledge of obeah causes the attempted spirit thievery of Anita. This is evidence of gendered and cultural oppression. Mass Levi uses his ancestral knowledge to psychically rape Anita, attempting to 'rob her of her possibilities' (p.106). His spirit thievery mirrors that of colonialism as Reverend Simpson explains to Ella (pp.106-107).

This misappropriation of the cultural practice of obeah highlights the complexity inherent in understanding Caribbean experience and the necessary rereading of our histories this implies. Spirit thievery takes many forms but it is part and parcel of African diasporic experiences. Conjure men, voodoo men, as well as priests refer to the syncretism of religious practices in the Caribbean. Within the African Diaspora, syncretic and traditional religious leaders have the power to heal and recoup the spirit. But the potential for misappropriation exists. Brodber's narrative is therefore a foreboding critique of this. This foreboding is also taken up in my novella in which a negative spirit, a Bacoo possesses and rapes (as Mass Levi does Anita) a young girl who had been abandoned by her parents and grandmother. This possession (violation) by the bacoo spirit can be countered by the healing and reconciliatory elements of the Comfa practice.

Mass Levi's spirit thievery of Anita occurs when she is studying. Her studying, we're told 'is the kind that splits the mind from the body and both from the soul and leaves each open to infiltration' (p.28). 'Infiltration' suggests that a space is being made for Anita's shadow (her spirit) to be usurped by false practitioners and bad spirits. Brodber is not suggesting that there is a problem with 'studying.' Rather it is the type of self alienating learning that is being critiqued. Ella is learning the technicalities of (European) music, which again is not a problem. However, there is a cultural rhythm within the Grove Town community of which neither Ella nor Anita are aware. This lack of cultural awareness is what splits the self and psyche. Consequently, as an oral community characterised by folk wisdom and traditional African based remedies of healing Anita does not remain a victim of Mass Levi's spirit thievery for long. Whilst the 'conjure man', Mass Levi is 'praying extra hard to take away Anita's spirit', the collective spirit of the community join forces to counter his act of spiritual theft.

Brodber's use of multiple voices, narrative shifts and styles provides a cultural lyricism that embraces Brathwaite's nation language. The poetics of Brodber's narrative is intensified in the build up to and during Anita's exorcism:

Miss Gatha looking like she had a warning. The long green dress with the tiny red flowers the head -tie of the same print tied rabbit-ear fashion, the big wooden circles in her ears and the bunch of oleander gripped tight in her hands like they were one and the same. And the swinging and the swaying and the twirling! Miss Gatha now have no ordinary foot walking thump-thump and mashing the stones down into the mud. (p. 70)

This is a powerful image of Miss Gatha's resistance to Mass Levi's obeahism. When she begins her walk, we're told that 'she had no audience' to her ritual performance. But 'Miss Gatha spoke and that was how her private hurricane became a public event' (p.70). Miss Gatha's performance emphasises the importance of reclaiming the stolen sound, the lost souls of Africa and the colonised spirit. Miss Gatha's sound, her rhythm is juxtaposed with the technicalities of Anita's music lessons:

she [Miss Gatha] recited; she sang; she intoned. In one register, in another, in one octave, then higher. Lyrically, with syncopation, with improvisations far, far out from her original composition. The changes were musical only. The lyrics never changed.

(pp. 70-71)

'The lyrics never changed' because they are rooted. They are evidence of her ancestral knowledge. This knowledge must be used to recuperate and reclaim

the dispossessed spirit. For we learn that 'Anita had spent all fifteen years in Grove Town but she had never before sat in on Miss Gatha's performance. Though she had heard things' (p.72). Thus Anita is being exposed to another type of music. But Miss Gatha's rhythm reflects the stolen (ancestral) sound. It is the type (of rhythm/performance) that does not alienate but recuperates the self. Thus Brodber's use of *Myal* as a literary aesthetic emphasises its significance as a powerful symbol of decolonisation that reconciles the culturally split psyche and re-possesses the dis-possessed spirit.

Michael Gilkes's *Couvade* was first performed in 1972 at the first Caribbean Festival of Arts event (Carifesta) hosted in Guyana. The event is credited to the vision of Forbes Burnham, Guyana's president at that time of bringing together artists, musicians and leading writers from the Caribbean. *Couvade* was commissioned by the Government (having recently advanced its newly independent status to republicanism) in the fervour of cultural pride and nationalism. During this first decade of Independence the 'arts' were regarded as integral to the development of a post-colonial Caribbean (and Guyanese) cultural identity. However, as I've highlighted in the previous chapter, cultural practices like Comfa which are part and parcel of Guyanese folk consciousness are overlooked as important symbols of cultural identity. Instead of artistic expressions, the focus on Guyanese identity has become associated with politically motivated violence and racial disunity; notable remnants of colonialism.

*Couvade*, subtitled *A dream Play of Guyana* is a dramatisation of ancestral forces and prospective regeneration symbolically reflected in the myth of couvade. Gilkes's reworking of the couvade myth provides a complex depiction of the quest for Guyanese cultural identity. The Collins dictionary defines couvade as 'a custom in certain cultures of treating the husband of a woman giving birth as if he were bearing the child.' In Michael Gilkes's 'Note on the ritual of Couvade', prefacing the play, he cites anthropological references by Everard Im Thurn and Richard Schomburgk who observed the practice among the Carib Indians in the then British Guiana. Gilkes notes that in variants of the practice the father undergoes personal ordeals such as fasting or in one account, as observed by Schomburgk 'a public ritual in which the man was cut all over the body with the teeth of an agouti. Blood from his wounds was then collected and rubbed on the child's skin'. The purpose of this was to ensure that the father's courage would be inherited by his child.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See Michael Gilkes citation from Richard Schomburgk's *Travels in British Guiana 1840-1844*, Vol II, translated by Walter Roth, Georgetown, 1923 – *Couvade: A Dream Play of Guyana*, Longman Group 1974, vii.

In the Dagara culture of West Africa, it is the paternal grandfather who plays a symbolic role in the birth of a child. In *Of Water and the Spirit*, Maladoma Patrice Somé writes:

A few months before birth, when the child is still a fetus, a ritual called 'a hearing' is held. The pregnant mother, her brothers, the grandfather and the officiating priest are the participants. The child's father is not present for the ritual, but merely prepares the space. Afterwards, he is informed about what happened. During the ritual, the incoming soul [the child] takes the voice of the mother (some say the soul takes the whole body of the mother, which is why the mother falls into trance and does not remember anything afterward) and answers every question the priest asks.<sup>23</sup>

The incoming soul reveals its identity (name and gender), why it has chosen a specific place and describes the talismanic items that should be prepared for its arrival in the corporeal world. The purpose of the 'hearing' ritual is to ensure that the soul does not forget who they are and why they have returned. I mention this practice because I think it is relevant as a way of inverting a deeper significance or interpretation of the Dreamer's experiences in *Couvade*. My point is that *Couvade* and my novella *Comfa* are not simply aesthetic representations of Guyanese spirituality. They also provide intuitive perceptions/interpretations of society. This relates to my initial inspiration for this work; how can the experience of *Comfa* be interpreted; what does the trance mean; what messages are the possessing spirits trying to convey; in short what is the significance of 'ketching *Comfa*' to the understanding of Guyanese cultural identity?

The role of the priest in Maladoma Somé's account of the 'hearing' ritual is to ask questions of the incoming soul. Similarly, the role of the Mother leader in an organised *comfa* ritual is to identify who the spirit is that has possessed a participant or host and to establish its purpose for doing so. What, in other words, has caused the spirit to manifest? In *Couvade* meaning and interpretation is equally compelling for us to understand the umbilical connectivity of the ancestral past, the present and the future. The myth/ritual of *couvade* is used metaphorically to represent Guyana's quest for cultural identity. Art and politics serve as extreme variables of this quest; one (art) constitutes vision, spiritual truth, intuitiveness and cross culturality through

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<sup>23</sup> Malodoma Patrice Somé, *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, 1994, 20. The grandfather is important in the birthing ritual because 'grandfathers and grandmothers represent ancestral energy'; grandchildren are believed to be incarnating ancestors and a close ancestral bond is desired for the transmission of messages from the world of ancestors. A notable connection can be made here with the grandfather/grandson depiction in Wilson Harris's short story *Couvade* from where Michael Gilkes takes his inspiration.



the apprehension of 'figurative meaning'; the other (politics) reflects empty rhetoric, tricksterism and contextualises identity in essentialist overtones.

The play begins with an Arawak Shaman and his attendants performing a ritual to 'Makanater', the 'Earthmaker' to 'hear the dream of couvade'. Lionel, the play's dreamer and art teacher is referred to as Couvade by the Shaman; his wife Pat is pregnant. The incantation to Makanater is intended to invoke the ancestral power of couvade. Lionel is dreaming the Shaman's incantations as we're told that he is asleep, encased, womb-like in his hammock; *unconsciously* adopting the position of couvade. Lionel as dreamer embodies the ancestral power of couvade, but there's an element of fragility attached to this power, suggesting potential loss. Thus the Shaman chants:

Sleep Couvade  
Dream *your* dream  
When you awake  
Forest will *die*  
Deer tiger tapir howler-monkey  
*Die*  
Fishes will *die*  
Tukuiu, Guacharo will fly away  
Behind the cloud  
Our people *die*  
Canoe of Makanater  
Will not sail across the sky  
Sleep Couvade  
And dream *our* Dream  
(p. 2. My emphasis)

The strength of the power lies in dreaming/dream space and time, in memory, in myth, history and a pre-columbian ancestry. When the dreamer Couvade/Lionel awakes –becomes conscious of another state of being, another sense of time/reality - everything will die. It is therefore primordial power and, as I highlighted in the 'hearing' account by Somé, physical consciousness or birth is a signification of a potential loss of spiritual purpose. But death/dying needn't be an end of the spiritual self, or of time, community and society. And the loss of ancestral power does not have to be absolute since it has primacy in the subconscious and can be invoked through the arts of imagination. Spiritual death holds the possibility of rebirth and regeneration, precipitated by dreaming – 'visionary truth'; the artist's muse as it were.

In *Couvade*, the artist's dream begins as an individuation – *your dream* – and ends in collectivisation – *our dream*. This collectivisation is repeated again at the end of the play by the Shaman (p.65). In this final scene, however, there is an ambiguity about who the dreamer is. For although we see Lionel curled up in a foetal position within a mosquito net at the hospital, this is juxtaposed

with that of a baby's cot (also referred to as crib). It's not clear whether this is Lionel's child. But whether Lionel is both child and procreator the *couvade* symbol is aesthetically inverted as regenerative power - 'dendé, dendé, dendé, uamánia' (p.65).<sup>24</sup>

Lionel's painting of ancestral icons (called the Robe of ancestors) is intended as an aesthetic representation of a collective, cross-cultural consciousness, but his wife Pat, who we might recognise as embodying a general, unintellectual Guyanese point of view, finds the painting abstract. Like the politics his socialist colleague Arthur espouses, Pat considers Lionel's art to be beyond the reach of 'real people' (p.7). Having admonished him about his 'high-sounding', 'fancy' ideas and his preoccupation with Amerindian myths, which she hoped he was not teaching his students, Pat is unable to understand Lionel's sarcastic retort that the students in his art classes were in fact being taught to mimic the rural landscape paintings of England. This implicates the colonial educational legacy (as we saw in the depiction of Brodber's Ella in *Myal*) as imposing a limitation on the expression of Guyanese cultural specificities. Thus directly after this seemingly casual dialogue with Pat Lionel says 'Christ, my head is splitting' (p.8) – which is not merely the result of his hangover from the previous night, but it is a subtle Fanonian wincing at the injuriousness of colonialism and foregrounds the collapse Lionel suffers towards the end of the play.

The play is organised in four parts respectively titled 'The Sleepers', 'The Game of Stone', 'The Masque of Ancestors' and 'Child of the Vessel'. Since *Couvade* is a dream play these four parts might be seen to mirror the four different stages of sleep; the 5<sup>th</sup> part being the REM (Rapid Eye Movement) stage during which the most vivid dreams occur. Although each part has its own symbolic vividness that contributes to the overall dream of the play, the fact that we don't get this 5<sup>th</sup> part to me suggests an incompleteness of the dreaming/sleep cycle or a suspension/frustration of the spiritual quest for cultural identity. Meaning and interpretation is effectively deferred as dreams never tell an entire story. Thus, moments before the play's most dramatic scene which prefigures Lionel's altered state of consciousness (read simply as a breakdown/collapse), he tries to explain his frustrations with the Robe of ancestors painting to Pat:

You see this? What does it look like to you? An abstract painting?  
What Arthur calls 'surrealistic fantasy'...it's not an abstract painting  
...It's a vision. A dream. You think dreams aren't real? They are, Pat  
...But this. This is a fake. [*Indicates painting.*] It's fake because it's not

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<sup>24</sup> In the epigraph, these words are part of a Black Carib incantation, which is translated as 'power, power, let us again have power', p.x.

**Complete.** It's not whole. And it isn't whole because...[*he has to put  
His hand over his eyes as if dizzy*] (p.47, my emphasis in bold)

We see here Lionel's frustration at the incompleteness of his art and the impossibility of encapsulating dream into reality. As the incarnated ancestral symbol of couvade Lionel is seeking a primordial reconnection (his spiritual purpose perhaps). As Tom Chetwynd writes 'dreams tell us what we need, as well as what we desire in order to be complete.'<sup>25</sup> Lionel's dream therefore is an individual quest to 'make contact with the roots of his being and his own true needs.'<sup>26</sup> Further, in his comparative analysis of Harris's short story *Couvade*<sup>27</sup> and Gilkes's play, Russell McDougall acknowledges Charles Nicholl's reading of the colonial quest as relating to the esotericism of alchemy. Referring specifically to Walter Raleigh's El Dorado quest, McDougall writes:

The colonial quest after gold...was mapped ironically as an interior journey of purification in search of wholeness and renewal. It was a quest after the *fifth element*, which would be released from chaos only when the other four were finally broken down, and the corrupt and divided nature of matter redeemed.<sup>28</sup> (my emphasis)

It is not clear from this reading whether this alchemical allegory means that the colonial sought purification *precisely because* their own (innate/interior?) destructive/corrupting force entailed an inclination to decimate indigenous peoples and the predisposition to the barbaric practice of slavery. In any case, the allegory of alchemy does have currency in the structure of Gilkes's *Couvade*, which as already noted takes inspiration from Harris and evidently Harris's Jungian influences. I have used italics to emphasise that, like the 5<sup>th</sup> part needed to complete the dream/sleep cycle, notably it is also a 5<sup>th</sup> element that completes the alchemical process of metal production and the ultimate quest for wholeness/enlightenment.

Rather than the 'pure and simple' reading of Lionel's collapse as mental break down<sup>29</sup>, I am inclined to consider it a possession by ancestral spirits whom he has conjured/invoked when he elected to represent them in his art. The ancestral myth of couvade provided the inspiration for Lionel's deeper, intuitive penetration into the art of his imagination. Before he began working

<sup>25</sup> See in *Dictionary for Dreamers*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1972, p.vii.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, ix.

<sup>27</sup> In *The Sleepers of Roraima: A Carib Trilogy* (1970), Wilson Harris's short story, on which Michael Gilkes play is based, is also titled *Couvade*.

<sup>28</sup> See Russell McDougall's essay 'The Unresolved Constitution': Birth-Myths and Rituals of Modern Guyana: Wilson Harris's *The Sleepers of Roraima* and Michael Gilkes' *Couvade* in *Kunapipi*, Vol XXV: 2, 2003, p.98.

<sup>29</sup> In his introduction to the play this is how Harris describes the response of Lionel's colleagues to what happens to him.

on the Robe painting, Lionel had produced a surrealistic impression of couvade which Arthur found objectionable (p.18). Arthur prefers the Robe painting because he considers its theme of ancestors to be 'more relevant' as opposed to what he thinks are vague, dreamy Amerindian myths (p.19). We can see here the marginalisation of Amerindian contributions to Guyana's cultural, social and political development which was discussed in Chapter One.

Lionel is, however, forced to highlight that the Robe is in fact 'mostly a blend of African and Amerindian motifs. But there are other elements, too, Indian, Chinese...' (original ellipsis, p.19). I find the ellipsis or break off at the end of this statement significant because it suggests a suspension of definition and is thus symbolic of Lionel's fear of his own illuminated (visionary) interpretation of Guyanese cultural identity and how this would be received by his colleagues. In any case, the cross culturality of the Comfa symbol is implicit here and for me ketching comfa- otherwise read as pure and simple breakdown – is inevitable.

In Wilson Harris's 'Approach to the play', by way of an introduction he regards Lionel's collapse as inevitable because 'it highlights the core of barren resistance to profoundest creativity in his civilisation [Guyanese society] at large' (p.xii). 'Profoundest creativity' is embedded in the expression of ancestral perspectives such as couvade and comfa, but can it be experienced by all? Esoteric illumination is sought by the seeker of spiritual truth, requisite in which is the journey into the interior, the subconscious. (In the play this is referred to as the 'Forest' each time Lionel dreams). The deeper into this subconscious space the seeker of truth journeys the more likely is a break with reality where profound creativity becomes possible. Moments before the play's most dramatic scene Lionel makes this impassioned plea:

Pat, I feel as if...as if just a little longer, just a bit longer, and I'll be able to do it. Then the vision will take shape. Become whole. You remember Arthur said once that a robe was meant to be worn? Now I know what he meant. Even though he himself didn't. I can feel there's a door in my mind that wont open: the door between dream and reality: living and dead: between past and present. And I have got to open that door and walk through it. (p.48)

This plea is an intuitive conjuration of the ancestral spirits poignantly implied in Lionel's desire to walk through the door of his subconscious. This desire is made urgent by the protracted stage direction in which Guyanese cross cultural identity symbols are given lyrical, aesthetic representation (pp.49-50). The effect is a new rhythm of culture produced from the original sounds of 'Chinese chime-bells...gourd-rattle, drum, bamboo horn and...flute' (p.49).

This new rhythm is embodied by a 'human totem made up of three dancers: the lowest [part of the totem] in Arawak, the middle in West African and the topmost in Southern Indian ritual costume'; tiered in this way to reflect the respective historical peopling of Guyana (p.50).

This new rhythm invokes the manifestation of the Ashanti priest and the Arawak Shaman, hence the Ashanti priest begins by saying that 'the door of spirits has opened' and 'he who was now dead has risen up' (p.50). Lionel's possession occurs when the Robe is borne down on him. He is overwhelmed by the Robe of ancestors – the manifestations it seems to me of the spirits, which results in a 'hideous cry of anguish' as he claws at his face, streaking it with thick paint like blood (p.51). The Robe is a metaphoric womb out of which Lionel is reborn, falling to his knees like a sacrificial bull. Lionel's rebirth is a sacrifice because it's an individualised quest for genuine change in a society crippled by its spirit thieving colonial legacy; instruments of political violence and economic disenfranchisement (metaphorically recurrent as a 'game of stone') and racial disunity.

Lionel's sacrifice in this scene is also a dramatic reconfiguration of the myth of couvade, an intuitive encapsulation of Schomburgh's account as outlined when I introduced the Play. The courage Lionel intuitively intends to pass on to his child is the regenerative power of the ancestral symbol of couvade. Other elements of couvade are also intuitively reworked into the play. For example, there are several references to Lionel being persuaded to eat by Pat, his wife (p.8; 46) or to his loss of appetite (p. 47), relating to the fasting that the couvade ritual entails. Symbolically, as the Child of the Vessel (the title of final part of the play), Lionel is moved by the spirit of ancestors to give an account of their experiences through the arts of imagination. As we're told by his brother in law, Eddie, 'Lionel paints best when the spirit moves him' (p.18).

Gilkes's play might be read as an invocation of hope. This is an individuated, fragile hope, however, as depicted in the near miscarriage of Pat's baby during an argument between Arthur (the political spinner) and Lionel (the artist). Art and politics are here written as oppositional forces to fertility, growth, true independence, expansive vision and cultural identity formation. Guyana's newly independent status at the time of the play's first performance is gestational, but the potential for spiritual liberation, rebirth and newness of ideas about cultural identity is embedded in ancestral symbols like couvade and comfa as un-apprehended expressions of the Guyanese subconscious imagination. This fragile, tentative hope then is one weighted down not only by cross cultural ancestral pressures, but also by the inherent blight of colonialism which underlies the depiction of political violence and seemingly

futile (though not quite *infertile*) vision for racial cohesion. Gilkes's use of the couvade myth for the form of the play is a compact endorsement of Wilson Harris's vision to develop complex creative perspectives as a means to figuratively counteract these various cultural and historic blights.

The final text I will be considering in this Chapter is Pauline Melville's 'English Table Wuk' from her short story collection *The Migration of Ghosts* (1998). This collection of short stories provides variations on the theme of migration as the necessary, culturally symbolic journey in search of identity. As Stuart Hall argues, for Caribbean peoples the search for 'lost origins' is recaptured through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth' and it is necessarily circular. The identity quest for Caribbean peoples embeds the haunting legacies of colonialism and its problematising cross cultural currents. Our quest for identity is not necessarily to *know*, to be *certain* who we are essentially, rather it is so we can understand how to give expression to the many selves we encompass. Our impetus, as reflected in Melville's collection, is to migrate in our own ultimately esoteric yearning for self fulfilment.

These migrations have not only been physical, as mine was when I arrived in the UK to 'join my mother', they have also been spiritual and in that sense *transmigratory*. Each time we journey, whether to the European metropolis (of England in my case), or back after many years to Guyana we encounter/discover a new impermanent self. Wherever and whenever we go our past becomes an unrelenting, liminal presence. The effect of the many shifts makes us see and 're-see', forces us to 'be' and 'be again'. As John Figueroa, one of the earliest Caribbean writers to migrate to the UK observes:

...without going too deeply into the unconscious...my visit...in 1946, and my living here until 1953-54, had two major effects on me. One, it taught me an awful lot about the Caribbean, and, in fact, made it easy for me to become *un hombre del Caribe*'. The second effect it had on me was to give me a certain amount of self belief.<sup>30</sup>

The experience of migration is for me a deeply unconscious provocation. It took fifteen years for me to fully recognise the impact migration to the UK had on me. I gradually became aware of a subconscious desire to engage in my own spiritual quest for identity. The compulsion came when I chose to attend University in Scotland. In Scotland it seemed to me that I had a flimsy sense of my roots and foundation. During my time at University I travelled to

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<sup>30</sup> John Figueroa's essay on his experience of migrating to the UK, 'Becoming a Caribbean Man', in *Voices of the Crossing: The Impact of Britain on Writers from Asia, The Caribbean and Africa*, Ferdinand Dennis and Naseem Khan, (eds), Serpent's Tail, London, 2000, pp51-52. John Figueroa is now deceased.

Spain and following a vision I had in which my grandfather guided me back to Guyana I knew a return was imperative. I travelled into the interior of Guyana which needless to say abounds with the esoteric figurations discussed above. The spirit of my grandfather was with me throughout this time and I felt as though my foundation was rooting. I returned to London this time as a (sort of reborned) Guyanese; when I return to Guyana, I am from London (though I cannot quite say that means I feel 'English' or see myself thus). Each self of our Caribbean identity dies and is reborn into new and shifting space, time and experience. What centres us is our spiritual connectivity to our multiple, cross cultural and transmigrating selves.

As outlined in Chapter One, an 'English Dinner' forms part of the rituals in the Comfa religion. The 'English Dinner' is performed in memory of the English spirits whom practitioners acknowledge as contributors to Guyana's historical, political and economic development. So far in this Chapter my focus has been primarily on the African and Amerindian spiritual ancestors. My discussion of the English or European influence has been to convey the cultural disfigurements of imperialism and colonialism. Although, as Stuart Hall argues, the 'European presence' in the Caribbean has been about 'exclusion' and 'expropriation', they do nonetheless constitute not only a physical presence but also a spiritual one. Europeans owned lands, lived, worked, procreated and, importantly, died in the Caribbean thereby assuming a place among its ancestral spirits. The significance of the remnant spirits of the English is explored in Melville's 'English Table Wuk'. Like Michael Gilkes and Wilson Harris, Pauline Melville, also born in Guyana is of mixed ancestry (her mother white English; her father Amerindian), which perhaps explains the intuitive and far reaching engagement in her narratives with Guyanese cultural identity.

In 'English Table Wuk', Adriana has returned to Guyana (for vacation) from studying Sociology in England. She is staying in the capital Georgetown with her Auntie (May) who is a middle class Guyanese. Adriana is somewhat slighted that her Aunt employs servants, one of whom is Gita. Whilst Auntie May busies herself in preparation for a trip to Miami, Gita asks for permission to take the afternoon off so that she can perform an English Table Wuk ritual. Unaware of this exchange between Gita and her Aunt, Adriana later glimpses Gita packing her Aunt's most precious silverware and crockery into a sack and believes she is stealing them. When Adriana confronts her, Gita assures her that she will return the items after the Table Wuk ritual. Sensing Adriana's incomprehension and unwavering suspicion Gita invites her to Mahaica (in the country) to observe the ritual.

Published some twenty five years after Michael Gilkes's *Couvade* the themes of socialist politics, economic disparities, class and cross cultural complexities are no less apparent in 'English Table Wuk'. The story's dialogic opening critically denounces the funeral of Princess Diana being broadcast on Guyanese television. The conversation is taking place between Adriana and three of her friends, at least two of whom regard the funeral as farcical and pompous (p.197). They are radical, anti-imperialists believing the pomp and ceremony to be a sign of the English monarchy's reinvention of itself (p.199). However, one of the participants compares the funeral to that of Cheddi Jagan, one of Guyana's presidents, who like Princess Diana died in 1997:

Every nation does like a good funeral. Look at us. Our president  
Cheddi Jagan dies. *Half* the people din like him but what happens?  
Everyone flock out in the street weepin' and wailin' to see the body  
pass. Death changes your mind about people.

(p.198, my emphasis)

This calls to mind the regenerating and transformative signification of death as highlighted in my discussion of *Couvade* and *An Echo*. In this rendering death also provides an occasion to reflect on static essentialist attitudes. The fact that '*half* the people' didn't like Jagan is a seemingly casual reference to the racially dichotomous politics of Guyana's two main political parties. Cheddi Jagan was the leader of the PPP (now PPP Civic) voted for mainly by East Indians; the largest *half* of the two dominant racial groups. Melville's detached style of writing effectively toys with this dichotomy. It is significant that this account of the national response to Jagan's funeral is given by 'a lanky East Indian in his thirties' (198). Although Adriana's Auntie, who is silently observing him doesn't remember his name, we're told that he was one of her niece's 'radical friends'. This connotes a deviation from the racialised affinities with either one of Guyana's two main political parties. But, I would say that it is *only* a connotation. Before independence both the PNC (African led) and PPP (East Indian dominant) espoused anti-imperialist politics, which led to Guyana's advancing to republicanism once independence was achieved. The radicalism of Adriana and her friends does not veer from a socialist, anti-imperialist and arguably national politics. As they watch Diana's funeral, one of them says:

We jus' watching the English monarchy re-invent itself. She [Diana]  
is part of the process. *Why is it people don' see reality?* The rich create  
the poor, then they want extra praise for throwing the poor a few  
crumbs. At least we are a republic. We might be an ex-colony but at  
least we managed to leave all that sentimental rubbish and fantasy  
behind. *Let's drink to reality.* A republican future and equality.

(p. 199, my emphases)



Melville's narrative technique ironises ideological positions and highlights the fact that ideologies often impose oppositionality and intransigence. Shortly after reading the above we become aware that the discussion is taking place in a house which has servants. This veritable class divide problematises the notion of a socialist driven politics. Also, the repetition of 'reality' emphasises that there are two kinds; *theirs* and *ours*. The irony in this instance is that these two realities are prevalent in a dichotomised Guyanese society.

When Gita asks her 'mistress', Auntie May for permission to leave early to do the English Table Wuk, we're told that Auntie May 'did not know what Gita meant by English Table Wuk but imagined vaguely that it involved embroidering a pretty table cloth or something' (p.199). In my discussion of Michael Gilkes's *Couvade*, I highlighted that the couvade aesthetic was analogous to an esoteric quest indulged in by a middle class artist; something apparently incomprehensible to ordinary Guyanese. This is reversed in Melville's use of the English Table Wuk ritual where it is performed by working class Guyanese. Also, in Chapter One it was stated that comfa is practiced mainly by African Guyanese. In Melville's narrative this is not upheld because Gita, whom we can tentatively assume is an East Indian, participates in the ritual. The ethnicity of Gita has to be a tentative assumption because although we're told that 'her hair was tied back in an untidy bun', easily suggesting East Indianness when coupled with her name, her ethnicity in a place like Guyana with its incumbent cross culturality could be a mix of any of these.

Adriana and her friends' indulgent political discussion about Diana's funeral is juxtaposed with the servitude of Gita and Barbara, the cook – who are 'back in the kitchen' (p.200). It seems that Gita is unconcerned with politics and watching the television because she 'did not possess a television, nor did she read the newspaper' (p.201). But this also suggests that these are middle class pursuits to which the working class either do not aspire or which they cannot afford. Gita and Barbara are instead discussing popular myths about the rites involved in death and dying (p.202). This effectively foregrounds the significance of the English Table Wuk which emphasises the rite of appeasing and giving due consideration to the dead. One of the key elements of my novella is the ever-presentness of the dead (ancestors) whose spirit forces are relied upon to assist the living. We saw too in Dennis Scott's *An Echo* the social, cultural and spiritual significance of the Nine Night ritual which was ultimately to ensure sacred restfulness for the spirit of the recently deceased. Without this they will otherwise remain tormented and wreak havoc on the living. These are experiences of the Caribbean subconscious. Barbara and Gita's conversation reflects the *lived reality* of Guyanese cultural experiences. But through the medium of a 'grainy' television Adriana and her friends are

experiencing/obsessing about the '*spectacle* of [Diana's] funeral' (p.200, emphasis mine) which ultimately represents a blurred, double, superimposed vision –rather an *unlived reality*.

In Chapter One it was observed that, having been forced underground during the period of slavery/colonialism, Comfa tended to be practised clandestinely. Most Guyanese I've spoken with tend to deny<sup>31</sup> any knowledge about or involvement with the perspective. This is confirmed in Melville's narrative – for neither Adriana nor her Aunt appears to know anything about it. But interestingly Gita is quite frank and open about her participation in the ritual. She is in fact bold enough to 'borrow' (she actually does not ask, but takes them) the items she needs to perform the ritual from her affluent employer. When Adriana confronts her about taking her Aunt's wares Gita repeats in the candid and open manner what she had earlier told Auntie May. This time, however, she replaces the indefinite article '*some* Table Wuk' (p.197) with the definite article 'the' when she tells Adriana 'I going to Mahaica for *the* English Table Wuk, Miss Adriana' (p.204). It seems that Adriana is expected to know what this is. There is a tense interchange of power and knowledge between Gita and Adriana. Uncertain about and uncomfortable with Gita's explanation for why she has taken the silverware, we're told that 'Adriana adjusted her spectacles on her nose, a nervous habit, and tried to appear both firm and sympathetic' (p.204). She wants Gita to immediately return the items she believes are stolen. Gita insists that this is a misunderstanding and responds by seizing 'Adriana's arm in a powerful grip', saying 'come with me. I show you something' (p.205). Adriana is 'weakened and allowed herself to be dragged on to the crowded mini bus' bound for Mahaica where the ritual will take place (p.205).

Significantly, as a student of Sociology in England, the social *subject* is here compelling Adriana to refocus (*adjust her spectacles*) her *object* of interest. Adriana had earlier been trying to 'analyse what was happening' on the soon to be 'dead television' -a blackout later caused it to be automatically switched off- (pp.198-200). Adriana's socialist ideals are constantly being challenged because she is both sympathetic to and suspicious of the motivations of Gita and the other lower/working class participants who have between them amassed the expensive items needed for the Table Wuk: 'she wondered anxiously whether she had fallen amongst a gang of thieves' (p.205). Effectively, however, Adriana becomes an unwitting observer of a social and cultural phenomenon which has the substance of a sociological research.

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<sup>31</sup> Perhaps there is rather a vague, searching recollection.

On an open patch of land, not far from a former 'orange plantation' and opposite a burial ground, an elaborate, 'solid mahogany' table is being prepared by the participants of the English Table Wuk ritual. Adriana watches, 'mystified' in the background. Earlier in her Aunt's house it had been Gita who was 'back in the kitchen' at a distance from Adriana and her friends. Having removed the 'Royal Doulton' crockery and silverware from a 'bag decorated with a Union Jack' where she had placed them, Gita ceremoniously places the items on the table. Melville's attention to the particularities required to appease the English spirit are closely aligned with those described by Kean Gibson in her observation of an English Dinner. Gibson writes:

cutlery and dishes were set at the head of the table. There was a knife, fork, plate, cup and saucer, and a teapot. Various foods (in small dishes) and drinks associated with the English nation were on the table. There was toast, cheese sandwiches, cheese straws [a sort of sable], cookies, stuffed eggs, scrambled eggs, fried chicken, a cake, peanuts, walnuts, fruit cocktail, sweets, bowls of fruit (banana, pineapple, pawpaw, grapes, apples and sapodilla), a bottle of black and white scotch whisky, a bottle of cream soda (representing champagne), and a pack of Benson and Hedges cigarettes. There was also a vase of flowers and a bottle of perfume.<sup>32</sup>

Here's Melville's description:

Pride of place in the centre of the table was given to a rich, dark Plum fruit-cake with plenty of whisky in it, resplendent on its tall, silver-plated cake stand. Gita carefully placed Auntie May's silver candelabras on either side of it. Gradually, the long table was laid as if for a Victorian high tea. Plates of hard biscuits, every sort of sandwich, cucumber and tomato salads, dishes of preserves, relish, plums, prunes, stewed apricots, silver teapots, decorated plates of Staffordshire china, Royal Doulton china, silver milk-jugs, silver tankards, all crowded on to the table. (p.206)

There is a notable distinction between the two descriptions. Melville's literary skill exquisitely brings to life the vivid setting of the ritual. The word 'silver' is repeated several times to convey the sparkling richness of the display. The same is done with the word 'china'. It describes a luminous invocation to the spirit adding to Adriana's mystification and, in a sense, *illumination*. Gibson's description is a sociological listing of what might be considered ordinary 'cutlery and dishes'. Melville's use of words like 'Victorian', 'Staffordshire' and 'Royal Doulton' leaves the reader with a much more specific and satiable impression of Englishness.

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<sup>32</sup> See in *Comfa Religion*, p.121.

This impression of Englishness is soon complicated, however, when we learn that the purpose of the display/ritual was in fact to 'keep the *Scottish* doctor' in the nearby burial ground 'happy'. We're told that this is because 'his jumbie [spirit] supposed to rise up from the burial ground and inject passers-by' if not appeased (p.207, my emphasis). The ethnicity of the 'white' spirits in the Comfa practice is always given as 'English' but this also refers to Scottish (essentially 'British') spirits; after all Scots also played their part in the British imperial and colonial mission. It might be said in fact that white spirits, other than the Spanish who have their own category in the Comfa pantheon are generally identified as English. Thus in Gibson's English Dinner account the host of the dinner had dreamt of an American spirit who was offering her money. The purpose of the dinner was to make an offering to the spirit in return for prosperity in her occupation as an informal trader'.<sup>33</sup>

When Gita finally explains that the purpose of the ritual was to appease the English dead, Adriana observes a further complexity. As they wait beside the 'unkempt burial ground' for the mini bus back to Georgetown, we're told that 'Adriana leaned over to try and decipher the names on one or two of the [tomb] stones. She made out some English names and one Dutch family grave' (p.208). Her curiosity now germinated (an illumination of sorts), Adriana wonders, '[b]ut what about the Dutch people near by...Is nothing done for them?' Gita's response is witty and provocative: '[y]ou head ain good or what? Everybody knows that the spirits of the Dutch are unappeasable' (p.209). Like Adriana the reader is left almost stupefied to ponder the justification for this cultural/social assumption. Ultimately, we are left with the decayed image of European imperialism and colonialism represented by the 'remnants of old tombstones sticking up like broken teeth planted in the ground' (p.208).

Melville's 'English Table Wuk' thus reminds us that Guyanese cultural identity is layered in complexity. The sharp, frank and ironic narrative style Melville uses has the effect of destabilizing political ideologies and fixed assumptions. As we saw with *Couvade* meaning and interpretation is also deferred here. In Gibson's sociological account of the English Dinner we're given a definitive purpose for the ritual – for prosperity. Other than the appeasement of English spirits there's no suggestion that the ritual is being performed for material gain in Melville's story. Instead, Melville uses the ritual as a literary aesthetic to explore the complexity of Guyana's cross culturality, as well as to give expression to a phenomenon that is embedded in the Guyanese subconscious imagination. My novella *Comfa* advances this exploration with the additional theme of spirit possession – ketching Comfa.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 120.

When used as literary aesthetic Caribbean spiritual perspectives express certain particularities of Caribbean experience. As noted in the Introduction of my thesis, Caribbean fiction also contributes to the field of social anthropology in their exploration of significant aspects of Caribbean cultural identity. Thus anthropologist Sylvia M Schomburg-Scherff writes:

we anthropologists can learn tremendously from [Caribbean] novelists...[they] not only explore the histories of their respective islands, the legacy of slavery, the colonial past and the post/colonial conditions of the present but also the ongoing processes of creolization and identity formation...using the medium of fiction to tell their complex narratives of identity and write in a rhetoric of the imagination.<sup>34</sup>

The above texts have explored these concerns through the themes of spirit possession/trance, spirit thievery, myth and ritual process. The thematic and structural devices of the narratives are effective formal experimentations that particularly disrupt the convention of linearity. For Wilson Harris this is a means by which the Caribbean writer is able to develop their own models of writing and 'arts of originality'<sup>35</sup>. The effect is that complex creative strategies are developed in which the historical, sociological and cultural perspectives of the Caribbean are given powerfully vivid expression. The following Commentary on the novella provides a detailed consideration of the way the imaginative process was used to compose my own contribution to the development of an artistically original Caribbean literary aesthetic.

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<sup>34</sup> See Sylvia M Schomburg-Scherff, 'Women Versions of Creole Identity in Caribbean Fiction: A cultural-Anthropological Perspective in *A Pepper-Pot of Cultures: Aspects of Creolization in the Caribbean*, Gordon Collier and Ulrich Fleischmann (eds), Matatu 27-28; Amsterdam & New York: Editions Rodopi 2003, p.368

<sup>35</sup> *History Fable and Myth*, p.11.

## Chapter Five

### *Something Buried in the Yard:* Commentary on the Novella *Comfa*

The composition of the novella was an attempt to write a narrative of the Comfa perspective as an intuitive engagement with some of the critical and analytical themes, issues and observations outlined in the foregoing chapters of my research. As fiction is a medium available to me I wanted to make use of the creative process to re-inscribe the otherwise neglected and unapprehended practice of Comfa. This endeavour has been essentially to demonstrate one means by which the practice can be used as a resource to give expression to Guyanese social and cultural experiences. To put this in Erna Brodber's terms my intention was to use fiction to *serve* the sociological perspective; thus making the sociological experience of Comfa un-footnoted and perhaps more accessible.<sup>1</sup> Even so, the idea of 'accessibility' posed a problem for me because in composing the novella I did not intend to produce a replication of conventional (European/Western) Realist forms. I attempted to develop a complex creative strategy which would convey Guyanese (though it is focussed on an African-Guyanese family) 'realities' and perhaps a culturally specific way of representing them. I chose the form of a novella because this seemed appropriate for condensing my ideas about Comfa's individual, collective/communal significance. For me, the novella is a representation of spiritual and psychical journeys that facilitate healing, reconciliation and the cultural renaissance of Guyanese Comfa.

The novella combines dialogic, stand-alone episodes usually found in drama with the prosaic internalisation of modernist and post-modern techniques. The internalisation of the narrative reflects the subconscious imagination wherein the complexity of Guyanese cultural identity is dramatised or performed through the experience of ketching comfa. As stated in the previous chapter ritual drama is interpretable through the use of narrative, hence the reason for combining these forms for the novella. Thus I conceived the novella as a formal experiment that would identify the sudden alterations in consciousness, shifting spaces, temporalities and perspectives; the

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<sup>1</sup> I do not mean to suggest that one discipline is better than the other, but that fiction involves a different kind of engagement in considering social, cultural and historical experiences. The disciplines are necessarily complementary. The reader of fiction might choose to find the implied (or hidden) footnotes in order to gain a fuller sociological and anthropological grasp of the subject or accept the creative/imaginative process as sufficiently informing.

interrelatedness of the living and the dead and the complex reality of Guyanese cultural identity that underlies the Comfa perspective.

I chose the 'Drum Work', as observed by Kean Gibson in *Comfa Religion*, because I was able to make some personal connections that I identified with my own family's experiences. But the experience of reading Gibson's 'account' was isolating; I felt as if I was looking at my family from a distance, objectively. I also felt that there was an unexplored layer which was not quite tangible, but nevertheless real. I wondered whether this unexplored layer was the untapped subconsciousness of the 'subjects' in Gibson's account. I mean by this that the 'account' was an objective observation *about* the subjects but I wanted a deeper exploration of the subconscious imagination; a meaningful penetration of psyche wherein perhaps lay the substance of something that had not been apprehended; hence the metaphoric title for this Chapter - 'Something Buried in the Yard.' The title also refers to the 'caul' (veil) which has been buried in the Quamina family's back yard in the novella. In Guyana it is believed that children born with the 'veil' - a flimsy coating over their face - will be highly spiritual, meaning that they will be able to see such things that the ordinary eyes are not able to. To prevent them from thus 'seeing', their face is steamed in hot water.<sup>2</sup> It is also believed that these children and later adults will be 'flighty' - not *quite mad*, but somewhat on the edge. The veil is also regarded as a form of protection for such people - like a guard against spiritual harm. It can be used for good and bad spiritual purposes, for which reason if it is discovered (by a 'knowing' parent/grandparent or other family member) at birth it is buried. It is otherwise removed and discarded as part of the cleaning up process after birth. The significance of the caul is made apparent along with the proverbial 'see and blind, hear and deaf' that recurs throughout the novella.

When I read the 'Drum Work' account I felt it presented an image of stasis, which seems to me to be partly the result of the incomprehension and fear and thus an unwillingness to acknowledge ancestral knowledges. I think it is also due to the seemingly social objectification of the 'subjects' (the family hosting the ceremony). Their 'story' in the context of Harris's essay might be seen to represent the 'apparently real.' Gibson sociological observation informs us that 'although the [Drum work] ceremony was seen as being unsuccessful, it has not been held again because of the expense of having it[...]. Thus the crisis continues for the sisters.'<sup>3</sup> However, I use the imaginative process to develop a narrative plot that enables me to figuratively

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<sup>2</sup> It's my understanding that this happened to one of my aunts when she was a child. It seems that the steam was only partially effective; my aunt was still able to see spirits, but her spirituality was believed to be 'spoiled'.

<sup>3</sup> *Comfa Religion*, p.107, 2001.

(re)interpret the 'apparent reality' of the comfa participants in Gibson's study. In doing so, I am able to explore this image of stasis as well as to project the reconciliations that the sociological process cannot imaginatively anticipate.

The plot of the novella thus follows: four sisters (from the Quamina family) arrange a Comfa ceremony to appease their ancestors whom they believe to be responsible for the inexplicable deaths of young children within the family. The first of these deaths occurred in the late 1950s when the children were young. The youngest sister, Bess, discovers their brother Ife with his neck seemingly 'broken'. It appears that Bess 'saw' Ife's neck being broken by spirits which no one else in the family are able to see. As there were no obvious 'physical' signs that Ife's neck had been broken, a spiritual explanation was sought. The Quamina family were told by an obeah practitioner that their ancestors reclaimed Ife because the family had reneged on a promise they made to uphold the comfa drumming ritual in their honour. Ife was spiritually gifted with the ability to 'see' spirits, though it appears that it is only Bess who was aware of this gift.

Born with a veil (caul) Bess also has the gift of seeing/communicating with spirits. However, as with her younger brother Ife, Bess' parents and grandparents do not recognise/acknowledge her 'gift' and regard her ability to see spirits as negative. The family disregard the same advice given to them by an Indian Pandit and an old African (Congo) spiritual practitioner to develop her spirituality. Instead they take the advice of a Lutheran Pastor to steam Bess' face and thereby to remove her ability to see spirits. This 'steaming' is only superficially effective, however. Bess learns to 'see and blind', 'hear and deaf' – a recurrent phrase in the novella that reflects the way she masks what she sees and hears spiritually.

Many years later another child dies inexplicably. This time in England, to where the eldest Quamina sister, Titty, had migrated. Titty had previously believed that the responsibility of honouring the ancestors would not have relevance in England. But the death of her daughter forces her to make a return journey to Guyana to perform the comfa ceremony to appease the ancestors so that other such deaths are prevented. Although the ceremony is not thought to be successful in terms of the manner in which the ritual was performed, there are a number of significant reconciliations and potential for healing as a result.

The novella is set at the time of the 1992 election in Guyana. This is in order to depict the broader implications of cultural stagnation that impact generally on the lives of Guyanese people. The election is fore-dropped; it's constantly talked about as embodying the 'apparently real', whilst the Comfa ceremony



is back-dropped to emphasise its subconsciousness - that which is yet to be apprehended. The 1992 election was a landmark that ended the African-led<sup>4</sup> PNC (now People's National Congress/Reform) twenty-eight year rule. The election was won by the East Indian-led<sup>5</sup> PPP/C (People's Progressive Party/Civic). As the novella depicts, elections in Guyana have been largely a pernicious issue concerning race – Guyanese are expected to vote in accordance with their racial ancestry. The result is that no sensible politics is discernible as individuals side with baffling ideologies and fomenting discussions that more often than not result in violence. However, in the novella there's an undercurrent of co-operativeness/interdependence between the factionalised ethnic groups which tends to be grossly marred at election time.

In my reading of the 'Drum Work' account, I was also struck by the apparent impassivity of the dead ancestors, who nevertheless exacted serious, terrifying punishments, such as death. In the account a young girl is possessed by an evil spirit, not an ancestor. In my novella this is depicted as rape to mark the distinction. I also fictionalise this form of possession by adding the 'wickedness' of sexual abuse which the young girl suffers at the hand of an older male cousin-cum-'uncle'. This is compounded in my novella by the fact that the young girl is essentially 'abandoned' (though she is in the care of her aunts) by her mother (a deputy head mistress who works in the City) and left to the whims of the evil spirit and the older cousin ('uncle').

My recreation of the young girl's possession from Gibson's account was made possible by the association I made with the erratic, wilful, sexually promiscuous behaviour of young girls that is sometimes considered by spiritual practitioners to be the cause of supernatural forces.<sup>6</sup> As observed by Gibson:

The 13-year-old granddaughter of the sister [hosting the Drum Work]... had been behaving erratically and it was hoped that she would be cured at the Ceremony. When the girl stood up, the Leader poured high wine on her head, then broke and smeared seven eggs on her head and face to cleanse her of the evil spirit that was disturbing her and [to] protect her from future infiltration.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> An African-Guyanese, Linden Forbes Samson Burnham led the party for nearly 20 years. African-led also means that the party was voted for *mostly* (not exclusively) by African-Guyanese (black people).

<sup>5</sup> Again, PPP/C was led to election victory by Dr Cheddi Jagan, an East Indian Guyanese. The party is *mostly* voted for by East-Indian Guyanese.

<sup>6</sup> This is not to suggest that a mythical explanation is sought for sexuality. It's rather the sudden, erratic and drastic change in behaviour that's not perceptibly natural or pubescent.

<sup>7</sup> See *Comfa Religion*, 2001, p.105.

In my novella the young girl's pregnancy with twins is a recreation (there's no mention of her being pregnant, or sexually abused/active in Gibson's account). The pregnancy is fuzzily suggested to be the cause of a 'spiritual rape' by an evil spirit (a bacoo) and simultaneous sexual abuse by her cousin. For me the deeper significance of this is that the pregnancy, marking a stagnation or 'stasis' cannot come to term; hence at the outset of the novella we're told that '[i]s bad thing she carrying. The thing buss up inside she belly. Was coming like one but is two bad thing inside she.'

Thus Maya's peculiar pregnancy with twins is metaphorically related to the dualistic and divisive politics in Guyana. This is stagnantly systematised and in my view needs to be revised –hence the vision Bess has in the novella in which two black snakes are removed from Maya's womb. Of course I had inspiration from Brodber's depiction of Ella O'Grady who had to be healed of the 'mass of grey muck' in *Myal* (1988, p.4). Ella's strangely swollen womb metaphorically implicates the colonial condition as a form of spirit thievery as I discussed in Chapter Four. Having zombified Ella this thievery had to be countered by the traditional practice of myalism. There's also a link with Gilkes's *Couvade* in which Pat's pregnancy metaphorically suggests a fragile hope of renewal and regeneration. Brigit's pregnancy in Scott's *An Echo* is more suggestive of a firmer renewal and reconciliation (between the rival siblings of Brigit's affection). In some ways Maya's pregnancy in the novella is a culmination of these metaphors. For in it lies a stagnant, strange muck conceived out of wickedness which cannot come to term despite the possibility of renewal and regeneration pregnancies are supposed to engender.

I am also drawing on the sacredness (or special significance at least) of twins in certain African communities.<sup>8</sup> According to Marilyn Houlberg, in Vodou cosmology twins are considered to be 'powerful and dangerous.'<sup>9</sup> Like Papa Legba, twins are associated with 'transitional places such as thresholds.' They are regarded as 'guardians of the crossroads where the world above meets the world below, where the world of the living intersects with the world of the dead.'<sup>10</sup> In Vodou both Papa Legba and the twins ('Marasa') are invoked before any vodou service can begin; having the power thereby to 'open the spiritual road.'<sup>11</sup> In my novella, the twins are mythically aborted (foreseen by

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<sup>8</sup> My mother is a twin and it is believed that they are they are protected from the spiritual harm that might affect others. There are also limitations (whether still adhered to or not) on the types of food they can eat. Consuming these forbidden foods would decrease their spiritual power.

<sup>9</sup> See 'The Ritual Cosmos of the Twins and other Sacred Children' in *Fragments of Bone: Neo African Religions in a New World*: Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, University of Illinois Press, 2005, p.13.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> The Marasa is a creolisation of 'Mobassa' which in Kikonga means 'those who are adivided' or 'the one who comes as two.' Unfortunately there's really not enough space for me to fully explain how I'm

Bess) *before* our reading of the ceremony, but Bess has the vision *after* the ceremony has taken place. The abortion of the twins is important because Maya has to be cleansed before her preparation for spiritual work and to carry future children. Thus Bess is mythically/prophetically informed that: '[Maya] must adorn the colour that is the sky, the colour that is the sun, the colour that is the moon, the colour that is our earth, the colour that is the trees where a new fruit awaits the kindling and the colour that is the dark womb of memories.' Again, in Vodou, children born after twins are believed to be stronger, thus 'twins and children born after [them] are part of a powerful continuum.'<sup>12</sup> I've engaged this cosmology in my novella to emphasise the need to revise the nihilistic political practices in Guyana in favour of a more potent symbol of renewal and regeneration. It's noteworthy that my treatment of the twin cosmology conflates two possible responses to twin births in African communities: for example the Yoruba deify twins at birth, whilst they are destroyed by the Igbo.<sup>13</sup>

The death of the young boy in Gibson's account was described as a 'blood sacrifice', without much further elaborations or explanations. The sisters accepted the obeah woman's explanation that the ancestors took the child because the family failed to upkeep the tradition. I could recount countless occasions of such supernatural deaths, these are not always ancestral, but it is not unusual to hear that ancestors have 'taken back' a child. But certainly, as we saw with the deaths in *An Echo*, I felt that the cause of the death needed exploration. Because of my personal knowledge of such deaths, I decided to make the 'last dying' (my own creation of Titty's daughter's death) a catalyst for the sisters to have the ceremony. This was a problematic aspect in constructing the story because I needed to reconcile whether this aspect of the perspective was the cause of the incomprehension and the fear of such cultural practices. But although difficult, I realised and accepted that Caribbean culture is complex and paradoxical (a 'continual flow of paradoxes') as Benítez-Rojo argues. Therefore, to understand/study the Caribbean is to embrace, however difficult, some of these paradoxes and complexities.

Furthermore, I argued in the previous chapter that in African communities, it is believed that failure to remember the dead (ancestors) may account for a series of disasters within the community or family. As Fischer (1998, 95) observes about the Akan of Ghana, 'death is an 'evil' that 'disrupts the harmony of the family', because it's not always possible to know whether it is

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using the concept, but hopefully the partial explanation is borne out in the reading of the novella. See *Ibid*, pp.14-15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*. p.17.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*. p.29.

the cause of *natural* or *supernatural* forces, especially when it is of young children. Given that they had such an impact on the lives of the family in Gibson's account, in writing the novella there was a compulsion to invoke/exhume the dead ancestors, to bring them to life and to make them more than impassive participants in the cosmic order (or structuring) in the narrative. I base this on the continuity with the African worldview which is conceived as a 'unified spiritual totality' – that is the interrelatedness of spirit and matter, life and death, as argued by Marimba Ani.<sup>14</sup>

The Comfa ceremony in my novella, as with the ritual practices discussed in Chapter Four facilitates a journey into the communal psyche to recover the images of the past and to provide a re-vision of the present and the future. Of course, the lack of economic means to support the ceremonies presents a dilemma for the sisters, because they have an unpaid 'debt' to the ancestors. It is not necessary for the ceremonies to be elaborate, as this will depend on the extent of the tragedy that has befallen the family. The death of the young children is symbolic of the need for purification, healing and renewal of family ties and recovery of their traditional practices. However, this recovery will depend on the family's awakening consciousness, which is expressed towards the end of the novella by one of the sisters' (Euna) realisation 'that there was nowhere to run from the thing that was in their blood'. That thing is the ancestral perspective of Comfa which they need to recover/reinscribe and haul back into the cultural frame.

The novella begins and ends with an 'ancestral voice' as a Prelude and 'Afterlude' to the overall story. Though this might not be explicit, I consider this voice to be 'African'. My purpose in doing this is to emphasise that Comfa is an ancestral practice that is African derived. The Quaminas<sup>15</sup> are an African Guyanese family who have become distanced from their ancestral traditions. Their African ancestors are cultural, historical and spiritual repositories to whom they can refer, on one level, to understand their position in the multi ethnic Guyanese community. On another level they can refer to their ancestors – understood as an embodiment of their subconscious imagination- in order to define their own spiritual, psychical and metaphysical reality, invariably expressed as 'light' in the novella. Indeed, as was discussed in Chapter One, members are called to the Faithist (previously Jordanite) Church through visions, dreams and signs. Hence the narrative

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<sup>14</sup> See, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*, Nkonimfo Publications, 2007, p, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Their name alone should indicate this even in a multi-ethnic society like Guyana. Quamina is a Ghanaian surname and is also a well-known Guyanese surname. Quamina Street in Georgetown was so named after a church deacon whose son led a Berbice slave rebellion in 1823, when it was felt that emancipation was no more than political rhetoric.

voice is in keeping with the 'didactic, prophetic and admonitory'<sup>16</sup> nature of the religion as the following extract from the Prelude illustrates:

We cannot throw blame at him [Festus Quamina] for the way he has come to discern the truth, for truth is coloured differently in sleep. What a man knows in his waking self will confuse him when he is bound by sleep's sweet enchantment. We need not tell you, but you may wish to know that our actions have been provoked by the somnolence that has affected our light since the work of iniquity that brought them to this coast.

The ancestral voice remains intermittently throughout the narrative, particularly in instances where third person is used for the narration. This establishes the 'everpresentness' of the ancestors; they function as an overriding narrative voice. Hence the opening line reveals their omniscience *and* omnipotence in influencing dreams: 'Pa the elder is dreaming. May God permit *us* to show you what he sees.' Their *omnipotence* is limited, however, because permission has to be sought from God in order for the narrator (ancestral 'presence', spirit – 'us') to give the reader access to the characters' dreams. As discussed in Chapter Two the 'Celestial' realm is presided over by God from whom messages are directed to the living. These messages can take different forms (such as spirit possession) and are mediated by spirit guides and ancestors. The fact that the narrator can *show* us what the characters are dreaming deliberately expresses a mythical omniscience rather than a merely conventional third person narrative technique. Therefore, this omniscience, as I intend it, should not be taken for granted. The narrator's omniscience is not simply a matter of realist convention; it is specifically connected to the liminality/otherworldliness of the ancestors and spiritual guides. In short, what the narrator *knows* and can therefore reveal to us about the characters is stylistically determined by their function as liminal/otherworldly entities.

I had intended for this narrative voice to form only part of the opening with a re-emergence as a summative 'afterlude'. However, I was undecided what the overall narrative voice should be given that I did not want there to be an obvious central character/protagonist. If readers sensed that they could not identify in the narrative a central character, then I hoped they might look at least for a central theme or motif. In so doing, I hoped that they would find that this was Comfa; that the narrative is always about the ceremony of Comfa and its function as a symbol of Guyanese cultural identity. Although the novella is called *Comfa*, there is no further reference to it in the narrative. The implication is that Comfa (like the caul) is metaphorically buried in the yard – the subconscious imagination. The characters (members of the

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<sup>16</sup> See Judith Roback's PhD, *The White Robed Army*, Department of Anthropology, McGill University, Montreal, 1973, p.32.

Quamina family) who participate in the Comfa ceremony have their own stories, related through my experiment with a variety of narrative voices and perspectives. But my dilemma was in establishing how I could give directions about the ceremony – from whose perspective would/should this be told? Thus I decided to retain the ancestral voice but tried to do this in a way that did not overwhelm the narrative. It was important that the ancestral/narrative voice was subtle and occasionally complex as spiritual/metaphysical ideas are interwoven into the narrative. Intuitively it came to me that as the overriding narrator was the omniscient, mystical voice of the ancestors then it would be effective for the narrative voice to be a blend of third person and first person narration. In other words, the narrator is both integral and yet external to the story.

Although the Quaminas' 'root' ancestors are African, there is a broader spiritual order, comprising ancestors from Guyana's multi ethnic community, of which they are a part. However, my suggestion is that in their efforts to define their identity, the Quaminas need to begin at the level of their 'root' - with themselves as an African-Guyanese family and as individuals within that family, before they are able to advance their identification with the broader, more diverse Guyanese community. It is my view that much of who we are as Guyanese lay in our contemplation of our individual and collective ancestral identities. This is not so that we become burdened by the past that might appear to hold no bearing on who we are now and the way we have remade ourselves. Rather, it is so that we can draw spiritual and psychical strengths from our various traditions and evolve them as befits our individual and collective circumstances.

The narrative therefore explores the 'concept of the ancestor' as it is discussed by Denis Williams in his Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial lectures in 1969. Williams argues that the 'Caribbean problem of blood and ancestry' embodied the opposing artistic responses to the colonial situation by Edgar Mittelholzer and Edward Burrowes. One, Burrowes, unquestioningly accepted the inheritance of mixed blood and ancestry, the other, Mittelholzer considered it to be a 'cosmic wrong' against which he revolted.<sup>17</sup> Williams considered it unfortunate that the 'problem of blood and ancestry' was not seized upon as a theme in literature other than its 'creative exposition...in the 'solemn' and for some terrifying 'vision of Wilson Harris.'<sup>18</sup> My rendition, I feel, is not one of 'unquestioning acceptance' but neither is it one of revolt expressing a sense of 'cosmic wrong.' My novella attempts to give 'originality

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<sup>17</sup> See, Williams Denis, *The Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures: Image and Idea in the Arts of Guyana*, The National History and Arts Council Ministry of Information, Georgetown Guyana, second series January 1969, pp 5-6.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.15.

and resonance', as Williams suggests, to the complexity of our Guyanese, and by extension Caribbean ancestral inheritances.

Structurally, there are ten sub-titled chapters (or sections), excluding the 'Prelude' and 'Afterlude'. There are also a number of un-titled sections interwoven in the narrative. This is deliberately fragmented and disrupting because it might perhaps be expected that *all* and not only *some* of the sections would be sub-titled. The Family Tree on the first page of the novella therefore serves to remind the reader of the individual member of family about whom they are reading at an unexpected moment in the narrative. The sub-titled sections that follow the 'Prelude' are the fore-grounded 'afterwards' that relate to the specific stories of the individual members of the family. I foreground their responses to the ceremony essentially to emphasise that, although it might not be considered successful, the ceremony resulted in the potential for individual, collective and communal healing and reconciliation.

Furthermore foregrounding the characters' responses to the ceremony also represents their *intro*-spective consideration of their *retro*-spective individual (and invariably collective) experiences. The reader journeys backwards into the story by way of deepening insight into the characters' subconscious. This form intuitively conforms to an aspect of the ritual which begins with practitioners walking backwards (from the gate of the house where the ceremony will take place) into the ceremonial space as a way of inviting the ancestors to attend. The characters' *retro*-spective experiences are recounted in the sections with titles drawn from songs ('A Wretch like me' and 'Say Poor Sinner Lov'st thou Me', for example) as well as symbolic phrases from the overall narrative ('There in the Blood' and 'The Queen's Invitation Letter'). Titling the sections/chapters was preferred to numbering because numbering suggests linearity, order and plot build up. But the sections are not in a sequential/linear time span; and the plot as a convention of linearity is deliberately abstruse. The structure of the novella therefore emulates the sudden spatial, temporal and perspectival shifts, alterations in consciousness and the dissociations that evoke the act of ketching comfa.

The un-titled sections recount the experiences of liminal characters as well as the episodic Comfa ceremony by the omniscient (ancestor spirit) narrator. In some instances - such as the communication between Festus and Ineze Quamina- these sections are solely dialogic and internal. Perhaps ambitiously I hoped that this might have the effect of psychically luring the reader towards the dissociative experience likened to the spontaneity of ketching comfa. Movement in the narrative from the titled to the untitled sections are demarcated by the use of asterisks which subtly positions and repositions the reader within and outside of the comfa ceremony and the internalised

experiences of the characters. Indeed the ceremony is not delineated in its entirety in a single section, but is sporadically interwoven in the narrative, preceding the longer, dedicated sections of the members of the family as their stories/experiences are related.

After the 'Prelude', the novella opens with a mythic communication between Bess and her father Samuel. This takes place three days *after* the ceremony. He tells Bess that the ceremony has to be done again because it was not done properly; 'my child the work ain do good... A next work got to do.' The inference is that the ancestral tradition of Comfa has to be perpetuated in order for the Quamina family to properly contextualise their place within the Guyanese multi-ethnic community. Hence at the outset of the novella Bess also communicates with the Amerindian spirit. The Chief informs Bess that there were other ethnic spirits present at the ceremony, but they did not participate because they had not been *seen* and they felt that they had not been properly invited. This is illustrated as follows:

-All of you been here

-All

-I din see all y'all

-All we been there. Some of we dance. Nobody din see. Din see me.  
A next thing - is hungry we hungry. And food ain deh for all of we

-I see

-The woman, Somner, she self know. She do wrong work. We was all there. Always. Some stay far, till they get invite. Till they get their food.  
A next work got to do, you own people going tell you so. They going show you

-I hearing you

The necessity of re-enacting the ceremony is thus consistent with my thesis that, as a symbol of cultural identity, Comfa has to be reread in a way that gives significance to the various ethnic ancestors that are part and parcel of the Guyanese subconscious imagination. The re-enactment is also a fictionalised rendering of Kean Gibson's sociological account in which ritual protocol had been broken in the 'Drum Work'. Among other things (Joey's failure to abstain from sexual intercourse the night before the ceremony, for example) this mainly involved the use of eggs by the Mother Leader (Ms Somner in the novella). According to Gibson the use of eggs (particularly broken ones) 'prevented family members from entering' the Drum Work ceremony. Gibson does not explain this in more detail, but my personal understanding is that eggs are primarily used for the purpose of exorcism. Therefore their rankness is shunned by 'good spirits' especially when broken. By using the eggs the Mother Leader effectively conflated the ritual practices



because the exorcism should have been conducted on a separate occasion.<sup>19</sup> In my novella ancestral spirits do manifest, but I extend the confusion with the eggs by suggesting that other spirits (the ethnic ancestors) were prevented from entering the ceremony because they had not been catered for (literally) by the lack of their ethnic foods. This is further compounded by Ms Somner's misinterpretation of the Chief's manifestation as 'Congo' – meaning African, which I discuss in more detail shortly.

Characterisation is complexly drawn through a variety of techniques. Primarily the characters' development is achieved through internalisation. For me this demonstrates the importance of developing cultural identity at the level of subconscious imagination. The individual characters nurture their spirituality in order to express a deeper understanding of self/personhood *within* community. The characters' internalisation is therefore precursory to the necessary healing and reconciliations between members of the family and the wider Guyanese community. I have not relied solely on the third person narration of the ancestor/narrator. Bess and Tamar relate their stories in the first person using Guyanese Creole. Dialect is used because they are working class Guyanese who reside in a small village on the West Coast. This presents the reader with a deeply personal and seemingly authentic perception of both sisters' sense of themselves and their experiences. Bess, for example, has never told anyone about the experience of 'seeing' the ancestors reclaiming her brother Ife. She has tried instead to hide her spirituality from the rest of her family as they associate this with madness or being 'flighty'. First person narration allows her to speak cathartically about this experience and thus to reconcile her sense of self and purpose. Unlike the other members of the family there is no second 'instalment' of Bess' first person narration after the opening section 'See and Blind, Hear and Deaf.' The reason for this is that Bess more readily acknowledges her spirituality and the Comfa tradition. This should, at least, be revealed within the narrative. Hence I didn't think it was necessary to provide a further 'dedicated' account for her.

As a Christian, Tamar is torn between her faith and what she knows/feels about her family's ancestral traditions. I use first person to explore this dilemma through her point of view which perceptively highlights the general misapprehension about African-Guyanese cultural practices. The section which introduces Tamar, subtitled 'Tamar at the Clap-hand', depicts the way in which she attempts to reconcile her dilemma about being a Christian with the acknowledgement of her ancestral traditions. Of course, the narrative technique of foregrounding means that the reader will be made aware of this

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<sup>19</sup> See Gibson, *Comfa Religion*, p.107. According to Gibson the use of eggs did not alleviate the erratic behaviour of the young girl. The wicked spirit by whom she was possessed was later exorcised by another practitioner.

dilemma in a later section dedicated to Thamar, 'Say poor Sinner Lov'st thou me.'

Titty and Joseph's narrative is related in Standard English and is a blend of both third and first person narration. Standard English is used because they live in England. Joseph, Titty's husband represents the English ethnicity that is inherent in Comfa. But although Titty mostly speaks to her husband in Standard English, her thoughts are expressed in Guyanese Creole. Joseph (Ambrose), however, both speaks and *thinks* in Standard English, as depicted in the opening section, 'Titty and Joseph's Waltz', which is shared by both characters. Their narrative is thus a representation of cross-culturality and the theme of migration. As I related in the previous Chapter about my own experience, migration from the Caribbean is both a spiritual (transmigratory) and physical experience. Titty's thoughts are expressed in Guyanese Creole because her *spirit* self is in a sense aligned with her Guyanese identity and I am hinting that it is perhaps this self that she had previously kept secret from her husband Joseph. But in order for them to have a more meaningful relationship it is important that they come to a mutual understanding about their respective cultural identities.

Euna's story is related in third person and in Standard English. This is used to connote her desire/aspirations to migrate to England. She is also a middle class Guyanese which, like the aunt in Melville's 'Table Wuk', suggests that she is detached from or at least apprehensive about her cultural traditions. Both Titty and Euna idealise England, as we learn from Bess: 'a day I hear she [Titty] telling Euna she going send for she to go up to London and if you see how the two of them hug up like is a big big box of raw gold they just open'. There are other instances where this idealisation is depicted. The implication is that England is perceived by both sisters to be a place of opportunities and riches, thus as an inversion of the mythic Eldorado. Euna fails to apprehend other possibilities for migration. For example, she is invited by her Trinidadian lover to visit Trinidad, but this would compromise the lifelong ambition to go to London: 'she had always told herself that if she ever left Guyana it would be to go to no place other than England; London, England.' However, her foregrounded letter to her lover after the ceremony suggests that she is reconsidering his invitation to visit Trinidad.

I have experimented with the use of dialect for both dialogue and narration for the chapter dedicated to Joey Quamina. The chapter is narrated by the Amerindian Chief who is a spiritual guide – representing one of the ethnic spirits in Comfa. I use dialect for the Chief's third person narration to stress his indigenous Guyanese-ness. As will be discussed in more detail shortly, the Amerindians generally occupy the interior of Guyana which tends to relegate

their visibility. They are, however, very much part and parcel of Guyanese society. My use of dialect for both dialogue and narration emphasises the Chief's internal function in the Guyanese subconscious imagination. Furthermore, this chapter is reminiscent of Samuel Selvon's technique in *The Lonely Londoners*. However, although Selvon's novel is wholly narrated in the third person, in this chapter the narrative at times switches to first person. An example of this is when the narrator says 'all I trying to do to make he remember what them girls tell he [about abstaining from sexual intercourse the night before the ceremony] he ain taking *me* on' (emphasis not in the original). The reason that the Chief can interject in this way at any given time in the narrative is precisely because of his liminal/otherworldly narrator function as earlier discussed. The development of Joey's character is an intricate matter that relates to his responsibilities as a father, brother and the remaining male bearer of the Quamina family name. His relationship with Vashti, an East Indian woman with whom he has fathered two sons is also representative of cross-culturality. He has to reconcile his perceptions about himself and his spiritual purpose.

Maya's story is told in the third person partly from the point of view of the evil spirit (a Bacoo) by whom she is possessed. The significance of this is that it allows the bacoo spirit to identify itself, which as illustrated in Chapter One is an aspect of the exorcism ritual in Ndyuka practices. By identifying 'itself' in the narrative the spirit, in a sense, is unwittingly performing its own ritual of exorcism. A ritual, it could be said, that is observed/participated in by the reader. This perhaps also implies an interesting function in my role as writer. It could be suggested that by allowing the Bacoo spirit to reveal itself in the narrative in this way that I am adopting the role of a ritual expert (or Shaman?) who has the ability to exorcise evil spirits. For me this recalls the 'activist intentions' about which I wrote in the Introduction. If the Bacoo represents a fearful aspect of Guyanese cultural identity then my narrative perhaps insists that this fear is confronted, understood and effectively exorcised.

Hence Maya's story is also partly related by her spiritual guide ('the bearded one') whose ability to help her to develop her spirituality is stunted by the Bacoo's possession. The spiritual guide's purpose and function in her life can only be realised when she has been healed of the possession and the sexual abuse she is suffering. It was illustrated in Chapter One that the young pregnant girl in the Ndyuka exorcism ritual had been neglected by her mother. Likewise, in the novella, Maya has also been neglected by her mother, Euna, who is instead concerned about the welfare of the pupils at the school in the City where she is Deputy Head Mistress. The implication is that this abandonment by Euna is also impeding Maya's spiritual development.

Ultimately the reconciliation between mother and daughter is necessary to cleanse her of the evil spirit and thus being exposed to sexual abuse.

A variety of narrative techniques are also employed in the opening sections of the novella some of which will later re-emerge. These techniques include, for example, the use of italics to indicate the Chief's internal and omniscient directions when he is spiritually communicating with Bess; dialogue between liminal and real characters; a letter generally<sup>20</sup> written in Standard English and the doubling of first person narration whereby we hear the thoughts of two characters (Titty and her husband Joseph) simultaneously. Stand-alone internal dialogues/monologues are used to narrate the communication of/between liminal characters (spirits). These are also narrated in the first person and mostly using Guyanese Creole. Dialect seemed natural to me as a means of signalling their embeddedness within the Guyanese cultural psyche. I also draw on the many stories my mother has related about ancestor spirits. One of these stories she tells is about my grandfather who died fourteen years before my grandmother. As my grandmother lay on her deathbed, one of my aunts dreams that my grandfather is annoyed that he has had to wait so long for her to make the transitional journey: 'why she have me here waiting so long for she' he complains in the dream. The point I'm making is that I use dialect for the dialogic episodes with the ancestral spirits because I do not disassociate the way they communicate in liminality from the way they would have spoken when they were alive.

In the dialogic sections between liminal characters and liminal and real characters I do not use punctuation at the end of sentences, but internally in the dialogue. The idea is to give the narrative a continuous mythic communication/consciousness which flows without the finalising punctuation that would appear to abruptly end the metaphysical mediation. In the mediation between Bess and the Chief in the opening section, I've italicised his first person narration to mark its distinction as a liminal internal monologue. I also do not use quotation marks for these dialogic sections because these would indicate 'speech'. Instead I want to emphasise subconscious mediation – that the dialogue is internal. I use hyphens or dashes to mark the distinction between the characters' responses.

Conventional dialogue markers are, however, used when conversation is taking place between 'real' characters, even though in some of these instances the narrator is a liminal character. This switch in the style of dialogic/quotation markers has a disrupting effect, since the reader might *expect* consistency, but the form of the narrative in its attempt to represent

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<sup>20</sup> I say generally because there are subtle dialectic inflections in the letter: 'I trust everybody going well', for example.

Comfa requires the reader to do more than simply read the text. It encourages the reader to be differently engaged with it than would be expected from a more conventional style. Experimentation, however, imposes a number of limitations, some of which will be discussed briefly at the end of this Commentary. But notably in the episode in which Bess chases the bad spirit from the ceremony it was necessary for me to use a mixture of dialogue markers. This is because Bess speaks (literally) to the bad spirit – it is not an entirely mythic mediation – but the complexity is that the spirit *responds* to Bess. It follows thus:

‘Leave this place. Go from here. Move yourself.’ {Bess’} voice  
took on the spirit of a drum, fierce and throbbing its base rhythm.  
She was not afraid, and the creature became vexed and extolled his  
malignancy.  
-Nelia son sexing the child and you see and blind. I come from your belly  
and the child’s waters I grow  
‘What you saying?’  
-Nelia son sexing the child but you hearing and deaf  
‘Leave this place. Leave.’  
-You seeing and blind

Conventional dialogue markers are retained when characters are in trance. This is because these characters are the physical mediums through whom the spirits speak. Thus the disrupting effect of using different dialogue markers signals to the reader that something peculiar is taking place. In *An Echo in the Bone*, Dennis Scott uses the act of spirit possession to shift the temporal sequences of the play in order to foreground and back ground the cultural events and experiences, which is similarly disrupting, sudden or rather ‘unpredictable’. Michael Gilkes’s sequencing in *Couvade* enables the reader to journey into the Guyanese subconscious imagination through Lionel’s dreams which invoke the spirit of ancestors. Erna Brodber’s *Myal* also employs a variety of narrative perspectives that include stream of consciousness, spiritual and metaphysical mediation and foregrounding and back-grounding techniques. Thematically, Pauline Melville’s evocation of the ‘Table Wuk’ gives poignant expression to the Comfa ritual as a Guyanese cultural aesthetic. These narrative strategies are significant because, as Wilson Harris argues, they allow Caribbean writers to develop our own models of writing and ‘arts of originality’ by which to creatively recover our cultural sensibilities and thereby to challenge notions of ‘historylessness’.

This originality extends to my use of language. The novella combines Guyanese Creole/dialect with Standard English. Both are used for dialogue and narration which further demonstrates the inherent cross-culturality of Guyanese identity. I was, however, concerned that a Guyanese reading the piece should find little difficulty identifying the particularity of Guyanese

dialect. Naturally there are some limits when using strictly dialect. For example, although this is dependant on the character, dialect does not easily lend itself to the narration of complex ideas. The narrative would have to be identifiably natural. Certain liberties could be taken, however. For example, The narrator in the 'A Wretch Like Me' chapter is also a liminal character (a spirit) which means that his explication of spiritual/metaphysical ideas would not seem incongruous even though his narration is in Creole. Yet I wanted the Chief as the narrator of Joeys's narrative to seem relatable to the ordinary, the everyday. The discovery of spiritual or metaphysical ideas should be revealed through deeper reading of the narrative rather than being directly signalled by the narrator.

In *The West Indian Novel and its Background* Kenneth Ramchand argues that:

dialect [is] a natural part of the equipment of the West Indian novelist [and is] used as a means of narration...for expressing the consciousness of the peasant character in a wide range of situations. [Common features of the use of dialect are] improvisation in syntax and lexis; direct and pithy expression; a strong tendency towards the use of image, especially of the personification type; and various kinds of repetition of syntactic structure and lexis combining with the spoken voice to produce highly rhythmic effects. (1970, p.107)

Indeed some of these features are endorsed throughout the novella where dialect is used. For example the use of imagery when we read Festus's experience with the 'Fairmaid' and the lyricism of his description:

All at a sudden, I feel something pulling me down under the water. First I frighten but then I start feel so light like I floating and I hear a voice, was not Ross or Prince. I hear a voice say open yoh eyes. Cause my eyes been close all this time. I open them and see a woman direct in front of me. She skin like Sunrise mud and shining like it have gold dust sticking to it. She eyes blue like how my grandmother eyes blue. But she ain look old. She hair yellow. Or like gold. It long long and floating and spread out in the water. If you see how the water clear the more down you reach. She smiling and I start smile too cause is I nice feeling. It feel nice like I in a day time dream. Dreaming I deh in heaven. You know how day time dream does be sweet. Is how I dreaming. She hand floating like they dancing. She have on a blue dress. It see through and flouncing in the water and I watching how it moving slow and cant take way my eyes from watching the blue see through dress she have on.

In this passage there is a discernible lyricality that is endorsed by the short descriptive sentences and imagery. It was my intention that the dialect does not appear to be strained or exaggerated; that again there should be a

naturalness and simplicity in the character's expressions. Metaphors are used but they are not sophisticated. Instead they are used to reflect an authentically fluent rhythm of the Guyanese dialect. Thus in order to effect the idiomatic Guyanese sound, I took the imperative of inventing the spelling of some of the Creole words. 'Foh', for example is used instead of the English Standard conjunctive 'to' or at times 'for'. It could also have been spelt, 'fa', which would give the same (sort of?) sound. 'Deh' is used mostly for words such as 'there', 'is', 'am', etc which I think sounds better idiomatically than these Standards in certain instances. For example, in the above citation when Festus says 'dreaming I deh in heaven', if 'am' was used instead of 'deh' it would not have the same dialectic sound and would not in any case be Creole.

Standard English words were kept in certain instances where the Creole would have given a closer Guyanese-ness. For example, Guyanese wouldn't say (at least in ordinary speech) 'truth' pronouncing thereby the 'th'. So a Creole version of this would have been 'trute' but I thought that the distinction could be subtle enough if read with the idiom in mind. Consider, for example, when Joey says 'I never think bout it tell you the honest truth,' in response to Kofi's quizzing him about what he considers to be the ungodliness of white people. As the sentence leads up to the word 'truth' the reader would already have the sense of the speech and the sound so by that end may choose to pronounce (or not) the 'th' in 'truth.'

'Da' was used consistently throughout the novella to replace the English Standard, 'that'. It gives a different, much softer emphasis than, 'that', which in any case more closely aligns it in sound to the way Guyanese would speak. Again 'lil' was used instead of the Standard 'little' because Guyanese would rarely pronounce the two syllabic 'little' in ordinary speech. 'Y'all' does the same thing to replace 'you all' or 'all of you'. Guyanese generally conjoin the two (or three) words to make a single syllable one of 'yall'. Other Guyanese (Caribbean) writers might prefer to write this as 'you all' but I consider this relative to a Guyanese speaker who was perhaps trying to 'standardise' this idiom. In any case the apostrophe in 'y'all' emphasises that the two words have been conjoined. 'Gafoh' ('gaffa' could work too) is another adapted word that I think sounds more idiomatically accurate than 'got to' or 'have to'. For example, when one of the East Indian men in the 'A Wretch Like Me' chapter says 'we ain gafoh stop foh none y'all', this sounds more idiomatically appropriate than Standardising any of these.

'Ain' is used for 'is not' and didn't (though 'din' could work there too) throughout. An interesting liberty is my fabrication of the word 'gi'ing' in one instance used instead of 'giving'. The 'v' in the Standard makes a harder syllabic distinction but in Guyanese speech this distinction is softer, much

more subtle. It was important for me to use dialect in the novella because I wanted to emphasise its dynamism and viability. My use of Guyanese Creole effectively challenges the assertion by the English linguist Derek Bickerton that the overuse of Standard English might lead to the 'decreolisation' of Guyanese Creole, as I discussed in Chapter Two. Here again, the creative process enables Caribbean writers to give expression to our cultural sensibilities and, importantly, the use of Creole is an attempt to achieve this *literally* in our own words. But ultimately my effort has been to provide a close representation of its *sound* not absolute accuracy since I have my own limitations with Guyanese dialect.

In the novella there are no easy pointers to direct the reader about what is taking place – there is a beginning, but what has begun – where is the middle, is there an end? What is taking place is at times open to the reader's interpretation, what the reader sees, believes they have seen. The effect of this is that the reader has to reread the narrative, a first reading, and indeed, a finalised (or totalising) reading is not sufficient. As Benítez-Rojo argues in the *Repeating Island*, it is necessary to reread the Caribbean in order to understand the complexities, diversities and the paradoxes that constitute Caribbean cultural identity (1992, 2-3). Similarly, the novella demonstrates a need to reread Guyanese cultural experiences, to do the kind of rereading whereby that metaphoric 'something buried in the yard' is stirred from the unconscious/subconscious as an activation of consciousness.

Hence this need to reread inspires my writing because I feel it is not always possible to be *certain* about what we know or believe – that some experiences are like trying to recollect a distant (what I call 'unlived' or unborn) memory. Some experiences are what we imagine they are; essentially how we *realise* them. 'Ketching comfa' occurs, but it is 'figurative'. How then can it be *realised*? This of course has an impact on the way Comfa practitioners interpret their experiences and the way in which they identify the spirit by whom they are possessed in the novella. The best example of this is illustrated in the episode during the ceremony in which the Mother Leader mistakenly identifies the Chief as a 'Congo' – an African. Of course, I have not made the identity/role of the Chief necessarily clear. I have not subscribed to the stereotypical movements that would indicate possession by an Amerindian (Buck) spirit.<sup>21</sup> But the Mother Leader seems *certain* that the Chief is 'essentially' African – in fact – 'Congo'. Yet, earlier in the ceremony when Titty asks her to explain Bess' 'non-lexical' murmurings, 'mo mora, meyee ee, mo mora', she is not able to do so. Although this is an African dialect, the

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<sup>21</sup> In Chapter One, it was noted that both the 'Buck' spirit and the East Indian spirit manifest by displaying small movements with their feet and hip gyrations.



Mother Leader does not understand what Bess is saying because the African languages have been disinherited. I use it here, however, to suggest its embeddedness in the subconscious; fictionally reflecting the non-lexical language sometimes spoken by those who become possessed at the ceremonies (referred to as 'speaking in tongues').

Throughout this work I have been arguing against essentialising identity, particularly in the context of Stuart Hall's essay, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora'. The possession of Joseph (the English character) by the Chief was an attempt to reflect Hall's suggestion of cultural identity as both 'oneness' and 'difference' within Caribbean (and Guyanese) cultural framework. The Mother Leader's misinterpretation highlights an inability to apprehend cross-culturality, despite the fact that the Comfa religion embraces seven ethnicities. But more than this, it reflects the slipperiness of interpretation and reinforces the idea that to understand Comfa is to locate 'figurative meanings' which throughout the novella the characters have been trying to do. This example from Euna's dedicated section, 'There in the Blood', illustrates my point:

Perhaps, she thought, it was the anxiety she had been feeling about seeing Titty. That must be it. But although she knew that she was feeling anxious about seeing Titty she felt that there was something else that bothered her. She knew it was not fear alone. It seemed as if it was more or less than fear, but she could not be sure what it was.  
(*Titty daughter dead.*)

The slipperiness of interpretation and the misapprehension of cross-culturality is also emphasised by Festus' disregard for the suggestions made by the 'old African' (Congo) and the 'Amerindian man of his dream' to acknowledge Bess' spirituality as a gift. He was told by the old African to keep a 'drum work' for her – in other words to uphold the tradition of his ancestors. Festus' disregard for the *narrative*, as it were, of the old African and the Amerindian calls to mind Edward Brathwaite's observation that Afro-creoles (in post emancipation Jamaica) were 'blinded by the wretchedness of their situation [and thus] failed to make conscious use of their own rich folk culture [failing also] to command the chance of becoming self conscious and cohesive as a group.'<sup>22</sup> Festus embodies a cultural psyche (as a liminal character) unable to absorb the fullness of Guyanese cultural identity. The ancestor/narrator thus tells us:

If we had made it possible they [Festus and Samuel] would have seen Congo show Bess the precise moment when the Sun and Moon parted time so that she could always look at the Sun though it blinded others who tried. They never saw when he

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<sup>22</sup> *Creolization in Jamaica*, p.308.

showed her how to wave her hand to hold back the rain and how to quell the roaring thunder. They never saw the white candle Congo passed to Bess that formed a pentacle shape on her forehead and lightened her cheeks and chin [...] We knew that being both uncertain about the incomprehensible ramblings of the old African, Festus would not need to work hard to convince his son Samuel that it was best to leave the fate of the child in the hands of the one true God they accepted and knew.

There is, however, a suggestion that Festus is becoming culturally conscious when he says: 'we can't do nothing about we mix up history. Them whitepeople fool we. Tell we when we die we soul perish. But is we history we been fighting. We own thing we frighten.' Furthermore, Festus seems to lament the misapprehension of Bess' spiritual abilities when he says 'we make a wrong move with she Bess.' The steaming of Bess' face reflects an internalised denouncement of ancestral knowledges. I am suggesting here that in *Comfa*, the Quamina family's attempt to steam Bess' face reflects a censorship of cultural knowledges, as articulated by Wilson Harris. Bess would thus be prevented from 'seeing' and 'knowing' – from being, as it were, spiritually/culturally conscious. The family thus regard Bess' spirituality as a sign of possible 'madness'. However, Bess has learnt to mask her visionary ability ('seeing and blind') because the steaming was not effective. In the novella the ancestors had intervened in her family's attempt to steam her face. The significance of their intervention is that it implies a suspension of the *potential loss* of cultural consciousness. Bess' spiritual blindness would signify *total loss* of consciousness, but like the neglected tradition of Comfa, her spiritual gift (the caul) is figuratively 'buried in the yard' from where it has to be evoked as a powerfully symbolic expression of cultural renaissance.

It was not initially my intention to give the Amerindian Chief the prominence he has in the story. But such is the 'unpredictability' of the creative (intuitive) process that the character insisted on *becoming* – on *voicing himself into the narrative*. The Chief appears at the outset and maintains a narration in the dedicated sections related to Joey. However, the Chief is 'outside' of the family's consciousness to a certain degree, he has 'remained rooted' to the family as a spiritual guard. He is essentially part of their subconscious; particularly aligned with Joey's spiritual development. The Chief communicates his *invisibility* to Samuel, Joey's father, a liminal character like himself that:

Joey see me in he dream a time. When he small. He ask me who I was, who I was to he. I tell he I's he cousin. And if you hear how this lil boy buse me. Busing me cause he say how I could be he cousin and ain look nothing like he.

The depiction of the Chief attempts to reconcile the observation made by Gibson that the Amerindians are not utilised in the Comfa religion. The rationale for this is the perception that Amerindians made little contribution to Guyana's historical, economic and political development. As earlier noted, the Amerindians live in Guyana's hinterland (an inversion of 'outside', where the Chief is at the start of the ceremony) and were not encouraged to make said contributions. Interestingly, in 'Cultural Identity', citing Peter Hulme, Stuart Hall notes that the 'Amerindian Presence' (in the Caribbean) 'continues to have its silences, its suppressions.' Furthermore, he observes that the 'Arawak presence remains today a ghostly one, visible in the Islands mainly in museums and archaeological sites, part of the barely knowable or usable past.'<sup>23</sup> I politicise this in the novella through the depiction of Mrs Rodriguez when we read:

What he [Hart, the President] doing for the Amerindians really, is only use they [politicians] using we again. Imagine is we must give them majority. Talking their big talk about how they going to review Integration Policies. So is exclude we exclude for truth? Is not that they saying really? How they can put we back into we country? Is out we been out all this time? They going to create heritage sites in our communities like we want to live in any museum like Roth's.

The reference to the Walter Roth museum in Guyana puns on the word 'moth', suggesting the non-presence, decaying, and apparent remoteness of the Amerindians. Thus I have intuitively engaged this perspective of the Amerindians in Guyana primarily in the portrayal of the Chief. Although Bess sees and knows he's there, she 'passing him steady' in silence, thereby failing to acknowledge his presence. However at the outset of the novel during the mythic communication between Bess and the Chief there is a suggestion that this might be reconciled.

Festus (Pa) Quamina also shows a disregard for the Chief when he asks his wife: 'how a buckman going know how to get through to a big hardback like Joey. Why it have to be a buckman who looking me legacy.' Ineze chastises him, however, by saying that:

Chief been here long. Is just how they make it, is just how it is. You still ain seeing? This thing is not racial you must can see that. Is disgusting how people stick up tight in them skin and frighten to touch them own mattie when we's all poor people and we's all one people when you really look at it

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<sup>23</sup> In *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, Patrick Williamn and Laura Chrisman, Harvester-Wheatsheaf, Hertfordshire, 1993, 401.

Although he is a spiritual guide, an ethnic spiritual ancestor aligned to the Quamina family, Festus does not initially understand/accept why it is an Amerindian, and not an African, who is so charged with this mythical responsibility. During the Comfa ritual the Mother Leader's misinterpretation of the manifesting spirit of the (Amerindian) Chief as (African) Congo represents a similar perplexity. Ultimately both episodes point to the misapprehension of Guyanese (and by extension, Caribbean) cultural identity. The Comfa perspective challenges this misapprehension with its ethnic pantheon of spirits. But as I have been arguing, in the broader context, Comfa is a symbol of cultural identity which has the potential to transmute the racially divisive atmosphere that permeates Guyanese sensibility.

Thus it was also necessary for the English character, Joseph (Hall's 'European Presence') to become integrated into his wife's culture in order to 'understand' what seems naturally inexplicable to him. He had earlier found Titty's behaviour at the hospital when they learnt of their daughter's death a 'nuisance', a 'terrible racket.' But Titty's exercise of her grief in this way is culturally specific. As Malidoma Somé writes in *Of Water and the Spirit*:

[At Dagara funerals paroxysms] are necessary if one's grief is to be purged. Unlike in the West, the Dagara believe it is terrible to suppress one's grief. Only by passionate expression can loss be tamed and assimilated into a form one can live with. The Dagara also believe that the dead have a right to collect their share of tears. A spirit who is not passionately grieved feels anger and disappointment, as if their right to be completely dead has been stolen from them. So it would be improper for a villager to display the kind of restraint and solemnity seen at Western funerals.

(1994, pp. 56-57)

Titty's expression of her grief is therefore implicitly aligned with a traditionally African custom. This emphasises an unspoken cultural difference between herself and her husband Joseph. This of course, is not to say that Joseph does not feel grief, but rather the way he expresses it appears to be controlled (the 'solemnity' Somé describes), which of course also has a gendered connotation. That said, Joseph had a premonitory experience the day before he met Titty in 1974, which he had never relayed to anyone. This connects him with other characters in the novella who suppress their spiritual/mythic/psychical experiences. My intention in doing this is to prefigure Joseph's later acculturation when he becomes possessed and thereafter experiences a release to which extent there is a suggestion that he is able to understand Titty's 'performance' at the hospital in London. His possession by the Amerindian spirit, which he connects to his earlier premonitory experience, has a profound effect on him. He is thus encouraged

to consider the significance of his own ancestral heritage and the deeper extent of his relationship with his wife.

Likewise Titty's impassioned outburst at the hospital is my way of foregrounding her experience of being possessed at the ritual. Importantly, the episode at the hospital connects her present grief with the grief (previously unexpressed) from the death of her brother Ife. Again, we might consider the significance of grieving from the perspective of the Dagara. As Malidoma Somé writes: 'during a Dagara funeral ritual, all kinds of grief are released – not just regret for the departed, but all the pain of everyday life' (1994, p.58). Titty's outburst is therefore more than the expression of grief. The grief is connected to her sense of guilt for not returning to Guyana to honour the contract of her government sponsorship. This is a personal burden – an unpaid debt. This is evocative of the Quaminas' collective cultural indebtedness to their ancestors. Their failure to acknowledge their ancestors by upholding the ancestral tradition of comfa is the cause of persistent tragedies and familial disunity. There is a sense, however, that Titty and other members of the Quamina family are inspired by the Comfa ceremony to reflect on their relationships with one another, their respective responsibilities and the significance they give to their ancestral practices.

Given the extent of its formal experimentation a number of problems were encountered in composing the novella. For example, it was difficult to write without a central protagonist in mind from whose perspective the entire story could be told. I was therefore concerned that the individual chapters would not seem to be part of an overall coherent narrative. However, the fragmentary style demonstrates the divisiveness and cultural split (the 'apparently real') that stigmatise Guyanese society. Yet underlying this divisiveness is the potential for unity and mutual comprehension. Another difficulty was trying to write about Comfa without naming it in the narrative. It had to present itself, emerge and be wilfully discovered through the activity of reading because it is symbolically buried in the Guyanese subconscious imagination. In any case, for the purpose of publication I may reconsider the title. My original choice was the title I used for this Chapter – 'Something Buried in the Yard', which I think would also be effective.

Further, the technique of internalisation was at times consuming. It seems as though I had no control over this; as if the narrative *had* to be (intuitively, decidedly) representative of a psychic exploration/journey. This was challenging because of the overall interdisciplinarity of the thesis. I was constantly shifting my own 'voices' to reflect the disciplines through which I was contextualising and analysing Comfa. Therefore although the internalisation technique dictated a powerfully consuming emersion into the

narrative I was trying to create, it was also imperative for me to bear in mind the process of theoretical and critical analysis demanded by my methodology. Like the comfa ritual itself, the narrative also had to be a representation of cross culturality. Thus I had to decide *how* – in what language – the characters would speak. I wanted to use dialect to give an authentic presentation of the ritual. This was difficult because though I am Guyanese, I mostly speak in Standard English. It was a constant memory-tap into my subconscious where once I spoke predominantly in Guyanese Creole. I also relied on *listening/hearing* Guyanese (especially my mother's sing song voice) and tried to replicate their particular way of expressing themselves. Furthermore, the internal tones are generally serious; even when I attempted to include more humour in the narrative it didn't seem appropriate. I will try, however, to readdress the inclusion of more humour at a later time.

Finally, I was trying to make the novella serve different purposes. Firstly, I wanted it to serve as the creative engagement with the overall critical and sociological analysis of the Comfa perspective, as part of the methodological approach for my thesis. Secondly, I wanted the story to stand as an independent piece of creative writing that could be read outside the overall thesis. I was also trying to provide literary (subjective/figurative) interpretation of Gibson's (objective) sociological account of Comfa, particularly the Drum Work ritual. Collectively these considerations were at times stifling and led me into varying tangents, which in any case, might reflect what is involved in the process of creative writing. But I also feel that in writing the novella and trying to encapsulate some of the foregoing themes and issues of the overall thesis I have at least depicted the 'sleeping possibilities' ('something buried in the yard') of the Comfa perspective that has yet to be consciously and culturally apprehended. Although the conclusion of this work might seem somewhat presumptuous, I think that the following concluding remarks are in order. An overall conclusion of the thesis is otherwise illustrated by the novella.

## Concluding remarks

Very disparate forms of spirituality – Taoism and then Voodoo – led me back to Shamanism (the way I was brought up until aged 13). [...] Through the practice of Shamanism I realized several things. Some time before leaving Guyana for Africa I had painted an eight by four feet canvass in acrylic which I entitled 'The Shaman's Journey Along the Milky Way'. This canvas has as its focal point an eagle. I realize now that this and other imagery are from my subconscious and came from deep within me. I realize, too, that this imagery forecast the journey I was to take along my metaphorical Milky Way and back.<sup>1</sup>

Like the Guyanese artist George Simon's metaphoric journey along the Milky Way, my engagement with the Comfa perspective has also been a personal journey of self, spiritual and cultural discovery. Simon relates a story, told to him by his mother, about a mythic journey undertaken by a Shaman. It was a journey at the end of which the Shaman felt that 'he had proven himself to himself and that mattered most.'<sup>2</sup> This expresses my own feeling about undertaking and completing this study of Guyanese Comfa. As I outlined in the introduction, there was a personal motivation for this work which I feel dictated my methodology. My endeavour has been to locate a vital text between my world and the world of my ancestors. The interdisciplinary method I used to recover the ancestral practice of Comfa has been experimental but I feel that it has provided a 'formidable transmission' of something new ('renascent'), complex and paradoxical that reflects Guyanese cultural identity.

My inquiry began with an attempt to understand and interpret what it means to ketch comfa. The complexities and paradoxes embedded in the Caribbean cultural framework do not permit easy, comfortable definitions and meanings. Hence the meaning or interpretation of the practice remains for me a figurative and subjective one. As I related in the Introduction, when my cousin 'ketch comfa' this was met with amusement. Like those attending my mother's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday that was also my initial response. But later I cried. As I watched the video I saw confusion, slight signs of panic and incomprehension. No one seemed to know (not even my aunt who was credited with some adeptness in handling such experiences) what to do. Why these reactions? I would say that these reactions relate to the fear,

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<sup>1</sup> George Simon, 'The Shaman's Journey along the Milky Way', in *The Arts Journal: Critical Perspectives on the Contemporary Literatures, History, Art and Culture of Guyana and the Caribbean*, Vol.2, No.2, March 2006, p.114.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.115

ambivalence and misapprehension of the significance of such cultural phenomena given the historical contexts in which they were discredited.

My effort in exploring Guyanese Comfa through the arts of imagination has been to confront my own fear and incomprehension. The untold narratives of the Guyanese subconscious might be considered a form of 'madness' (the flightiness of Bess and Maya in the novella, for example) or laughed at or cried over but not otherwise thought to be significant to the understanding of cultural identity. My consideration of Comfa demonstrates that its significance to identity formation might at least be understood through what is permitted by the imagination. Because it is a resource that is not available to social sciences and anthropology, fiction (art) seemed to me to be an effective way of exploring the cultural significance of the practice. The creative process makes it possible to access (project a 'figurative meaning') and therefore apprehend that which is otherwise neglected or invisible. Wilson Harris's concept of 'arts of imagination' has been a useful framework for the thesis because, like him, I feel that art is able to reconcile the image of violence, racial disunity and economic despair that overwhelm such societies like Guyana.

Although it is just under forty years since Wilson Harris outlined his ideas at the Edgar Mittleholzer Lecture, his observations are still pertinent to a Guyanese society whose social, cultural and economic development is impeded by the inability to embrace its multi-ethnicity. This is also hindered by the misapprehension of its cultural experiences, especially after the post independence honeymoon when these were considered instrumental to the nationalist agenda. Of course the history of slavery, indentureship, colonialism and neo colonialism bears the greater responsibility of how we have come to perceive ourselves; given the consequent and prevailing divisive politics. However, as we continue to 'destroy ourselves' through our unwillingness to *see* (apprehend) who we are and yet *not to be blinded by that seeing* this history appears to be inconsequential to the symptom of our desolateness. This 'seeing and blind' along with 'hearing and deaf' recur in the novella as familiar phrases which again identify the 'enclosures fear'. *See and pretend not to see, hear and deny what you have heard* (misunderstand it) connote that the blissfulness of ignorance is an embedded psychic ideal. Hence in my novella there is an attempt to 'blind' the visionary power of Bess (by steaming her face). The dreamer/artist in Michael Gilkes's play *Couvade* attempts to express visionary truth in his 'Robe of Ancestors' painting but this results in his collapse and 'mental breakdown' primarily because he is alone in this pursuit. Those around him (a microcosm of Guyanese society) appear oblivious to the culturally liberating power (the collective vision) which the



robe represents. This oblivion establishes the mutual incomprehension and prevailing violence by which Guyana is stigmatised.

I would say furthermore that the perpetuation of violence and racial disunity in Guyana is representative of a misdirected process of decolonisation. Frantz Fanon argues that decolonisation involves the struggle between two opposing forces – the colonised and the coloniser:

the naked truth of decolonisation evokes for us the searing bullets and bloodstained knives which emanate from it. For if the [colonised] shall [secure independence], this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle....That affirmed intention to place the last [the colonised] at the head of things, and to make them climb...the well-known steps which characterize an organized society, can only triumph if we use all means to turn the scale, including, of course that of violence.

(1967, 28)

I contend, however, that the violence in Guyana is symptomatic of an unfulfilled promise or destiny. By this I mean that the so-called independence of such countries as Guyana, whose will to govern itself - to be 'placed at the head of things' -is undermined by the phenomenon of globalisation and the resultant impact of US-led neo-colonialism. It is also restricted by a failure to perceive who or what the enemy really is, as one of the characters in the novella says:

[t]hings ain like it was in the 50s ... Then everybody knew who was the enemy. And every country have to have a enemy to call itself one country and if the enemy's not outside then it must be inside.

Here, I'm trying to suggest that the problems in Guyana underlie a more pernicious global phenomenon. The frustration of being *underdeveloped* (of being in a *perpetual state* of development) is the overarching symptom of the scornful implosion that prevails in the country. Thus in terms of Fanon's notion of decolonisation, the colonised fight amongst themselves – they are their own enemy, because there is little chance of 'meeting' (bargaining with) a more veritable opponent.

It must also be noted, as Fanon argues, that colonialism 'is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip, [but] by a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it' (1967,p.169). If it is accepted that the 'past' holds much that is meaningful in some societies, this distortion and disfigurement emphasise the dismemberment of the cultural psyche as I have highlighted in the foregoing

chapters. My thesis has, however, attempted to advance a counter discourse to the permeating desolateness that has come to be associated with Guyana. I have used the cultural symbol of Comfa to emphasise that there is a 'necessary diversity and unity' embedded in the Guyanese cultural framework. Victor Turner's concepts of liminality and *communitas*, and Wilson Harris's 'unpredictable intuitive resources' facilitate a rereading of our cultural experiences, which for me, also facilitates that vital text between the mythical (and mystical) world of ancestors and our everyday (daily life) experiences.

Thus my analysis of Comfa as myth and art has demonstrated that it is possible to redefine our cultural identity by recovering/re-inscribing and re-crediting the knowledges of Guyanese traditional practices. As a myth Comfa might be identified as a cultural 'language [that vital text]...that both records a narrative and intervenes in the present [daily life] as "lived experience."<sup>3</sup> Therefore as well as an empowering symbol of cultural identity, for me Comfa also represents a 'radical postcolonial tool' that 'writes/talks back' to history and the process of colonialism, imperialism and the impact of slavery.<sup>4</sup>

Guyana is a country struggling to define itself – to come into being, as it were. With reference to Stuart Hall, I have argued that cultural identity is a matter of becoming – that identity is not an already accomplished fact. This suggests that the search of 'lost origins' or an 'essential identity' is a mythical and symbolic journey. Our search for a *certain* identity is 'necessarily circular', since the point of our origins has been displaced. Our origins can be recovered through memory, imagination, myth and art. Stuart Hall also reminds us that there are three presences that constitute Caribbean identity: European, the New World and African. Antonio Benítez-Rojo identifies these as the 'spatio-temporal' points (including Asia) that contributed to the formation of the Caribbean. Our understanding of 'Caribbeanness' and by extension 'Guyanese'ness' demands a mythic, intuitive visit to these sources – a leap/dance into the space of liminality – the act, that is, of ketching comfa. But a return is necessary. Comfa should not therefore be interpreted as a static reflection of Guyanese society – instead it reflects a much more dynamic sense of the nation. The mythic journey into the space of liminality through the dance of Comfa has, however, facilitated a renewal of self and identity. It must be stressed then that the many sources of our Caribbean cultural identity mean that there are complex creative possibilities – one of these is the process of creolization as proposed by Edward Braithwaite - which have yet to be fully apprehended.

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<sup>3</sup> See Patricia Murray, 'Myth' in *The Encyclopedia of Latin American Literature*, ed., Verity Smith, London, Fitzroy Dearbon, 1997, p.574.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Indeed I have used this thesis effectively to argue that the Comfa perspective, which embraces seven ethnicities that contributed to Guyana's historical, economical and political development, is a complex creative perspective. The multi-ethnic component means that it holds at least the potential to facilitate a healing of the nation and therefore to reconcile the culturally erosive dichotomising politics by which Guyanese society continues to be defined. Understanding Comfa and attempting to identify its significance to Guyanese cultural identity is to become 'immersed', in 'a new capacity or treaty of sensibility between alien cultures' as Harris stresses in *History Fable and Myth* (1970, p.119).

Kean Gibson's account of the 'Drum Work' concluded that the ceremony was not repeated due to its cost and therefore any reconciliation between members of the family was not documented. It was *literally* left to the imagination to initiate this. And I attempted to do so in the novella by depicting instances of reconciliation between members of the Quamina family and others. Such is the decision by Lall Rambarran to share his land with Joey Quamina so that he could build a house for his family. This depiction alludes to the notion of power sharing which has been bandied by the dominant political parties in Guyana for some time. I used the imaginative process to make this more meaningful than mere political spinning, rhetoric and speculation. My interpretation of the Comfa perspective has highlighted its potential for cultural unity whilst accepting 'difference'.

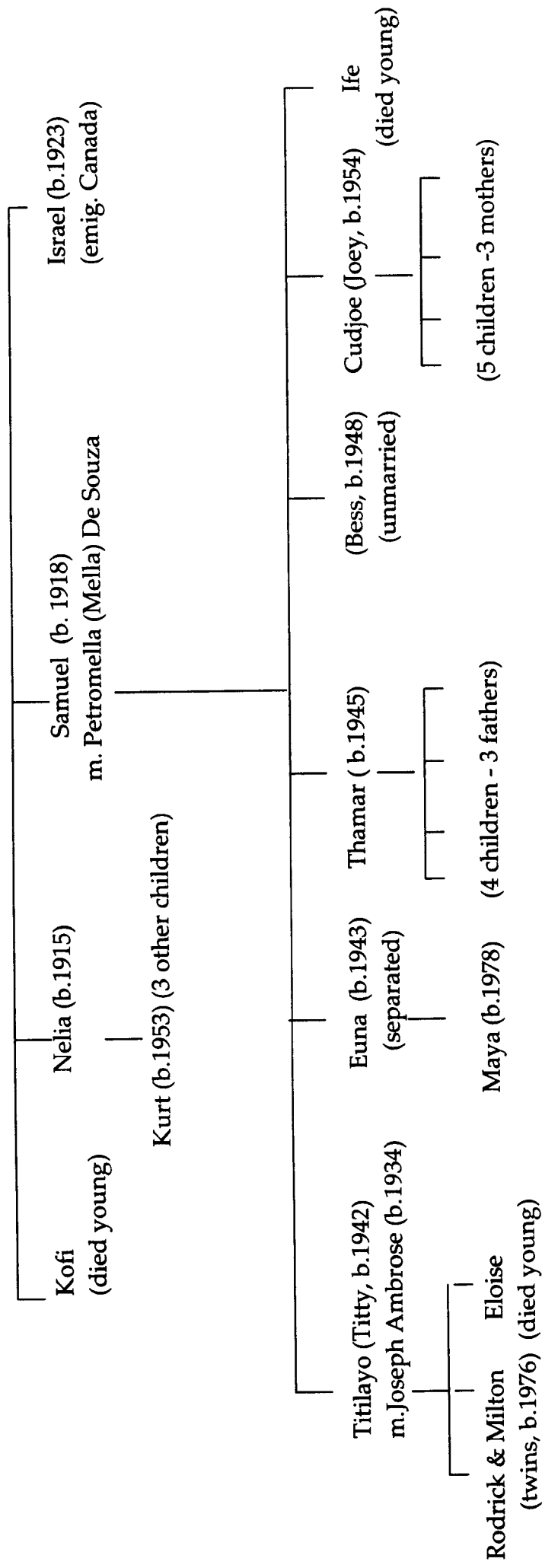
The experimental methodology of my thesis has enabled me to *begin* a process rather than completing one. The very notion of completion (conclusiveness) suggests that it is possible to finalise, totalise and be *certain* that a first reading will provide an all encompassing knowledge of a given experience or perspective. As the culmination of my analysis of Comfa, the novella which follows is constructed in a way that makes rereading necessary. This thereby keeps the ancestral practice influx and dynamic. It does not matter how many times the Quamina sisters perform the ceremony it will of necessity have to be re-performed as a means of keeping the memory of their ancestors alive. Further, 'repeating' the ceremony enables them to continuously redress social, collective/individual imbalances and furthers their understanding of symbols of cultural identity. Of course the novella depicts the complexity of the concept of ancestors in Guyana. For these ancestors are African, they are Amerindian, they are Chinese, East Indian and European, all of whom demand a seat and their respective foods at Comfa's ceremonial table and thus their rightful place in our memory. It remains for me to say that I fully embrace this inherent diversity of my cultural identity. I am no longer fearful and apprehensive about my ancestral traditions and how these can be

meaningfully used for my own spiritual/psychical journeys. And if I can be certain about one thing, it is that by writing about this paradoxical, complex thing that has terrified me for so long, I have enabled the Comfa perspective to dance its way, formidably, into the arts of imagination.

**PAGE  
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# Quamina Family Tree

Festus Quamina – 'Pa' (b.1880)  
m. Ineze Saul – 'Ma' (b.1885)



# Comfa

*A novella*

## Prelude

Pa the elder is dreaming. May God permit us to show you what he sees. There is an extraordinarily short man who is dragging a box that's much larger than himself towards the Lutheran Church where the Quaminas worshipped. The head of this man is somewhat oversized compared to the rest of his body. He must be a midget, Pa tells his sleeping self. But we who are not afraid of the fearful truth must tell you that Festus Quamina is dreaming a bacoo.

We cannot throw blame at him for the way he has come to discern the truth, for truth is coloured differently in sleep. What a man is certain of in his waking self will confuse him when he is bound by sleep's sweet enchantment. We need not tell you, but you may wish to know that our actions have been provoked by the somnolence that has affected our light since the work of iniquity that brought them to this coast.

But what is in the blood is in the blood. We keep there in the blood and in the bone and in the heart enough of our thing. For how far can flesh stray from bone? So it is that sometime after he was hauled from his sleep like a drowning man Festus admitted to himself, but told none other that it was a bacoo he was dreaming.

Beside the elder lay his wife, Ma also in her dreaming sleep. May it be charitably granted for you to see as she sees. On this night of bleeding darkness Ma is dreaming that she has received an invitation letter – from the Queen– to go to England. A ceremony is held in her honour. There is singing, clapping of hands and dancing to an off beat beating of drums.

Ineze Quamina is dreaming that she is wrapped in a cloth of bright colours and she is being carried through the crowd as if it is she who is a Queen. She sees herself waving, a stiff, half dead wave at the villagers from a white gloved hand. She notices that the crowd of people are larger than those who live in the village of Sunrise. Several others had come from the stretch of miles that made up the villages along the west coast to bear witness to one privileged with the chance to give up the coast.

As she was thus waving and about to step into a special hire car for the ride into town to begin her journey across the Atlantic, an elderly man whom she recognises as Congo who lives near the back dam thrust a naked girl baby into her hand.

The baby is crying. She is making the sound babies make when they are gasping for breath. It is as if she was being choked. Ineze is trying to hush her but



she cries yet louder. She rests the baby on her shoulder, patting her gently on her back. The more she pats her, the more the infant continues to cry. With a suddenness that changes the pace of the heart Ineze realises that the white glove has become sodden with blood as if she really is squeezing the life out of the baby. It was all we could do to disturb her dreaming. We watch the contortions in her face. Her body is tossing in the bed next to her husband. He at this time in his sleep is assisting the extraordinarily short man with an oversized head to drag the heavy box into the church. We had chosen this creature – for they too have their uses on God's earth- because a legend from our land tells that anyone who claps eyes on him in their sleep would rush toward consciousness and be abruptly awakened, lest they should die, as they say, in their sleep. For this one of all such creatures is abhorrently ugly. The sockets of his eyes are blood red. His teeth are abysmally discoloured and distract the senses. You must know that the creature is one who invades the dreams of vanity seekers and promises them their hearts' desires. He is not to be befriended for he burdens with his weights. But on this night of all nights Festus in our seeing appears to have both befriended and colluded with the unsightly creature so deep is his sleep.

It is impossible to sound a scream in your sleep, but his wife attempts to scream at the sight of her bloodied glove. The baby's crying sounds like a screaming, her screaming and the baby screaming. But she hears the screaming outside of her dreaming self and she is dragged half conscious from her sleep.

Their son Samuel was at that very time of his parents dreaming receiving a vision. For it is he, Samuel the father of the screaming child to whom we passed on the secrets of our time to reclaim our light so that they could hear our sounding silence. He would see in this vision that his destiny and that of his children was blood bound and outside of his time and their time. And all his life unto his death he knew, but would remain in the sleep of this story's beginning.

God grant that you see as he sees this night. Samuel sees his youngest boy child sitting crossed legged in front of a large rock that is covered in indiscernible writings. There are several women dressed in white from head to toe. Their faces and arms are doused with white powder. Drums are beating and the women are dancing behind the boy.

Outside his sleeping self, Samuel's body is twitching to the beat of the drums. Inside his dreaming self his son is not moving. He is sitting very still and is in a trance. It is at this time that Samuel notices a black goat appear beside his son. Still the boy does not move. He is gazing straight ahead into a vast land with peaks of mountains showing far into the distance.

One of the women in white tries to grab the goat, but having made a mortified petition to its legs the goat begins to run. He is fast and makes good speed with its brittle legs, but the animal was not to know that the women in

white have our wings. They take flight and it is not long before the goat is brought to its knees by one of the women who has the strength of a lioness. She holds the goat so that another of the women can slice him at his throat. Blood spurts. The goat lets out a shriek that sounds like the scream that the boy's father hears that propels him from his sleep on this night that was as dark as unencountered memories.

The senior and junior children slept their own dreaming sleep. All but one. We whispered in the ear of the unsleeping child a thing less than the sound of breathing and watched her undetermined movements to the place where her sibling's cry remained half released, unheard and uncertain. She was afraid. But we could do nothing about the fear she sometimes feels of the watching dead, nor the perplexity of a child's stifled breathing in the dark. He breathed like sounding silence, like the inside of a sleeping, strumming heart.

This child who had not long refused the milk from her mother's breast was awakened by the boy's gasp of dying breath. But like an unborn memory she was uncertain what she had seen. It was a seeing not like the clarity of occasional truth when encountered, but like a veiled reality. She had to know beyond seeing because this knowing could not be learnt nor sought. It was a knowing that had been there long before she could see and blind, hear and deaf. Long before they had dipped her face in a calabash of piping hot water. Long before they had buried the veil. Long before the unborn memory of this night and long before everything in her life was a dream dance with shadows.

If you are seeking to hear the story of our light from the beginning do not strain yourself like one who tries to remove with bare hands a boulder of rock in search of buried treasures. Do not tire yourself out for we have already lost much. Time has made haste with the rhythm of our light. And we have known that blood spoils like curdling milk if it is not reclaimed and memories born. We understand the preciousness of blood. So it is there we begin. There in the blood. It is there we reclaim our light. Blood spills. Earth turns. Memories born.

And yet you must know that it is we who beg their forgiveness for we have tarried in their awakening. We hope only that it is not too late. To your good fortune you will hear from us again. See and hear in your hearts rhythm the story of our light. Tread carefully through the savannah of our blood for it is you who can bring to life the unborn memories of our dance in the perfecting rhythm of light and time.

\*

*Bess - See and blind hear and deaf*

Four day morning, before even cock start crow they come wake me to discourse. I been twisting and turning whole night but since the thing happen with Ife sleep never been easy for me. I ain bother to open my eyes but I knew the kerosene lamp ain out because I could feel it still glowing in the room. The house quiet cause them rest still sleeping. Sleeping just like that night with Ife. Must be bout three nights after we do the work cause Titty and she husband Joseph did left. They spend one more day before they go to town by Euna. A day I hear she telling Euna she going send for she to go up to London and if you see how the two of them hug up like is a big big box of raw gold they just open. She husband don't seem like he's talk much. But he have a way he's smile at me with he eyes. I ain give he wrong to vex with Titty. She should have make he know is what she plan to do. She just bring he and drop he in we confusion and expect he must accept and understand what she she self spend she whole life running from. Not to say is she alone been running. I do my fair share of running from something we know deh in we blood. But still I's member all that big set of fuss and palampam she make when she leaving for life in London. What all of it was for? It take long but look is what happen. Is not right back in Sunrise she have to reach. Is easy she did think it easy to dig up coconut tree and plant back somewhere else.

I ain give she husband wrong at all. But he handle he self though. He handle he self good. If you see he the next morning. He start ask a whole heap of questions and Titty only sliding she eyes at Thamar and Euna like if is a next language she husband all at a sudden start talking. When he ask she how soon they coming back I hold in me breath to see what she going say. Is not that I been asking she too? And till now she ain tell me nothing. And I surprise because all the time I been telling myself he ain comfortable. Is a lot of work the house need and me and Thamar try we best but was a hustle to fix it up before they come. We put them in Mummy and Daddy old room which is Thamar own now. Is the biggest room in the house and cool too cause is down at the back of the house facing the sea. Is where you get most breeze. You can get onto the back veranda from that room so it give them lil privacy. It still have the old four poster bed Mummy family give she when she and Daddy marry. Is a strong iron frame bed that have a white mosquito netting all the way round – them old time bed you's hardly see again. Is only a little brown polish the floor did need and some paint. Every thing happen so fast we ain have time to do it all. We barely borrow money from Euna before they come and put in a inside toilet, but we ain get

chance to do over the shower room so god in heaven know how he make out with the bucket and calabash we's use to bathe.

'I...I think we need to plan it. We'll see,' is all she tell he but you could see he didn't too please.

'I'd like to come again. Spend a bit more time. And soon.' He look straight at me when he said 'soon' and somehow he remind me of something or someone but unto now I cant say what or who.

Three days after we do the work they wake me up four day morning. Is Daddy who's always come first. He's always come anyhow not just now. Everyday me and he does discourse, two, three times. But I think he sounding different this time. He voice ain sounding slow and heavy like how it does normally sound. Or must be I hearing he different this time cause everything he telling me sounding so clear like if he lie down right close next to me. Whether or not he sounding different or is me hearing he different I cant say is which but it make me feel like is closer I getting to something I been running from a long time.

-Bess you hearing me child

-I hearing you Daddy

-Child the work ain do good

-So people say

-A next work got to do

-It cost money Daddy, who going pay? Titty going back to England and we ain know when again she going to come back. Since she been she's hardly send money for we. So is not easy to do

- The work have to do

-I understand Daddy, but everything get hard. The shop ain making money again. And you ain see is them coolie get back in. If was hard for black people before, what you think going happen now. Them coolie ain going make it easy for we after look how much years

-Child that's not you worry. Is where we all born and grow. Is one belly we belong to. Everybody have a part they must play to keep the belly together. The work is not you alone work. Is everybody responsible. I ain going lie to you and you know already, it going get real tight for all y'all. But when the belly suffering everybody going to feel it

-Joey say he going help out lil more at the shop cause he want to build a house for he and Vashti and them children. I ain know how he going do that when she father say he ain want he for he daughter

-That's not you worry child. Is time he Joey start make he way and is good he start think bout house. It going work out. But he got to try

-You hear what Kurt been doing Euna daughter  
 -I get to understand  
 -Is where he pick up that thing  
 -Been in the line we ain know how long but is wicked  
 -What I must do  
 -She belly big but is bad thing she carrying. The thing buss up inside she belly. Was coming like one but is two bad thing inside she  
 -What I must do daddy  
 -You going know. Hold on. Hold on... You see how Titty husband do he self  
 -Eheh. I didn't expect that would happen so to he. But he handle he self  
 -The drum is a thing ain care who it take when it make a hold. He handle he self good  
 -Well Daddy you understand is not every day this can happen  
 - No not every day. I know child but this thing we take it for granted and I feel shame  
 - Shame for what Daddy  
 - Is a lot of things we do and didn't do cause we tell we self we ain know  
 - How you mean  
 - I was young. I ain know much bout them things back then. Pa said was what we had to do. And I ain know no different. I going along in this world like I ain have past and future. Just going along in the world and is a world that have it own kind of enchantment. A enchantment that can turn a man fool. You seeing things and not seeing them. You hearing things and still like you ain hearing them. And I feel shame because ignorance can be a thing a man choose. No mine how they tell we how we must live and how we must pray and who to we must pray, we know what we know. But we didn't trust we own self. And Pa and Ma they let it go on so. But on this side things coming real real. Here we live in we memory from before we can remember things. And everything clear and nothing feel like the hell and damnation promise we if we believe in we things. You must trust what you know and believe  
 -I understand  
 -You and Ife was different. You born so. You had something that make you a special kind of child and we try take that from you. You seeing all your life is not so  
 - And blind  
 -Hearing too  
 -And deaf  
 - The thing we do – after – after Ife dead –it ain work. You play like it work  
 -They said was what I must do  
 - Who say

-I ain know what must call them. I see them they see me. We discourse. They been here with me for a long time. First time I was frighten. I used to hear them telling me things and it seem like I had a lot of voices inside myself. They come on me sudden and tell me things. I use to be jumpy, but they does help me. You know when you want do something they tell you how. Make it happen. You ain know for sure is them but you feel so

-How they sound. Like how I sound now

-Is not something easy to speak about Daddy. Is a feeling like something big big swelling up inside you. So you know is there. You know is real. You know is true

-I hearing you

Why you low the woman to use the eggs

-We ain really know nothing

-Go on say what you want to say

- Is true you and Pa and Ma, y'all ain show we how we must do anything. How you can just left we to do it how we think it must do. Auntie Nelia ain show we neither and she know

-But is in you. It always been in you

-Was in you too. You didn't show none of we

-Is true I hearing you. We didn't show you. And it deh right inside we blood. Pa and Ma was so thick in the Church. Was too much girl. But lamentations ain good to hold on to. The spirit mustn't cry too long. And is a lot of tears we people holding on to. I don't see all them like you. I does see and hear one and two. But seeing and hearing is not it alone. The feeling's be more powerful, the feeling's how I know them too

-Who is the Buckman always here? You does see he

-He's one of them I's see. He's Wai Wai. He say you never call him

-He don't tell me nothing

- He been here long. He say you passing him steady and doing like you ain seeing he

- What I must tell he

- You never ask he who he is

- Why he ain tell me

- He ain mean you nothing. You must do and talk to he

-Daddy what really they want we do

- The woman ain ask Pa nothing. Is dance alone he dance. That's not it alone. You must command the spirit. Ask is what they want. And a next thing is wrong work she do with the eggs

- So people say, but we ain understand

- Rank man, rank. Is what they use for turn back bad work. How she can mix up the work so? You self can do the work child. The woman 'spiring for she self.

You ain see is Chief she been calling Congo. You ain see how she doing for she self. You ain see is mix she mixing up the thing. You know the thing. That's what they want you do. Know what is what. Know who is who and how you and them can live with mattie and 'gree. And you must remember. They want you remember. It deh inside. Is what you know from before you born. And is only remember you got to remember for it come back up

And is just so easy he bore back out. Easy and quiet and the morning feeling as if it cleaning and still ain cleaning. So slow and quiet. Like it ain ready for move until they tell me what they got to tell me. Seem like they can do that. Hold up time. Is same way so the time hold up the night I see them taking Ife. Wasn't a nice thing to see how he crumple up by the gram. I's member it like if it just happen. Seem like day was taking long to clean then too. Morning didn't come for me like it did them rest. Was the longest night I ever know. You see me and Ife was so close people used to say look is batty and po when they see we coming. Till now no one ain ask me how I feel about what happen to him. And I never tell nobody. Not even Daddy. And me and he does be discoursing steady. So come I know nough things pile up inside me and ain have no way to come loose. But is burst I feel I's want burst sometimes and talk what I got to talk, tell them how I's feel like is weights burdening me from sometime and place I see and been before. And is just so I been feeling like is high time what swell up inside me come clean out when Ma and Pa bore in and start discourse.

-Bess you hearing

-I hearing. And I seeing too

-You sound vex girl

-She must vex Festus. You ain see how bright she eye them look

-Why y'all steam my face

-Like you reckoning for we now child. We feel shame like your father. But is what use it make to throw blame on we head alone. We ain know

-Festus how you can say we ain know. We know good good what we do. Or what we try do. Girl, was a time we feel we back against a wall. Trying to please everybody

- I been doing so too. and people only pleasing them self. Then this thing come heavy on my head. Telling me what I must do. What I have to do cause is in my blood

-The whitepeople fool we and we take everything they feed we and eat up good. We ain question nothing like is only one way to butt up with truth

-Is true child. You grandfather and me we was 'fraid them times. And afraid of we self. Y'all in new times now, but don't leave out what you know. Here we gone back to school. We got to start over so nothing cant tumble us upside down again. Don't do like we. What in you in you. We try to take it from you. But what you know make you strong. There's a place in you where only God can speak with you and what you know is in there. don't matter who say and how fancy they look. Could be your mother. Your father. The pastor. The President. Could be any body. They could show you in books. They could tell you that God forbid it. That you would go to a place name hell. But child this place so secret and private that no mind what they saying and what they trying to make you think nothing cant touch it. Is in your heart. Is there in your blood. You just got to know how to use it and we ain show you nothing that's the whole damn truth. But nothing ain do before it ready. You hearing me child

-I hearing you

Is Ife who first start seeing them and he ain tell nobody. Was one day when we been playing by the fish pond at the back of the yard. They sent me and he to lock up back them fowl in their pen, but we been doing we own thing. Thamar was combing Euna's hair on the front step. Euna was screeching from the scrapes Thamar was making in she head with the comb. No one never like when Thamar combing them hair. Was like she taking she own enjoyment from digging up people scalp and hearing how they ouching and hollering out in agony. Ma and Pa was most probably up stairs on the front veranda cause was late afternoon and the sun didn't stand up so hot and is then they did like be outside sleeping. Titty was inside with Mummy and Daddy cooking pot. Joey must be was sleeping cause I don't member hearing he exercising he lungs. He nose and eye always running water when he small. He was lil sensitive, any and anything make he cry and no one ain know is why. Was like he didn't ready yet to born. You cant tell he them things now, but was how he come like he too carrying burdens and worries from since before he born.

Ife and me was skipping round the fish pond when I run into he and make he nearly fall in cause he just stop all at a sudden and start one staring down in the pond.

'Ife what happen?' I ask he, but he ain say nothing. He cock he head one side and look at me like he ain sure is me he seeing.

'What happen, Ife?'



'Look. Look. There. You ain seeing?'

I looking into the pond where he pointing but I only see them fine fish what been there all the time.

Was after then I use to see he just stop like that in the middle of playing or eating or fetching water and stare. And lil time after then he start talking and laughing but I couldn't see is who he been talking and laughing with. He laughing different from how he's normally laugh though. It sounding so nice when I hearing he I want to laugh same way so too.

'Ife make me see. Make me see,' I beg he one day.

'Me ain know how.'

'I going tell on you.'

'Tell who girl,' he smiling lil bit when he saying so.

'I telling Mummy and Daddy you playing with jumbie.'

He didn't get vex with me. He just sigh and bow down he head.

'Is me alone or she too?'

It ain make no sense trying to tell you how it feel when I start hearing them. Is a feeling no words make up for because is not like something you hearing for truth. Is not like is someone talking to you direct. And I hear them first before I start seeing them. I hear one of them tell Ife – see she will and blind she going see hear she will and deaf she going be – and just so I start one laughing like something sweetening me and tickling me.

And I know it sound like how Ife was laughing cause Thamar hear me from till by the front gate where she just done sweeping the yard.

'Bess is what sweet you so girl?'

And me and Ife hug up and start one big laughing till it feel as if we sides going burst open. I could hear Titty calling me and Ife to chase after them fowl but we stand up long long laughing till I ain hearing she again. Only thing I knew was I was laughing sweet like Ife and somewhere in the midst of the laughing I was frighten. But is how it start. And was from since then I learn how to double hear and double see. I start see one thing and a next thing, hear one thing and a next thing at the same time. Till it start get mix up and Ma and Pa and Mummy and Daddy start notice. Is not only what happen with Ife make they steam my face. They did want do it ever long. Tell you the honest truth it ain do nothing to me. It burn me, yes. I get a round black mark between my eyes from where it burn. Them children used to call me Congo coolie cause is so it look like them mark coolie people does put between them eyes to keep way bad eye.

That first night after I start seeing them I couldn't sleep. If you see how much of them come. I get frighten cause some of them quarrelling and it take a while for me to understand is what they saying. Some of them vex. But I get a

feeling like some of them smiling and playful. Not playful like how me and Ife used to play. Was in a way I didn't too trust. I tried to shut my eyes but was like a breeze blow them open again and I hear one of them giggling. But then the sound change like if is crying they crying. I was wondering if Ife sleeping. He and Joey sleep in the same room, the one Thamar boys in now. I want to know if he sleeping cause like this lonely feeling take over me the more I hearing them. I feeling like something going happen. Me, Titty, Euna and Thamar in the same bed but they sleeping and hauling snores like they in competition. Ma and Pa room next to we own. Ma had a way how she's mutter in she sleep. Was comforting if you shut out every other sound and listen to it. It sound like she trying to make up music with words except the words was not really words but a sound you know good. I trying to listen to it, but I only hearing them laughing and crying and quarrelling and pleading. Some of them sitting on the end of we bed. And some stand up in front the bedroom door as if they want to go out but they waiting for someone to open the door. I could hear some of them talking outside the room – not loud but hush like they conspiring. And I hear Ife name calling but what they saying jumble up.

-back bring he need he hear time now been he long with them not see what use for make he –

And the ones who inside we bedroom stop quiet like they know I hearing them ones outside talking about Ife and they looking at me. I trying hard now to hear Ma mumbling she tune in she sleep. But is them I hearing. And like if a needle jook through my hear drum is just so clean I hear them saying something I sure was about me.

-left she take he bring he home back work she can do it no need for both them be they so-

Is so this thing going on whole night. And day ain cleaning. Talking and laughing and whispering sounding like they want take over me. And them rest sleeping.

Ife wasn't frighten like me. And he ain make nobody but me know. He seeing and discoursing with them good good and ain frighten. Because he know say I frighten he would hold my hand and smile he smile and that used to make me feel easy. Was a special something me and he had. Is a thing I feel been there long before we even born. But was like I lost piece of myself when they come take he back. I's dream he steady. He didn't come when we do the work. Is how I know something ain right cause Ife ain come. Plenty of them ain bother to come inside but is the same buckman make me know bout them rest what been there. I does see he for truth. But I ain know is what he want. So I seeing and blind. Is not so they tell me I must do when they get to understand the steam ain do nothing. Me and he does talk good now. He come four day morning too but them other

ones - I ain know what to call them bore in before he. And day was still taking long to clean but when me and them done discourse my eyes open full and bright like them want light up the whole of Sunrise.

-You seein, Bess

-Hearing too, what I must do

-The belly must be clean

-What I must do

-The people of Tapanahoni will see all that the belly bears. Take Euna's daughter there

-I will

-Their power is full as the before time people

-I see

-Euna must go with you

-She going come

-And Kurt must go too

-I will take him

-He will fight you but we have divined with his mother to appear in his visions and dreams. The judgements will be strong but the fiend can be turned round about

-I see

-Rotten fruit spoils the womb where memories born. Strife wrestles in the child's waters

-I dream that is so

-The one has become two and they kick and fight and scramble for power. Who would be the first and who would be the last and the waters soiled in blood

-I see Maya in my dream lying by the river nakedskin. A woman come from the water and blow on she belly and two black black snake crawl out. The snakes opening they mouth and what they saying I ain understand, but is like they cussing mattie. It getting louder and louder until the woman from the water take hold of them and fold them in she fist and the snakes disappear just so. The woman get a yellow cloth and cover she with it so she ain look nakedskin and expose no more

-The vile creature seeks his own peace but retribution is his greatest crave. He has been in the belly so long he will fight to stay there. The Tapanahoni dwellers will say he cannot be removed, for he is wily and sly. This my child is not a lie. Blood ties and hides its impurities

-I see

-Yet we must tell you that furies can be turned to do your good. These very waters, spring and black, creek and river can wash the stain and stench of

curdling, soured, fomenting blood. The child must honour through out her days the many rivers and waters of her womb and memory. And you, you must adorn your head all times for there is your fount and light, your caul still beholds its erstwhile power. And Maya she must adorn the colour that is the sky, the colour that is the sun, the colour that is the moon, the colour that is our earth, the colour that is the trees where a new fruit awaits the kindling and the colour that is the dark womb of memories

-I hearing you

-The bearded one sits outside her door. His heights are yet too high for her attaining. He sits outside her door awaiting the rekindling. His wisdom is held within the rhythm of time and light to which she must be attuned to dance

\*

*I hear them calling me. Samuel and the seeing one. Not by my name I hear them calling me. Is only the sound of me. I waiting. Quiet, quiet. Cause he going to bore out soon. Is so I waiting for me time. But them rest bore in before me. She grandfather and grandmother. We wait. Hold up time till we get we chance. They reach in before from the heights. So it must go. Everything have season and time. And was we time now. So day coming clean and the light coming up bright but we take we chance and discourse with she. We know she frighten. Still. Is a long time now she frighten. But still she does try. My heart near burst when she light come up and she look at me and ask me.*

-What I must call you

-What you want to call me

-I ain know but you been here long. Sometimes you look old. And a next time you look young

-I can look anyhow. Take any shape I want to. Look like a old old man or a man in he youth and prime

-Is like I know you all my life

-You know me before you born. But is plenty fear in you. A oldtime fear. From your people before. It put there and it stay and none of you do nothing to it. So it living with you. And the light taking long foh come back up

-You does fly

- Yes. Flying is nothing for me

-Is you does come in the craft

-Not me alone. Why you so afraid of the craft. *She smile a little when I ask that.*

-When I see the craft I feel like it going carry me away

-You frighten to go to a better place. *I hear her heart skip a beat. I wasn't surprise. Mortals all the same. They think soon's they see we is come we come to bring them over. It does make them frighten and chase we. And Sometimes is so, we come for them for truth. Not all times though.*

-It better there where you is. *She ask me trying to do something with the fright gripping she in she belly.*

-Yes is better here. This is where I stay. Is the only place I know. I seen all that happen here and all that going to happen here. And is not me alone. Take a lot of people to make this place. What vex we is that y'all ain giving we nothing to do. We watch you and try to make you see we and talk with we. And you see we but you play like you don't see. That does hurt. We ain have nowhere else to be but we can effect what you want we effect. Since none of you know what effect you want we mean nothing to you. You ask any of them. Is how we all feel

*It was then she look good and see all of we. Chiney dress in white slacks like he ready to fight. He sword there by he side, where he always have it. Another time you might see him, he look old old, with two strands of he white beard hanging long past his chin like stringy cotton. He sitting easy. He like using the craft. Cause he from the heights too. He know she afraid and it does vex him. He take on the lil one, name Maya, cause she in the line and is big big worries come with she and he couldn't do nothing till she light come back up. She ask who's the white man too. I tell she he people from Scotland, but we's call he English. He's dress up slick in a white suit make out of Linen. He wearing a panama hat on he head. Looking sharp. Always looking sharp like he ready to do business any time. He tip he hat so she could see he seeing she. She want to smile, but the fear still holding she. He look to she like he holding a cup in he hand, limp though, cause is empty. Not like first time. He want she see he cup empty so she can bring he tea – is da he does want. She recognise Conga. We call she Nanase over there she ain have no name other than Conga. She rubbing she legs, chewing she gums. Always hungry for pineapple. She skin colour like molasses. She live through much and she cry plenty. She have plenty scars all cross she body and plenty pains bearing down she heart. She head tie up with a cloth that use to be white. She clothes always look old and raggedy. Sometimes when a strong breeze blow she smell rank and muddy like the Atlantic. She didn't see Bai Bai straight away. But he there too. He young and feisty. He's like flinging cuff. He's be the anger she's feel sometimes. That kind of anger he's have she don't too need again. She belly never ripen cause the garden tangle up with too much weeds. But she hands good for the work. She see Laljie there too. He rattling and twitching. He want to go through and dance. He want his turn cause he waiting long. He want to make she see and know hear and feel he. He raise a tune and start sing in a high high pitch. A Indian something.*

*She seeing he dancing too. Shifting he head slow from side to side. We all deh watching he till he done. She watching he too. And she seeing he clean clean. Is something she have to go through. We showing she sheself. Who she is. Who she been all she life. And what she have to do with the life she bless with. What she have to do is in she blood and it mix up with all of we. Laljie ain so selfish to dance he dance long. So he go back and sit down but he glad he get lil chance to show she he can dance. And now she see all of we again. At one time. In one place. Together. Each belonging somewhere in she past and in she years to come. And inside she heart she crying. Who really can tell you why. Sometimes tears have their own meaning and they say their own things. Not the way how you thinking and feeling. But she cry long. And we watch. We understand. We know how she feeling. She feeling shame and happy same time. She feeling as if is now she born and she remembering how and when it happen. I tell she thanks for the glass of water she put out even though she ain know why. And we see she start smile with the tears rolling out she eyes too. Tell you the truth, we only too glad. We been cooped up inside she for so long we start feel a next generation going pass and nothing. When she ask me again what she must call me. I know it was lil boasty boasty but I tell she I too vast to name like the waters of this place. And is then I see how bright bright she eye open like she memory just born and living.*

-So you's a Wai Wai

-They does call me Buck

-They call you Buck there too

-Here I am Chief - I tell she and I bore out cause I know she tired and when you open to spirit rest don't come easy. Spirit work is no easy thing but a thing that stir up inside you need you to give it plenty time so is understand you can understand what it want you to do with it.

-All of you been here

-All

-I din see all y'all

-All we been there. Some of we dance. Nobody din see. Din see me. A next thing - is hungry we hungry. And food ain deh for all of we

-I see

-The woman, Somner, she self know. She do wrong work. We was all there. Always. Some stay far, till they get invite. Till they get their food. A next work got to do. You hearing me.

-I hearing you

*Euna relents*

*At Home  
South Ruimveldt  
Georgetown  
Guyana, SA  
October 1992*

*Dear Dawuud (David!)*

*I pray these few lines find you in the fittest of health, thriving under the Divine grace of the Almighty heavenly Father. As for me, you could say I am in good spirits.*

*There are so many things to tell you, I hardly know where to begin. Let me start by humbly begging your forgiveness for my tardiness in replying to your letter. To answer some of your questions therein posed; yes, I did decide to attend the service. (Perhaps I will speak more about this another time, it was a few weeks ago, so recent that I'm still trying to understand what happened to me – to us – what it all meant.) I had to extend my leave, but Ernestine was so good about it.*

*And yes - of course I spoke with my sister, Titty. They (her and her husband) stayed with me in Town before they went back up. He seems pleasant. He was quiet when he came, but seemed to brighten up towards the end. He too get his own experience – I'll tell you about it when (if?) I see you again. He said he wanted to come back and go into the interior. He seemed taken with the interior and asked questions I myself couldn't answer about it. Titty said she would send me an invitation letter – so I could go at last and see the place- and I think she meant it this time. However, I don't think I should hold my breath any longer, do you?*

*Besides I have been thinking that if your offer still stands I would very much like to visit Trinidad. Imagine all these years the thought has never crossed my mind. You remember me saying that the scoundrel to whom I was once married (by the time you get this the papers for the divorce will be through – I relented! Please don't laugh!) now lives there? Well that had put me off when you first asked me to go. I feared I might see him and dredge up too many things from the past. Perhaps now I feel that excuses will fit the young and the restless but time changes our hearts and makes us brave, don't you feel so?*

*And David – Dawuud (sorry) - it is braveness I feel. Somehow I feel more alive than I have felt in my whole life. Does that sound peculiar? I trust that you of all people will understand – at least I'm hoping so!*

*As for my daughter, Maya, about whom you also inquired – and thank you so much for showing interest –she has not been well. I was not aware of it. We have some work to do with her – 'they' said it can only be done in Surinam, so I plan to go with Bess, God spare life (more leave; I don't know how Ernestine and the governors are going to take it this time). When she's better I will bring her to live with me in town. I should have done it sooner. I hope it's not too late. She has missed out so much on schooling but I will do my best with the good grace and help of God. How is your family? I trust everybody going well.*

*You could say that I'm still 'keeping' myself, though I'm not sure I know what you could possibly mean by this! And to that very last of your questions my reply is yes – it has taken me long to admit it (you know me already) – but yes, I do. I hope it's the same for you too.*

*I will write again soon as I must tell you about the time I heard your voice in the sea!*

*Until then, continue to walk in the pure light of the Almighty, most precious and ever loving Father.*

*Sincerely yours.*

*Euna*



### *Joey get wife and land*

Just so easy Lall Rambarran pick heself up a fresh, breezy Saturday morning, lil time after the election and tell he daughter Vashti he going to see the boy in Sunrise. Vashti want to know is what wrong now cause he ain tell she nothing since the morning of the election when he come home with he face buss up. Joey come out the bus and walk Lall right to he door. Foot to foot Joey behind Lall and none them ain talking. Vashti come out to ask what happen but she ain get no satisfaction. Joey drop off Lall like he bringing provisions from backdam.

'Bring Sammy and Sasi, come.' Lall voice always firm but Vashti thinking is vex it sounding.

'Why, what happen now Pa. I ain see Joey look how long. What he do?'

'Just come na, let we go.'

'Sammy, Sasi, come yoh grandfather want carry y'all out.'

'Put on you clothes, you coming. Don't let me talk again girl.'

Bess was sweeping the front yard like she's normally do first thing before she go round and sweep at the back. She glad it rain over night cause it ease the work of watering them plants. The rain raise up a kind of smokey smell in the grass and earth that you can only smell in the first morning breeze. Bess only look up because she hear the gate squealing like how it does normally do when anybody coming. She sister Thamar opening the louvers in the shop when she hear Bess calling out for Joey. Thamar push out she face from the shop counter and couldn't believe was Lall, Vashti and Joey two boys she seeing. She send she son them, Ricky and Marcel, to go and wake Joey. He's sleep in the downstairs room next to the shop so he can watch man. He's tell he self is rest he resting on Saturday like them Rasta's do and he get lil more serious bout it since them girls do the work.

'Uncle Joey, uncle Joey.' Joey hearing he nephew they calling he and he haul heself from he sleep to see is what wrong.

'Mammy calling you,' one of Thamar's boys tell he. Joey make to kiss he teeth and turn back in to sleep but is me make he feel to get up. He go downstairs and go in the shop just so in he shorts and vest.

'What happen?'

'Look na, go see who deh outside,' Thamar tell he. She walk out behind Joey and nearly bump into he cause he stand up just outside the shop like he clap eyes on a camoudi. Is Bess had to motion to he to go and see what Lall and Vashti want. Joey start scratching he head. He see he nephew them run up to he children and

the four boys looking at each other and smiling. Sammy and Sasi trying to hide behind Vashti. Joey bend down and say 'howdy' to he boys.

'Look boy, I come...I come to talk to you.' So Lall start off like is nervous he nervous. He watching Bess how she holding the broom, just so she been standing since he come. She didn't say nothing to Lall and Vashti but she call Joey soon's she see them. She sister Thamar come from the shop and standing just behind she.

'Me and Vashti mother, God rest she soul, ain make she for no man run through she. She get sisters come after she and is me alone got to look them. She's big for them and they watching how she living. If you deh with she you deh with she. You understand what I saying?'

'I hearing you,' Joey tell he and he say it in a way make Lall see Bess turn and look at Thamar and shake she head. But he couldn't hear when she say 'alleluia.'

'I come to ask you to marry Vashti. Live home with she and ayoh children. Them is your responsibility. I ain going be round all the time.'

'Pa – who tell you I want marry?' Vashti saying, cause was true she been telling she self Joey too wotless for she marry.

'How you mean? What's all this for?' When Lall say so he pointing at Sammy and Sasi. Vashti push up she mouth but ain say nothing.

'You want to lie down with a man, make child for he and ain want to marry he. Is so your mother and me raise you?' Sasi and Sammy ease up from under Vashti skirt tail and start playing with Thamar two boys.

'If she ain want to marry me, ain make no sense forcing she, I ain want she feel...'

'Ayoh young people's making a dance of this life. A blasted dance', Lall cut Joey off from finishing what he did want to say.

'You want marry Vashti or not? I asking you?' Joey scratching the back of he head but it ain really scratching. He rub he mouth after scratching he head, like he just done eat cassava bread. He look over and see Sammy and Sasi playing with Ricky and Marcel. They laughing like they always know one another. He remember how he and Ram used to play and something swell up inside he. He feel as if he going to cry. He look over at Bess and Thamar and they looking back at he and he hear something heavy fall from the back yard. No body ain move cause they know is only a coconut from one them trees.

'Talk up na Joey. What wrong to you?' Thamar say.

'If she alright with marrying me.' Vashti look at he and she could see is like he want to cry. The way he holding back the water in he eye from falling make she feel like touching he face. And he see how Vashti look at he and something loose inside he.

'Alright Pa – I going marry he.'

'Good. Joey call you sister them. I want they bear witness.' Joey motion to Bess and Thamar to come over.

'Howdy. Howdy. Is we custom when a man take one of we own for wife to give dowry.'

'Yes we know.' Bess tell Lall.

'We get plenty land and is only me and them three girls. I going give Joey piece land for he build house for Vashti and them boys. Enough land for he plant and so. That fair or is anything more he need. Y'all have any thing to ask. Or is fair?'

Thamar and Bess look at mattie and seem like they ain know what to say. Is like is shock they shock. None them ain feel is so things could work out between Lall and Joey after the problem he give he and Vashti when they start courtening. Is Bess first who talk up.

'That sound fair. You ain think so Joey?'

And Joey words take long to come out like if was a big big announcement he think they expecting from he. He looking at Vashti all the time he taking to say what he got to say. Not he sister them, is not them he looking at. Neither Lall. He ain looking at he children and how easy them and he sister children playing. Is Vashti he looking at. And she looking at he too and just so easy he tell Lall what he got to tell he.

'That sound fair.'

## *Titty and Joseph's waltz*

'I do wish you had told me why we were coming, Titty.' I hope I didn't sound desperate and angry or afraid. We spoke little about what happened. I couldn't tell her how I felt. It was a remarkable feeling, as if I'd discovered a new way to breathe and...

'I'm sorry Joseph. I didn't plan how it went.' Why he calling me 'Titty' all at a sudden.

'I meant it you know. It would be nice to come again. Under different circumstances. The boys might like it.' It's a remarkable feeling. We had a warm send off that day we left Sunrise. All those faces from that night, they came, beaming in the bright morning sun. Their goodbyes seemed to last an eternity as though they thought we'd never see them again. Their faces were different somehow. In their eyes I felt I could see the difference between acceptance and tolerance, between affection and gratitude, pity and compassion...

'It wasn't much of a holiday. I'm sorry, Joe.' He never call me Titty before. Next time he say it, I going pull he ass up. Why he going on so bout coming back. I tell he already we got to plan it. Is what get in he...

'I'd like to see the interior. It seems unimaginable that indigenous tribes still exist in communities there. Quite intriguing.' How had she never told me about this I'll never understand? I felt sorry after that night; that I'd not tried harder to understand...that I didn't know what she was feeling at the hospital. And I judged her. I didn't know why she screamed so violently, so angrily, so tragically...

'I never think bout it tell you the truth, Joseph.' He cant really be serious bout going in the interior –all me life I never went in there. What he want to go there for? Is what really this man want? And take me boys for mosquito mark up their skin...

'It was good of your sister to let us stay with her on such short notice.' That house in the country was dreadfully run down. The mosquitoes were ghastly. The breeze from the sea was refreshing, though. The house might be lovelier with a little help to repair it. I'll suggest...

'Pegasus would have been better, I think.' It break my heart to have to cancel the reservation. And why? He want to *experience* how the people live. To live like the blasted locals. For what? When I left all that behind. I left it all behind, hadn't I? And the houses so run down. How they get so run down? Bess and Tamar try, but is a lot of work for them. I going see...

'We've been through that already darling, haven't we?' It's only for a few nights – I don't hope to ever experience what...

'Is children property, anyhow.' Is not like Euna could say we cant stay in my own mother house. It need fix up, though. Lil paint and so. How she let it get so...

'What do you mean?'

'Children property. This house belongs to me, Thamar, Euna, Bess and Joey. Our mother left it for us to have equal share. Only Euna and I ever lived here though. The others never left Sunrise because they feel that our mother abandoned them when she left my father. It only has three bedrooms but my mother said it must be for any of us who want to stay here. None of us can sell it without discussing it with each other.' I'm sure I tell he this already. I must be tell he it.

'I see.' This was the first time she had told me so much about her family. Her mother, she had hardly spoken about. It would take some time for me to see her as part of such a large family. With so much history, so much...

'You're right though. It was good of Euna to let us stay. My aunt Nelia's two daughters used to live here but they gave Euna too much worries. It's the same when she rented one of the rooms. Too much problems. So she live here alone. It could do with fixing up. 'Them houses look so run down. When we was in Sunrise he didn't complain, but he face didn't make up too nice though. Must make arrangements to fix up the house in Sunrise when...

'And the house in Sunrise?' Now that she was talking so candidly about her family, I ventured for more of what she might give...

'My father left that to Bess because she's the only girl child who never married.' And how Thamar hold that thing in her chest till to this day. She still ain understand why Bess get the house. But every time Thamar meet a man, she move in with them and fall out with them after two mornings. Not before they big she belly.

'There's something I've been meaning to ask you.' There were so many things I've been meaning to ask her and now seemed a good time, the levity between us was like a fresh breeze.

'What is it?' I was going call he 'darling' just now, but is a long time now since I...How he sounding so? I ain hear he talking so much in a long time. The dance must be sweeten he. Is what this I hearing in he voice? And don't think I ain notice how he eye look clean like they been red red all the time. And he cried, cried when we went upstairs after everybody watching after the thing happen to he. He keep on saying how he sorry and I say I sorry too and I start feeling how I feel the time we meet and he holding my hand tight like is trembling he think it trembling...

'Do you...do you think it possible that my ancestors played a part in what happened to our daughter?' Why did I ask her this – I wished to take it back, but it was too late. Only I felt as though my great uncle Joseph played some part, but

I couldn't understand how. I simply needed to know. And since that night, since what happened I felt a closeness to my uncle that I'd never before felt and I needed to know more about him...

Oh gosh, what's this he asking me now? 'I don't know. I can't speak for your people. To be honest I can't even speak much about mine. Who knows how spirit work?' I didn't know how else to answer he. I ain't really know too good how to explain what happen. Before Loise, was Ife and my father say he had a brother name Kofi who die young too. So I ain't know what to tell he.

It was no answer. But what was I hoping she might tell me? 'Indeed. Indeed.' It raised further questions, however, and I needed to know. I desperately needed to know one more thing.

'Titty...?'

'Joseph, why you calling me Titty?'

'It's your name isn't it?' Of course it's her name. Why would I ask her this? Of course I knew all the time it was her name. But I never...

'No. My name is Titilayo, but you don't call me that. You only ever call me T.'

'Yes, but your family call you Titty.' She's right of course. Since that day when I first held her trembling hands I stumbled so much to pronounce her name that in the end I simply asked if she minded me calling her T. Well Titty – it sounded awful. I rather liked her as T and she never complained. Not once, and now...

'Most of them call me T just like you. I'm sure half of them forget my name is Titilayo.'

'Well what would you like me to call you.' Now she's upset. I think I've upset her...

'You can call me what you always call me, Joseph. T. Ok?'

'Ok.' Oh. And she's smiling again. Lovely. And did I hear her singing as before. Or was that a new sound in her voice?

'Good. What were you asking me?' It sound strange when I use to be calling me T for he just so sudden to stop and calling me Titty. The way how he say T is how he say T. Is how I like it. If I want it change, I would ask he. I ain't mean to sound brash. I hope he ain't think so. It ain't look so. He looking like something nice happening to he. I want know if he feeling how I feeling. I want...

'I wanted to know...I was wondering....where you would like to be laid to rest?' I had begun thinking more about her and her family and this other world of hers about which I hardly knew a thing. I asked her this because my mother had said that my uncle Joseph wanted to be laid to rest somewhere in the East where for most of his life he had lived. His wishes were never fulfilled. My mother had told me that the East was always his spiritual home. Yet she had entrusted me with the urn containing his ashes. I have kept it faithfully, but now...well now I wondered if this was right. If somehow he needed to be properly laid to rest.

'You planning for me to die, Joseph? How you mean where I want to be laid to rest?' I only stalling cause I think the same thing a long time now but he's my husband and I make my choice when I take he.

'Please answer me T.' Perhaps it was time....

'I want to be put in the ground next to you, if you must insist on being morbid. You and me side by side.' I come and meet he in he place. Not mine. Is how it go. Nothing can change that. I love he. I got to love where he from. Where he born and grow. Is not he come looking for me. That would be another thing. But is me come and find he. Is a chafe, but is a choice too. I make my choice done already.

'In England then?' Perhaps it was time for me to lay my uncle's ashes...

'That's where we live isn't it?'

'Yes.' I said but I was thinking about what she had said before – "who knows how spirit work."

'You know Joseph. I was thinking.' And I was in truth thinking bout it. Since that night I felt him kiss my eyes and my nose and my lips and could do nothing because it was the next day we plan do the work. I getting the feelings too, Just like he. I knew I hurt him. And he ain say nothing. Just so sweet he always been and I think is only fair.

'What darling? What were you thinking?' He had loved a woman– "an oriental" my mother used to call her until I pressed and learnt that it was during his army days in Burma. He had loved her passionately. But the family disapproved and it was this my mother said that broke him. My uncle Joseph was a broken...

'Well, I was thinking...I was thinking maybe we should sleep side by side in life too.' Like is wait he been waiting to hear me say so. And is how long it been since I see he smiling just how he smiling now. So long I cant even remember. And it feel good to know I still know how to make he smile.

'I miss waltzing with you too.' It was good to see the charm in her smile again. It felt good to know that I can still make her smile. "Just like your uncle Joseph" – my mother had said after that awful day I took T home to meet her. It was strange to see my mother crying when we told her about Eloise. But she loved her terribly that I know...

'And Joe...darling, you're right. It would be good to come back soon. I think it was too long to leave Milton and Roderick with your Mum, don't you think.' He know full well she never like me. But she love them children I give she that.

'Oh they know how to handle mother.' She's a puss really. Besides all that steam and stuff went when father died. Perhaps nothing but true love lasts beyond the grave. I think I ought to read my uncle's journals again, and see if I can possibly find where exactly she lived, the woman whom he loved so passionately.

## *Thamar at the Clap-hand*

*The Church is one foundation  
Is Jesus Christ her Lord  
She is His new creation  
By water and the word  
From Heaven he came and sought her  
To be His holy bride  
With His own blood He bought her  
And for her life He died*

*Mid toil and tribulation  
And tumult of her war  
She waits the consummation  
Of peace for evermore  
Till with the vision glorious  
Her longing eyes are blest  
And the great Church victorious  
Shall be the Church at rest*

Is a lot of people come out to see the new church open in Sunrise. Them ain give the Church no name yet but it build good cause is green heart they use inside and outside. Even the steps that leading up into the church make out of greenheart. But the foundation make with concrete. It going last cause is a strong wood what they does use to keep way woodants and fine insect. We father used to say them old time people used greenheart for medicine. They say it was a kind of wood that Solomon use to build he temple with. Bess say they build it with wood so it can move if they ever need to move it. Is on a piece land that use to belong to Congo. It situate not so far back near back dam where Congo use to live, but more up front, near Sunrise main road. He people say is that he always want to use it for. So they was only too glad it getting use at last.

When I make up me mind to go I see people standing round outside like they frighten to go in. And the door fling open for anybody who want to go. No mind where you live in Sunrise you could hear the noise the tambourines making. Drums too. Is plenty plenty people inside, cause Sunrise people like new thing. Bess been helping all week to get it complete so it could open on time. I tell Bess to go ahead without me, I going to follow she and come. I didn't want to go cause me ain able with the talking talking. But the drums knocking so hard inside the house like it raising up me blood and ain stop calling. When I reaching



close to the church door, I hearing the singing and the tambourines and shak shak sounding strong and lively. When they stop I hear a voice I recognise and a psalm, psalm 133, I know out me head since I small.

*Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity*

When I bore through the crowd of people line off at the back of the church, I see is Bess. She and them rest of people – them is the members she did tell me who form a group and open the church – dress in white from head to toe. But look Bess? I seeing is she and is like is not she. She look young, and she ain reading the psalm with no bible in she hand. Just out she head, like Pa teach we. Was not too long and if you hear how Bess singing the Psalm. Is then I remember the psalm is a song David sing. Is 'David Song of Ascents.' None of we ain understand what it mean when we small. But it sound nice to we. When she done, one and too people shout out 'again, again, read um again sister.' And Bess start back again singing the psalm.

*Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity*

When she done, a woman a little way in front of me raise up a Sankey and everybody start sing.

*Get on that glory road  
heaven is now with you,  
though the road may rough and tough  
Jesus will carry you through*

The drummers lashing the drums hard hard and if you hear clapping and noise. Thing is it I want to know if is any and any body can raise tune just so. And was true is sheer tune raising and I ain know if was the strong wood smell of the green heart get my head feeling light but I start shake and clap me hand too. I feel like is hold me head want to hold me but is just nice I feeling nice and I cry and I clap and let myself shake and ain care who get to see how I doing me self. And is me self raise up a next tune and everybody follow and sing it with me.

*Weeping may endure for the night  
Joy comes in the morning  
Weeping may endure for the night  
Joy comes in he morning  
Halleluiah for the joy*

*Halleluiah for the joy*  
*Joy comes in the morning*  
*Joy comes in the morning*

Next thing I see was a young girl start spinning round, fast fast. She walk up in front the drums and doing like she want they play she own tune. They know too. And they change the rhythm they been playing. It coming fast fast and she dancing and swinging till I see is who. Is Maya, Euna daughter walk up to the girl and the two of them start dance. I start move up cause after they take she Suriname Maya quieten down but I's still be frighten for she. She ain too like living in town so she's come back to Sunrise any chance she get. I see Bess go behind the girl who first start dance and put she hand round she. Hugging she. The girl stop jig up and Bess carry she and put a white sheet round she. I see she give she a glass of water. After the child done drink, she get back up and start back dancing.

Maya still dancing she dance and Bess walking slowly round she steering she from knocking down anything and hurting she self and any body. A next lady, dress in white too, come and bring a glass of water and give Bess to give to Maya. Easy, easy, Bess move in towards Maya and touch she. Maya didn't open she eye, but she ease down how she been dancing and let Bess put the glass to she mouth. And she drink. She drink like she been thirsty bad. She drink out all the water. And when she done drink, is so she stand up still for a lil time before we see she moving she self slowly, slowly slowly. Is so she moving she hands and raising up she leg like she doing she own dance. When I look good, I see is a kind of Chiney, Kung Fu thing she doing with she legs and hands. Is not fight she fighting. Is like she dancing. Slow and easy easy. She weaving she hand in a way like if she holding a sword or a knife. I move up closer now and go beside Bess. She deh watching Maya do she thing. The next lady in white looking after the other girl who been dancing. When she done dance, Bess tell me to watch Maya and she go to the girl and they start discourse. You cant hear what they saying – the drums still knocking. Is a long while Bess been talking to the girl, but when she done, I see she walk over to a big woman must be the girl mother and talking to she. The mother start one hollering like she belly burning she. Is a sound like is baby she making. The drums easing down now. The whole place quietening.

I see Maya put she too hands together like is pray she praying. She bend down low four times in four directions. Bowing to the East, North, South and West. When she done, she open she eyes and walk over to where Bess now standing. I follow she, but I go back with the rest of the people. Everything quiet down. Drums stop knock. Shak shak still. Tambourines ain sounding again. It

feel's though we all holding in we breath until a woman, standing not too far from Bess and Maya look up from behind a wooden stand and start address the church.

'Good day brothers and sisters. Welcome all. All are welcome to our new church.'

\* \* \*

Our drums were beating in their blood from a distant place in time and unlived memory. We understood their nervousness and it seemed the truest thing they shared. The last dying had made each of them, in their own way, revisit Ife. There was some guilt too for not doing as their Aunt Nelia had asked, what their father had promised her he would do. The debt had long detached itself from the centre of their everyday. Bess, whose seeing was fraught and fought by her sisters and young brother had tried in her simple way to remember, but being already the object of speculation from as far back as Ife, her efforts were repeatedly reviled.

‘This small thing you want to do, it cost money and who going pay?’ This was a bold feature, ever forestalling their fervent hope.

‘You?’ her sisters, Euna and Tamar, had smirked between themselves at the improbability of the notion.

‘Every skin teeth is not a laugh, we all going pay if we don’t do something,’ Bess had told them.

Their elder sister, Titty, had by this time taken up the clamorous call of her generation and vomited away the memory of the debt on the journey to England. Her over-planned return was our wilful imperative made urgent by this last daying.

Bess rose from her knees beside her bed where she had been praying. Our names she could not call for we are before her time but she called on the elder, her grandfather’s name, and she implored Ineze her grandmother too. Her father Samuel heard her pleading like a distant drumming in his heart. She called her mother too, Petromella though she had never visited her in her dream since her passing. Theirs was a relationship strained and testy long after Ife. After she prayed with tears shed for libation Bess remembered her Aunt Nelia who had borne our memories in her heart. The last work was held here by Nelia’s children who heard their mother’s calling. At this time a small girl had jumped up and landed a box on Euna’s face. This was presumed to be the prank of an earthbound spirit for their manners are abhorrent. The girl jumped up again suddenly, and then sat down, holding her face with a near smirk but seeming as though she had done nothing. Everyone there gathered were on their feet dancing as the drums formed beat and bounce. When again the girl jumped up it was noticed this time that she strutted towards Bess.

‘Do the work’, Bess heard her say before the young girl returned to her seat where she began to groan deeply. She was trying to speak again, but the words seemed to be choking her. She was breathing heavily, and when finally she was able to speak she sounded much older than she was but not like anyone the family recognised.

'It going come again next time is a girl they coming for.' The words were choked out of the girl for it was her first mediation and although our selections are not without care the adjustments cannot be hurried. The child struggled to control her breathing. Bess took some water from the service table and gently rubbed the girl's head until her breathing steadied. The girl sat up, shivered, and scurried from the room in tears. A short time after, their cousin, Kurt began to fling himself around the service table. The drummers could not cease their playing for the rhythm stirred memories and blood. And Kurt found his own rhythm in the memory of the drum. Samuel, Bess' father could not know this vessel would in time be charmed by the lure of lust and money. He found in Kurt's dancing a discordant sound as a melody beating in his blood from distant time. Kurt's dance was disjointed and slightly contrary to the drum beat.

'Clear the way, clear the way.' Immediately Bess and her sisters recognised their father's sounding vexation.

'Is you Daddy?' It was Euna who asked though she was already certain.

'How y'all do me so. See how you aunty children do a thing for she look how they show she respect. Y'all ain get no time for me. Y'all busy doing a bundle o rass.'

'Daddy, what we must do? You didn't show us what to do.' This was Bess.

'Is so you talking to you father?'

Kurt's head struggled to move slowly from side to side and he groaned heavily, as if his own words were hurting him. It was a wailing, mournful sound.

'Oh my children, oh my children and their children going wear mourning clothes all their days.' The sisters cried their stream of private pain for their father. Kurt slumped to his knees, burdened by tears he knew were not his own. Moments later and unnerved by the feeling something frightening had happened to him, a secret that he alone did not know, Kurt dazedly left the room.

The drummers outside were not yet playing. Ms Somner had told them that for now, the drums must be silent -the singing and the tambourines would suffice. She had made gestures that all were welcome into the area she had splashed with liquor and seeds. But the heights were not secured, the circumference was not drawn. The Chief bore his ground outside whilst others streaked into the house where the elder Pa and Ma had already taken seat. Pa sat in his usual place, beside the silent radiogram. Stroke had taken over his right side and he imagined the infirmity was still there. The girls' father, Samuel, was disquieted and nervous for his children. He strode back and forth in the kitchen, vowing he would not relive his last dance, when he chanced to appear before his daughters, importuning them to bear him in their hearts and memory. He glanced across the house to the living room where everyone was gathered and

noticed the serious faced man on of his daughters had married. Joseph was sitting upright on a low wicker armchair purposely placed for him to see and watch, secretly, privately but hardly comfortably. His nose seemed flared, Samuel thought, as if he was inhaling the foulest odour.

Joseph Ambrose could not deny to himself, even if he hid it from his wife, the discomfort he felt in the searing heat of Sunrise. But the lavishing breeze from the Atlantic soothed him into afternoon lulls on the veranda. He longed now to be there half dazed, watching the abundant fans of coconut trees. It was five o'clock in the evening. The sun was cooling, but the air was thick and clingy. He was not to know that his position had been discussed by those gathered for they seemed to do so without the exchange of words. They knew it was his daughter who had died and for that they had their sympathies. They felt too in their hearts that the work could not be done to its depths and fullest glory without his English pounds for which they simply smiled their gratitude and bestowed upon him highest courtesies.

A large wooden table crafted from greenheart by the elder, Festus, was centred in the living room. Four white candles like miniscule pillars were nested at each corner. Of varying heights were also dispersed around the table a number of coloured candles. A clear glass bowl was lavishly filled with grains of all blends and mixtures; dried corn and black eye, barley and rice this was well done. Succulent sweets we savoured for their blessings sparkled from yet another glass bowl. Resplendent white lilies and delicate angel ferns which Bess herself had preened and picked had been placed at either end of the greenheart table. Bread baked without yeast by Thamar along with a lemon coloured sponge cake, spiced and sweet smelling of vanilla essence were plated and perched amidst other delights. Spice mango, fig and apple banana, pineapple whose head had been picked for ripeness, muss and water melons, red grapes and long papaya were savoured and eyed by all who came. Receptacles of water, creek, spring, black and coconut from the heights we saw.

The sisters, their relatives and friends adorned the clothes of their everyday; their heads tied the Creole style. Ms Somner sprinkled rainwater, the purest of our signs. Sweet orange and lemon, lavender and cloves flavoured the Florida water she sprayed on everyone and around the house.

The Chief was still outside, as if pristinely rooted there. He heard the jangling of the tambourines that gave rhythm to the hymn, 'The Church is one Foundation.' Ineze had only intended to shake her feet a little. It seemed a long time that music had played in her heart and memory. Her grand daughter, Titty was bouncing to the beat of the tambourines when she felt her feet extend as if she was a ballerina practicing to pirouette. Her balance wavered and her feet rested back to the ground and began to shake as Ineze yielded to the light's

rhythm. Titty began to hop on one leg prompting Ms Somner to ask one of her assistants to place a white candle in her hand. Titty stopped hopping, but her head swayed as the singing continued. There were murmurs of recognition by those who saw in Titty the movements they knew to be that of her grandmother. With closed eyes, and yet without disturbing its sumptuous setting, Titty took a calabash of spring water from the table and waited. Ms Somner motioned to Euna, Bess and Tamar that they should approach their elder sister. Quietly, sombrely the three did so. In turns Titty daubed a little of the water on their faces without speaking. It was the gentlest touch and tender too. But in a twinkling Titty's anger was provoked when she saw their brother, Joey, approaching as he had been called by Ms Somner to receive his own tender blessing.

'You fire rass, you blasted fire rass. You disrespect this belly you disrespect your family. Where you been last night. Them ain tell you foh stay clean. You nasty up the damn wok. You disrespect your belly.' Fiercely, Titty wielded her grandmother's indignation and fury.

Joey's heart pounded and he wanted to run and hide within the solacious arms and heart beat of a woman who knew the rhythms drumming his own heart. For sudden and great was the remorse he felt. He could not understand the extremeness of his feelings. And for a moment, he was unable to speak. In the silence he could hear Titty's breathing heavily as if revving for a fight.

'I ain do nothing, why you busing me. What I do,' Joey said finally so all could hear. Ms Somner gasped, for his words bore a sounding vexation. She made an attempt to steer Joey from the spot where he now seemed rooted, unable to make the flight he craved, when Titty slapped him, suddenly, sharply, brutally across his face. Although they pinched the corners of his eyes, Joey tried to repel the tears threatening to shame him. The effort was futile. He sobbed. They were hard sobs, and without control, as he had never done for all his life. And in the tears were mixed an eternal uncertainty of his purpose on earth. Tamar edged towards him, and tried to hold him, for it pained her to see her brother's deep distress. But clutching still to his vexation, Joey pushed her away, as if he was gearing to charge from the room in search of a desperate freedom.

'Respect your belly and this work boy. Respect your belly boy.'

Joey tried again to compose himself. And yet again, his effort was futile. His knees buckled like a stricken lamb and he dropped them to the floor.

*Say poor sinner lov'st thou me.*

*Can a woman's tender care cease towards the child she bare?*

*Yes she may forgetful be.*

*Yet will I remember thee.  
Mine is an unchanging love.*

Ineze, not so weary, but her heart ached with the pain a mother feels forced to upbraid a wilful child. Gently she stepped away from Titty, for she knew that the body was no measure for the will and might of the spirit. She returned to sit beside her husband. He noticed that she had changed; she seemed brighter, her eyes sparkling with tears. He wanted to touch her face, so much softer it now seemed.

*Search me O Lord and try this heart of mine.  
Search me, O Lord and from the dross of sin  
refine as gold and keep me pure within.*

*Search me thou my thoughts,  
whose springs Thine eyes can see.  
From secret faults, O Saviour, cleanse thou me.*

Joey was doubled over on the ground in front of his sisters, weeping a multitude of agonies that the Chief could hardly bear. The Chief had shifted toward the house not so that he could see what he knew Joey had always felt. But he hoped that Joey might finally see him and draw from him a little of his own light and strength so that he too might feel strong again.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me*

Thamar and Bess helped Joey to rise up. He was shaky on his feet. The Chief felt the tears Joey cried and they seemed not so much of a waste but neither were they like those from a sweet water creek.

*I shall possess within the veil a life of joy and peace.*

Joey could hear the words of the song singing somewhere inside himself. In that moment he realised that the voice he heard singing that song seemed at once to belong to someone else and yet sounding words of a song that was his own. And beyond the tears that were there clear for all to see were tears he cried deep within himself that seemed at once to hurt him and yet bring him a feeling of comfort. And joy too was there like a suspended notion in the interminable darkness of his ancient agonies.



-How was it  
 -Nice  
 -You look light  
 -I feel so  
 -Is nice for truth  
 -Is nice  
 -You look bright  
 -I feel so  
 -you ain tired  
 -No. Is them does be tired. Not we  
 -Oh  
 -Should have been you Fes  
 -Me what  
 -To open their way  
 -Why it should be me  
 -Is your responsibility  
 -Why it must be me  
 -Them people ain going like it. Wasn't so it was to go  
 - How you mean  
 -You's not the elder? You know this thing have a order, Fes. But you playing you stupid but is serious this thing serious. Look how much mistake make already and you frighten to use you thing  
 -Is you fast and go dance now you telling me was me to go before you. Why I must dance? You ain see how me leg stay so till is stick carrying me  
 -Is your responsibility, Fes. Is only help I trying to help them children, specially Joey cause it look like he ain know if he going or coming  
 -The boy not going to change. Nothing them children do cant save he. Even Chief despairing with he  
 -Is we must give them a chance  
 -What chance we can give them Ineze when they singing that song like it was specially written for we. Is we is the wretch. Is not he John Newton we must call wretch. Who is he anyhow  
 - Is that song we been singing all the time too. And is so they remembering we, Festus no mind you decide you ain like the song again. Why you asking me who is John Newton. What he got to do with you and me  
 -Is not he write that song – says so in we hymnal. He's the wretch aint it so? He write bout heself. And we take it on. Like we was always wretches like he. Is what I trying foh show you  
 -You talking nonsense. We all sinners. That song make us see that. The boy going to change.

-Maybe when they stop singing that song we going deh back alright  
-And maybe if you start dance you going stop singing about your leg

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- Change don't only have one face Ineze. Them boys right to call he Derek Persaud. He making a world of promises to them coolie people like he and them is friend and family. Is stupid he stupid

-Change cant be friend to everybody, Festus. People have a right to take back what them feel is them own

- I never take nothing from no coolie man. You talking like we black people take this country from coolie. What power blackman have to do that. Go rile up Churchill in he grave, tear off on Kennedy and he liard, meddling self. Like you forget was a time when breeze couldn't blow through coolie and black. We all was on one side. We 'gree to send the white man packing. And we ain do no halfy halfy thing, we come fully out of her Majesty, and them rest of country laughing like we do something stupid. But you tell me, is what sense it make saying you get independence but you under protection of the Queen of England. If you emancipate you emancipate, no one not protecting you, you must can stand up for yourself. Is what you think people - black, coolie, buck, potagee - is what you think we vote for in '53? We ain vote for no coolieman or no black man. We vote for this country. We feel is better we lead we self, how we want. But what? How you going have one party running the country? England - she know good how to divide up people. Is only England know how to take two from one, like them people who can extract milk out of coffee even when the two mix together good good. When she done out of one thing is a whole lot of thing we trying to understand and we get confuse till we ain even know is what we suppose to understand again

-I think is Hart you talking bout, what that have to do with he. And what time you get to be studying what the man doing anyhow. Like you ain seeing is them children I studying

-Woman I trying to show you how history does come back round. Hart want to show people he fair, that Guyana's a fair country where election concern so he bring back the same white man who show we how to fix election to oversee how free and fair we election going be now. How he can trust people who teach we foh fix election. And who teach presidents how to blow up a man in he car or shoot he clean clean in front he wife and the world? Is not beat he trying to beat the devil at he own game. And it going to land the country in a lot of problems. He bending over he self to show coolie people he setting things right for them. If

he think coolie going vote for he the man's an ass. A coolie going always look out for he mattie, no mine how he smile with you and tell you you and he is friend. But he Hart don't look like he understand how this thing work. Is who really he looking out for? He tying bundle with everyone but he own people and is so is sell he selling out the country. How he can pay back debt to them people. Is not them suppose to give we compensation for what they do we. What compensation we get. He have influence, he smart and still he only skinning he blasted teeth with them white spies. Look how much of them deh here cram up in the place like they still looking for something we self still ain know where to find. How they can come foh oversee we again when we send them packing look how long now. So is emancipate we emancipate? Is independent, we independent for truth, you tell me

-Festus you taking on the man too much. We cant do nothing bout them things now. Nothing ain change, and time moving still same way. We had we time. And what we do. How many black people take up the chance to own land and do lil farming and make we own business? One and two. But look how Bess have to deh behind Joey to help out with the shop. He ain want to work. We ain left coolie to run all them business so we can look fancy in shirt and tie? Now what? We crying eye water cause we getting knock back. Is long we down tools and loll off. Like we frighten work. But is not the same hard work that can build a country from scratch? You can remember is who say who own the land own the country? Is who say the thing? Is not so it should go, is who *work* the land, who work hard for the land, is them is for the whole country, no mine who wearing the shirt and tie, not true? Is how long you think things can go on the same way? Them people must want them time. You don't think that's fair

-Woman is what you really telling me? So is not hard work I work in the bush all them years. You forget how your father used to talk bout the contracts and code they make up to pressure black man trying to work he own land and do for heself. Is strike we strike make them bruck them code. Is not to say when them free we we ain want go work. We want them pay we proper for we work. They free we but they still want we work for them for nothing. That is anything? You call that fair? Is free we free if we working for nothing? Is bring they bring coolie and stop we from striking. Them coolie so blasted fool them couldn't see is use they using them

-Is what really tricking you, Fes, you mind or your mouth. You twisting facts to suit you blasted self. I know what my father tell me. Is not just coolie. Pottagee ain come, Chiney and them new Africans come here same way too. What bout all them people from them small islands? So you been trying to tell them children say is only coolie bruck up strike. Me father tell me different

-Is more coolie than them rest. They bring more coolie than them rest for fix we good good. Is row you like row. You think washing clothes, mining babies and standing over pot is any kind of hard work. How you think this country where it is. Black man back build am

- Is so na? Then must be what a man build he think he have a right to bruck. You work hard for true. But you forget you drink hard and play hard and spend hard too. And done out the money long before you reach from bush. Not even say put a side some for hard times. And you must know things going get bad. Hard times always come. Just like what happening now. So much budget make, and so much plan pon top of plan and outside book people with economy papers coming in and out and we still ain making nothing

-But is me build this house. This house ain build with borrow money. When it done build I ain owe no bank, no man money. Me father teach me is a serious thing when a man got to borrow money to build he house. I tek time and build it, slowly so it can last long. With green heart – you ain see how strong it last till now. Cause is not pitch pine it build with

-Is show off you like show off 'bout how you build this house, but building the house is not it alone. Is who been looking it after. If you ain know how to look after it, all the hard work and time you put for build it ain make no sense. The house get dilapidate till you your self fed up and want to move out. It don't look new like when it first build. It come like the mango tree near the latrine that never bear. And no body never chop it down, till now it ain bearing but who chopping it down. You build the house from scratch for true, and I ain saying it ain do good, but what plan you make for we future? If we did have a lil small piece put down we could buy piece land for all them children, stead of them squeezing themselves in this one house. Is only problem make between Tamar and Bess cause you left the house give Bess alone. And them two living so like them in two house. You talking bout Hart this and Hart that but is what really you do

-Like I's President and Prime Minister now too. Me ain have no paper and diploma. Me ain know how to twist up me mouth and pra la la. Is not me to have vision for the whole country. Hart ain got no vision for he blasted self is just that. All them papers he get and he only skinning he teeth when he meet the white man in he country. Making he self look like a damn jackass man. He get more paper than 'nough them white man he pra la la with and what? Skin he skinning he teeth with them and get them thinking he arms make out of mud

-Ow na Fes, the man is only a man, paper or no paper. He's just a man. And is not like he been having any dealings with them big people from the day he born. He talking same way like them but talking is one thing and thinking how they think is a next thing. Is hard to think how other people think and how they want

you think. Nobody but Eve ever hear snake talk. There got a way how certain people does talk and is only them really know what they saying. Sometimes is force they use to make people think the way they want they think and see things how they want them see things. Is not that make big people does beat small children to teach them what them must learn? And when they learning what the big people telling them, they frighten. And they always going be frighten when they talking to big people. Cause is them they learn from. Is big people teach them. Is not that we do Bess? Get she frighten to see what she know she seeing. And to know what she know. Is that you should be studying, not no politics. Is them children I studying. Look how Joey making children and is who looking them after. He ain got a care in the world bout them children he making

-You want I must be responsible for how the boy living he life

-Who else responsible? Like he's not your legacy? We have to try with Joey. Why you don't talk to Chief. He must know how to get through

-How a buckman going know how to get through to a big hardback like Joey. Why it have to be a buckman who looking me legacy anyhow

- Chief been here long. Is just how they make it, is just how it is. You still ain seeing? This thing is not racial you must can see that. Is disgusting how people stick up tight in them skin and frighten to touch them own mattie when we's all poor people and we's all one people when you really look at it

- All one what? How you can say we's all one? Woman you head good? You think a coolie going call you his sister or me his brother? Look how much problem them giving Joey and Vashti. Why is always we blackpeople does jump in other people thing so? Same problem we get with Mella and she potagee people when she and Samuel courtening. And look what happen. She didn't run way back to she people when thing get bad, left all them children for Samuel and we raise? Now the boy come and make same history all over. Titty she tell she self she blasted white cause she get more complexion than them rest. Look how she gone go mix up with white people. But is only a lil time before day catch up with moon. Take she long to learn blood is blood. Why we children got to mix up mix up so. A coolie is a coolie and he does wear he culture strong on he back and he don't like mixing at all

- You blaming the people for having them culture now too. You know Vashti father only looking out for he child. And Mella didn't leave them children foh we raise. Like you forget is she take Euna and Titty to town and get them in a good school. And is not the same School Euna is Deputy Head mistress at? I ain saying I 'gree with how they living. Look how Euna left she only throw foh Bess and Tamar look after. And she Euna take so long foh make baby. She pray so hard and when she get through she left she belly just so, and deh stick up in town like is she one in the world, propping up she mother people ole house. And she Titty

fly in and fly straight pass she people them house ain even look in on she sister. Is not right man, all them things I studying Fes. It grieving me. It does get me belly feeling tight tight like it going burst. The shop shelf dem always empty, always looking so run down. It ain making no money like first time. But you get time to run you mouth after them politician. Study how you can help them children help them selves na. And if Vashti father got a problem with Joey I ain give he wrong. You self does turn round and say is wotless the boy wotless

- I alone own that right since you does be reminding me the boy's my own

-Look man buck or no buck the good God almighty put Chief to look this family and he must can get through. You must talk to him. Too much mistake make in we life and now them children own. Is up to we to fix what we can fix now till it reach more down in we line. Look how the thing reach till to England and knock Titty daughter. We think it done with Kofi and Ife. But this thing ain done and I know is a big work we got to do to help them children

-But what them really doing for we. Them is not children, them is big big people with them own children. Is only Bess ain get none of she own. Must be so she life cut. But Ineze what them doing for we. Is only Bess. And she ain too sure neither. But none of them rest don't put out lil rum for me, a lil water for we drink and we there round them all the time. That is not nothing for we ask nor for them to do

- Them is children no mine how big they big. You want to ask yourself is what we really show them about this thing. How you can expect them to know when we weself do like we ain know. You ain see is try them trying to fix things. We did put water out for you mother or me own, or for you mother mother and my mother mother. The whitepeople say when you dead you dead, not true? So look how long we done do them things. Children cant do what none body never show them how to do. Them trying, Festus and we got to help them. you think was easy for Titty to bring she husband here. To a choke up small place like Sunrise where current cutting out steady and pipewater running red. She ain use to them things again. And what he know bout black out. Is always bright in England. You ain see how he look frighten? She ain tell he nothing. I ain say I give she wrong. What she going tell he

-Mosquito tearing he tail is da get he frighten. She should have bring he long but she she self stay long to come home. Girl Ineze, this thing get me weary. I ain know. Seem like there's no rest. Like the work is long and it ain have no recompensation. Plenty plenty work and no recompensation

-Must be so it stay when you lost way from your self. Is a big work to find your way back. Anyhow is not to say we must find we way back to nothing cause nothing ain deh back no where. Everything deh right here. Right here. Them coolie know them thing and they does use it. We frighten we thing and is da

make we stray way. A coolie can tell you direct where he people come from, and he can find he line straight back three, four hundred years. But he deh here just like we deh right here. Now. I did know my grandmother and my grandfather, but I ain know who else come before them. But that is not to say I ain know them but is like I forget I know them. We forget we people. We forget them Festus and is a serious thing happen to we people. Is not something you can forget just so. But we forget. We put everything in one basket and forget. Look when Congo did tell we what we must do with Bess. What we do? And Pandit ain tell we too what we must do to stop this thing. And is who been telling we things all the time. Is not we people. Things you and me never read nor learn no where. Is who been telling we. It come from we heart and through we blood even though we ain paying it no mind it just keep running through we. Is not them alone fool we, is fool we fool we self. Some nights when I lying here I does reach a big big place I ain know is where but it have nough space and if you see people who does come out to see me. Drums does be knocking, women and children singing and dancing in the street. The children skin look shine and clean and black black like nothing never touch them. The streets same way muddy like in Sunrise. The men does look powerful. They always barefoot and they foot broad like they trying to cover the whole ground. And when they lift me up to carry me through the streets, is like I's a queen floating on nothing. When they put me down, is always by a black river where they start sing and drum to raise up watermamma. When she come out she does look so frightening I start to run not looking back till my eyes them open

-Why you does run from she? How she look

- One time she look young and a next time she face look more old than time. She eyes does open big big like they trying to laugh. When I small I see she come on my grandmother and spin she round fast fast fast then stop dead straight, only she hand them moving like the coolie god Pandit did have on he wall

-I never tell none body bout a time I nearly drown. She nearly drown me

-Who nearly drown you

-Fairmaid. I never tell none body. Was me, Ross Myers and Prince Douglas. A day, early morning, we get way to go swim and ketch crab. That time was a long way out to sea. Take whole day to reach from Sunrise. That day we ketch plenty crabs. Hide them behind a rock sticking up by the sea edge till we done swim. Sun was just coming up. Ross and Prince ducking in and out the water and I a lil way from them watching them cause I frighten to duck under water. All at a sudden, I feel something pulling me down under the water. First I frighten but then I start feel so light like I floating and I hear a voice, was not Ross or Prince. I hear a voice say open yoh eyes. Cause my eyes been close all this time. I open them and see a woman direct in front of me. She skin like Sunrise mud and

shining like it have gold dust sticking to it. She eyes blue like how my grandmother eyes blue. But she ain look old. She hair yellow. Or like gold. It long long and floating and spread out in the water. If you see how the water clear the more down you reach. She smiling and I start smile too cause is I nice feeling. It feel nice like I in a day time dream. Dreaming I deh in heaven. You know how day time dream does be sweet. Is how I dreaming. She hand floating like they dancing. She have on a blue dress. It see through and flouncing in the water and I watching how it moving slow and cant take way my eyes from watching the blue see through dress she have on. You want to stay here with me, she ask me. I ain know how to answer so I ain saying nothing. You want to stay, live here with me. Dream here with me, live here by the sea with me, she saying to me. With me Amaya. I am Amaya, I think she saying she name Amaya. Amaya, like I dream Euna to name she daughter, member how she been praying and praying for baby. I have gold here see gold enough here for you and me. And if you see gold coins, whole heap of gold coins start float round me. I ain seeing where they coming from but they nough and bright like sun shining. And she start laughing just how Euna used to laugh when she small like a macaw sounding strange then it stop sudden like is hiccoughs she get. You want to stay here with me, give me progeny. Worship me. In the sea. You and me and all this money, she asking me. Answer me, boy answer me. Follow me. Worship me. I getting frighten and feeling like I going choke cause I trying to answer she till now I ain know what I was trying to answer she and say but is then I hear Ross and Prince calling me. Fessy. Fessy. I trying to answer I down here, but nothing coming out me mouth. Follow me, she still saying. Bring gold flowers for me. I hear she say. And gold honey. Bring me honey when you come back to see me, she saying, don't leave me lonely and alone here in the sea come back and look for me. She turning away from me and I hear she laughing again but it sound like if she crying now. Is then I see a big big snake wrap round she head, looking back at me and it sound like is the snake crying and laughing. Sound so strange, I get frighten and I take in a whole heap of water cause I trying to talk out. But then I feel like something pushing my feet and I reach back up fast like I ain even been down nowhere. Ross and Prince calling me and asking where you been. You know how long we been calling you. I never tell no body. I make all kind excuse so's not to ketch no more crab with Ross and Prince. I never go back. Must be a month after I stay just so and start limp pon me right leg same right leg what get strokes

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-Chief, I want you do something for my son, Joey. He doing a bundle of rass with he life and them people saying is like the line donning. They want you see what you can do for he

-You sure is me help they want- me - a buckman. Look how long you people ain taking me on. Look how long I deh trying with he. Big hardback pushing forty like he.

-Is not that you suppose to do? You must can help he. You doing like you ain got no power? You must be have power cause they keep you free

-Man you always lambasting me for this thing. Everybody get squeeze. All of we. Not me more than you or you more than me

-But they left you for run free you must can see that. You stay free so must make you feel is strong you power strong

-What kind free you talking bout? You know what is free? Since you come through you talking as if you know what is free. Like if you think is something you can touch. You ain really know what is free. Free is not even when you dead and you can see now who and who is your brother. Free is not even when you still know your gods names and ain even know who is your brother. Free is not even when you can remember who's your great great great grandfather and you cant feel is nothing to watch a man tear out a next man tongue from he mouth cause he talking a way he cant understand and doing what he ain want he do. Free is not even when you can drink the same black creek water where a tiger just done drink and feel you is boss and you ain know how to bear your brother cross the way Simon bear Jesus own. Free is not easy. Is not even when you sure you name kwakwani, Kwakwani, Mazaruni, Mazaruni, Waini, Waini, or Wai Wai, Wai Wai and you ain know who's really your brother. A man who free is not no shadow. Free is not easy. A man who free know he have power. He know he power's not no wickedness. He power quiet like Pakaraima. Cause a man quiet ain mean he ain have power. Free is when silver and gold and hat cant buy a man power. Free is not even when you know what Pakaraima thinking for so long and you ain know Wai Wai, Shanti, Warrau, Congo, Macusi, Guinea, Wapishiana, Kromanti and you is brother. And if you cant 'gree and live good with mattie free is when you do like Esau and Jacob do and do like what Sarai tell Hagar to do and ain forget still that he and you is brother. But what? Is centuries I been at this thing and free coming like if is a thing inside yourself that keep moving around cause it cant find a easy place to rest itself

- Look like you been studying this thing long time. I ain sure I understand good what you saying, but I hearing you. And I still want to know if you can help Joey

-Weights and history burdening he, burdening all your people and them ain know. Joey's a centuries man like you and me. It going take he long to know he self, he strength, he purpose. Is going take he long to understand is what does

make he fly in he sleep. He not using the craft but it trying to use he. The craft can do that to a man. You ain see till now how Bess running from the craft. But is not nothing. Is not a easy thing to master the craft, to get to see back your light. Is a whole lot of levels you got to pass through and climb. You got to master each one before you can channel you way back and know this universe we all deh in and what we mean to we self and one another. Joey see me in he dream a time. When he small. He ask me who I was, who I was to he. I tell he I's he cousin. And if you hear how this lil boy buse me. Busing me cause he say how I could be he cousin and ain look nothing like he. Is ready we think he ready cause same way like you daughter, Bess he born with he light bright and till now no one can see he light bright. Not like she who seeing me clean clean and ain asking me nothing. Joey ain know he get it. After he buse me so in he dream they tell me I must stay way from he till he light come back up. But is going more down with the flesh thing he deh pon. You getting what I trying to show you

- I hearing you. Man Chief I fraid for them. All of them. Is not easy. Things getting more hard for everybody. Is a lot of things I studying. How me and Mella fight over stupidness when you now looking at it. When we could have been living good good. She God. Me God. Was not one God. How she people Catholic and my people ain Catholic. That was she problem after we do the thing with Bess. She say how my people mad. I get mad and cuss she potagee rass and ask she if is only one blood them children make with. Is we black people blood get them children so flighty she tell me and still she couldn't understand why I ain want make them Catholic. She was only thinking bout them children and them schooling she say. Catholic have good good schools in town. Why I following Ma and Pa and sending them children to the Lutheran church. When people saying Pastor Millington does suck. Unto now me ain know if anything go so for truth. But she frighten Pastor Millington and cause of that she say bout how she not going to no Lutheran church. Is so come she take Euna and Titty to town and give them first communion and all kind thing. Them too bright to be hitch up in a chokey country village like Sunrise she tell me. And them two couldn't wait to leave and start speak like if they barn and grow outside. But let me ask you something- she God, me God, she church me church is who church really is who God really. Is not dead we God dead if he see shadow breaking a boy child neck and cant save he. And now look a girl child dead just so and he deh deh watching. Is what really them teach we. Is not teach they teach we how is a world without end what going end when God son come again. Is the same God teaching we one thing and then a next and get we so blasted confuse till we ain know we own damn self and nothing at all bout how the universe make like you been saying

-I hearing you

### *Joey - A wretch like me*

He's usually go to town to buy rations for the shop he's suppose to help out he sisters them with in Sunrise. But most times when Joey go town he does find he self at Jensens. Is a bar and hotel hitch up at the corner of Robb and Camp Streets. It own by a Potagee name Alvarez and he wife – she from Cayenne. She name ain coming to me now. Alvarez's hardly be there so is mostly she does be running the place. Is not no fancy place but she keep it nice. Clean. She obsess with keeping fly and mosquito out. Every minute she get them girls foh spray baygon and fly killer. Then on top it have a sweet freshener smell like cherry and sugar local drink with spices. Is a place where a man and woman can pleasure themselves for a hour or two. Is she - Alvarez wife – is she tell he to run it so. All kind people does be there. Buck coolie black white. All kind people. Rum sucking men and rum sucking women is mostly who does be there.

You wont find much white people in Guyana round election time though. They hear it does get violent when is election time and how crime does get more high. So you wont see much of them time like now. Is not to say that Titty husband brave because he come now. He only playing he part in a thing that's big more than he. Even self he did listen to he ole civil servant friend who ask he why he going now he would still find he had to reach. He wife Titty too. She reach cause is high time she reach. And if she ain telling he nothing what he really know bout violence and anything. So Jensens ain have white people renting rooms now. If was another time, you'd see plenty foreigners white black and Indian, bush men and business men and university people drinking and gaffing and making play. Cause it clean and the rooms cheap a lot of outside people does rest up there when they come. Is da what really make Joey does go there too. He like being round outside people. He tell he self they different. They look different, they sound different, they smell different even. Joey feel there's some other thing outside people have but he ain know is what but he tell he self one day he going find out cause is something what make outside people look strange like they head ain too good.

When he grandmother lash he for spending the night at Jensens I ain saying she wrong, cause he did mess up he self. And you must know sexing before you do the kind of work them girls do can bring more problems. But Joey is a funny boy, he does pick up things in he own time and he like take he time to get to understand a thing. I ain too sure he people know is so he stay. And so he and them going always ketch case. Cause is something they got to know bout he. How he think. How he feel. What make he does behave how he does behave.

He have he own way, sensitive. Since he small. Feeling things deep. Hurting and crying into he heart. And is a hurt you cant understand just so easy. It still deh in he. He ain stay so for nothing. It connect to a old agony what I myself does feel. Is know he people got to know why he stay how he stay.

Joey ain really plan to stay at Jensens da night. But he butt up with a man from outside and they start reasoning till it reach late. He did notice this outside man before and Joey did feel to go talk to him but he ain know what he would say.

And too besides Lurline, a oley youngey thing he does sex with now and then, brackle he when he just stepping out to ketch a late bus and he couldn't hold out. Is so he turn and go back inside and she and he ask for a room. All I trying for make he remember what them girls tell he he ain taking me on. Is so it go with Joey. Is hard to get through to he ever since he small. When he first wake up he light bright like he sister Bess own and he brother he people take back. But after a time it start go down cause no one ain doing nothing for he. And he ain doing nothing for he own self. Nothing he ain doing. He just get the light and ain doing nothing.

Before he and Lurline start their fun I press down on he head to give he a stiff headache but she go in she bag and give he two aspirin. The aspirin didn't work but after she start rub up she self on he, he forget say he head creasing with pain. Next thing I try make he see me so he skin could crawl and get he frighten but I forget is beer not brown rum he and Kofi drinking all night. And how he going see me if is beer and not rum he drinking. Is rum I's want. And High Wine. I only left was to leave he there with he thing and sit outside he door till day clean.

Kofi, the man Joey been drinking with, he must be have a few years behind Joey. You could see he's a old head though. He been here before, you could see so. He used to go by the name Rex Chapman till must be three years back. He self change he name. Just stop call he self Rex after he father take he rest and dream he say he must go by the name Kofi. He mother and the rest he family point blank refuse to call he 'kofi' even when he tell them bout the dream. He mother – she name Victoria after one them white queens - say she ain business and besides is not he father he dream but the devil cause the only Cuffy she know is the one every one say is Brownham bacoo. He tell she there's a whole country full of Kofis in Africa. But she say she don't know nothing bout that and she tell he how the thing Brownham build so ugly and how he could go and name he self after a bacoo. When he tell she say Cuffy's not more ugly than the white witch what still stick up outside parliament building she ask people who been round them at the time if they hearing how brazen this boy brazen. She say is da she didn't like he for, he mouth always hot. Is so he stay ever long. He get

she so mad she bring back up the story that Kofi never finish he studies. 'You's nothing like yoh sister. Look how long she done do she own and you just drop out. Drop out cause them ain telling you nothing you ain already know. So you's professor now. Is a damn disgrace all the money we waste. Head always in books and you ain get no paper foh show no body. History – what history so you want to know. What use we have for history now. He mouth just hot. And he want *I* must call he Cuffy. Hear what this boy calling he self now.' And is so she tear off on Kofi going on so till he left she firing off and Kofi thinking to he self say must be she he get he hot mouth from.

Anyhow Kofi keep he title, Chapman, but he only too glad to give up 'Rex' cause in School in Guyana and College in America he get tantalise for he name. I ain give he wrong, Rex is not what people does call dog?

Kofi never get he self tie up with a Jensens woman. One and two look alright to he but he scornful bad. Not only that, he's a serious man when it come to them things. He don't eat out, though the woman he live with in America fretting she self say he got a next woman home here.

He hitch a seat on the table where Joey sitting. He ain feel to sit on no other table and he did notice Joey some time before and seem to he like they could hold a reason. He ask Joey what he drinking. One of the bar girls bring four bottle of Banks for them and take up Joey empty bottle. It take a while before he ask Joey he name and unto now Joey ain know why he tell he he name Cudjoe, Cudjoe Quamina when everybody does just call he Joey.

'You get a strong name there boy...Cudjoe Quamina...African through and through.'

'I does go by Joey'. He say it like he embarrass.

'Kofi Chapman.'

'Like Cuffy,' Joey say and though he want to ask he how he get the name he shut up he mouth. Something else pricking Joey about the name Kofi, but he ain know is what. Is like he hear the name – the way how Kofi saying it before. Or like he did know someone else name so, but it ain coming to he clear, cause is a long time he ain hear talk bout he father older brother who did name Kofi same way. The one who die same way young like Ife, like Eloise. So Joey make a sign inside he self to leave it be for now, he going remember a next time.

Kofi see how Joey look at he and know what he thinking but he ain say nothing.

'Cudjoe is a legend in Jamaica...he was leader of the maroons. Maroons. You understand what I mean? Like them Djuka. He and he sister Nanny beat up the British with them own weapon. They think he was a savage.'

'You sound like you's a professor or something?'

'Na man. I does do a lot of reading. You don't read. Since I know me self is so I stay always finding some book to read. Things I know bout General Cudjoe of

the maroons I read cause I want to know my history. Is mine...mine and your history.'

'I think you say he's Jamaican? How is your history and my history'

'Boy is your history. Jamaican, Guyanese, Trinidadian, Bajan – what you think? Is one family. Ain make no difference. Is one family. Is scatter we scatter. How else you get the name. You carrying a powerful name boy you got to know who you are man.' Something in Kofi voice get Joey frighten when he saying you got to know who you are. Frighten like he's feel when I go up close to he and try tell he something when he sleeping. He hearing me and like he ain hearing me. He seeing me and like he ain seeing me. Like how he sister's operate. He's get frighten when it happen to he. And a next thing he never been Jamaica, never see Barbados. Trinidad neither. So is want he want to know how he and them people could be any kind of family like how Kofi saying. And is not that he been asking me in he dream that time?

'I ain saying we is not one cause I know we's all African. I just ain...' Kofi didn't give Joey chance to finish.

'And you get a street name after you too. Da's real nice, man.' Joey skin he teeth lil the way how Kofi say it.

'Must make you feel like a man to have a name so strong. So much history inside it – you know that?'

'I ain understand what you mean.'

'Your name, man. Your name does give you strength. Is the surest thing you know. You don't feel so. Strong. Cause you know you name connect to something. And you got to know what it mean. Tells you the kind of man you are. The kind of man you was suppose to be. That's how them Africans name deh children. Give them the heart of themselves in their name. You see here in Guyana you believe you's just a man, in the States you're a black man or you's African American. You cant be just a man. You have to make a choice which type of man you want to be. A man who know he self inside out or a man who ain got no self because he tell he self he's an American or worse a man who see he self the way a white man see he.'

Joey say, 'Oh', like he understand but he ain too sure what Kofi trying to tell he.

'When General Cudjoe was small all he and he people do was run and hide from the whiteman. Backra. Jamaicans call them backra. What da sound like to you?'

Joey ain say nothing he just look at Kofi and the two of them laugh.

'He see enough he people get kill when he father was leader. He father was Kromanti. A set of people in Africa name so. When he get big even though he lead the white man a dance it never stop he feeling like he was prey. Is so the white man still see the black man. Something he can hunt. Them people wicked bad. Is we spirit they want take – destroy we soul even. But I going tell you

something. If you know yourself good you know nothing cant touch your soul. Da part is what God make. White people ain have no godliness 'relse they would never try take people soul. Try break people spirit. You ain feel so'.

'I never think bout it tell you the honest truth.'

'How you mean you never think bout it. What you does think. You never think bout yourself. Who you is. How you come here. Why you deh here and so. Man let me ask you something. You believe in reincarnation?

'I ain too sure what's...I ain too sure bout da.'

'When you die and come back in a next body. You think that could happen?'

'Anything could happen. I ain see why not. But I ain too sure how it could happen.'

'Me neither, but I does stay just so and a thing start coming to me. Da never happen to you? You get a sudden understanding of something like if you read it but you know you didn't read it no where but you know is true. It does happen steady. I feel like I lost way and like I running mad, as if something taking me over and telling me things. Da never happen to you?'

Joey know good good what Kofi saying. He experience it plenty times. But is surprise he surprise when he hear a next man talking it out and to Joey is like Kofi don't feel no way how it sound to people. Is so outside people stay, Joey telling he self.

'What you trying foh say? You does hear things? Man is mad you must be running mad foh truth.' Joey laugh out loud enough to make - da is it - Alvarez wife name Elynette - Elynette and the bar girl and a few others want to know is what making Joey laugh so. And Joey looking round to see who else looking cause everybody know outside people strange and he ain want people think he strange too. Joey go foh say something more to Kofi but he clap eyes on he friend Ram who live two village down from Sunrise and two other Indians waltzing in and sit down at a table next to a big fern plant.

'Hey Ram, how you drive pass me so this morning like you ain see me?'

Ram ignore Joey like if he ain hear he. Joey call out to he again, 'hey Ram' but Ram still ignoring he. Joey get mad and haul he self up to go over to Ram table.

Joey ask Kofi to hold on and he bounce up to Ram and say, 'what wrong with you boy? How you could drive pass me so this morning?'

Ram looking at the two men he deh with. They looking at he. He ain sure what to say.

'Is full the bus full, Joey.'

'Is what this I hearing you telling me, Ram? Since when you bus too full foh anybody? Foh me? Since when? Is me you talking to? What stupidity you telling me, boy?'

One of Ram friend start twitching in he seat.

'Ram, how you making this boy call you boy soh steady?' He hoist up he mouth specially to pronounce the first *boy*. And he say it loud like he ain care who hear. Is block Joey raise he fist to block he out but Ram holler out to Joey to stop.

Nothing anybody saying to one another private at Jensens. People can stay far and still hear everything a next man saying. But the man with Ram ain make attempt to low he voice. So the place get a lil hush and all eyes square to where Joey and Ram and Ram two friends deh. Is then Kofi find heself at the table to hear what really causing the commotion.

'What happen man?' Kofi ask Joey

Joey say that how he ain know why Ram all at a sudden just drive pass he when is he bus he's normally ketch to come to town. The next man sitting with Ram pipe up and say.

'He's na no *boy*. Coolie is na no blackman slave. He ain gafoh stop foh none y'all.' The hush get a kind of a heavy feel now, like if a gun man buss in, stick up the place and tell everybody don't move. But someone move after a lil while and was Kofi. Is not really move he move but what he say seem like if he make the kind of move that would make the gunman hail fire.

'You're not a blackman slave', Kofi putting on he outside voice how he does speak when he talking to white people who think he ain have no sense to say this to Ram friend, 'but you're a coolie is that right?' I feeling sorry for Ram friend cause he ain get time to haul back the 'coolie' part so pump up he been when he hear Joey talking to Ram.

'If it is a problem for you to be a black man's slave then by virtue of being a coolie you must be somebody's slave. So is there a difference between you and we? Really, tell me. Is there?'

The way Kofi talk with he outside voice people ain too sure if they hearing he good. If is contention they hearing. Or if is a riddle he sounding. Everyone hold in their breath, puff up. One and two people ducking their head waiting for the boil to lance but nothing ain happen. Kofi deh pon he guard though. He thinking how is da he just been telling Cudjoe. Look how the man calling he self slave and ain know is da he doing. He ain hear Cudjoe call none them slave. Is not Cudjoe they suppose to have beef with. Is not Cudjoe make things how things the way they are.

'Da is it Ram? Is da make you drive pass me?' Ram lower he eyes and ain saying nothing.

'You get me stand up long long waiting for a next bus. For what Ram?' Joey kiss he teeth then tell Ram, 'yoh fuckup, Ram. Fuckup. I ever tell you you is me slave. Is not me and you go Beaufield School same time. Is soh you doing me, Ram?'



'Free drop I does give you Joey. Free drop. One time I ain stop and you going on like is anything.' Ram ain saying it rough but he looking round all the time he talking like is not only Joey he talking to. Joey feeling lil shame cause he know Ram never take a dollar from he yet but is not da what really eating he out.

'I ever tell you you is me slave? I don't give you nothing, Ram? Is not me does drop off whole sack of provision and greens foh you and Lakhsmi and Robby and Bim?' Joey reach up close in Ram face to say Bim. Ram edgy in he seat.

'Don't bother with he. He only getting beside he self because Hart gi' ing them nough concession. Is only they vote he think he getting. But I want ask you something,' this was a black man who overhearing the talk and buss in cause is a fight he want and he think say Joey look like he backing down so is fire he trying foh stoke.

'Any y'all going to vote for Hart tomorrow?' Is Ram and he two friends he asking so.

Ram eyes start get fine fine and he only picking up he Banks and sipping steady. He feeling Joey eyes on he. He two friend looking at Kofi like they want take on what he just say but they ain do nothing. Is only puff they puffing. Is a next man who speak up.

'How you could ask a coolie if he going vote for a black man. If you's coolie you got to vote coolie. If you's black you must vote foh a black man. If you pottagee – is frustrate you must frustrate cause y'all money still ain enough. If you's buck – is who really got time foh hear what you gafoh say. Jagessar going use you and Hart going use you da's all. We's like doing what we told to do. We's followers. Da's why them politician always leading we a dance'? The man start one laughing like what he say sweetening he but is only he alone. Everybody else stay quiet. And is just so I stay quiet too.

Joey walk back to he table, shaking he head like he's a ole man. He looking tired. And Vex. Kofi buy a next two beer foh them.

'You believe da thing?' He ask Kofi

'Don't take he on man. Everyman get he own worry. Must be da make it hard foh get taxi in this blasted place right now. Never happen or I ain notice it happen before. Is a different time now man. Politics get people tie up. Things don't really change much. It seem like is changing but is not really changing. Revolutions make changes. Revolutions make a difference. I ain too sure what change elections make. Talks go round and come back round and everything still same way. Look how long they talking bout power sharing. But in Guyana power's what you have to steal to get light when night come. Just how their big talk bout hydro electricity stick up in air is just how the power sharing talk stick like a scratch record. Talks. Talks is all we do. Talks can get a man blow up in he car,

out he light like it ain have no cause to shine and wake up people. Is just a few good men can hold out in a revolution. Look how Castro holding out. All America do he holding out. But to be a revolutionary is a big big price. Is not every kind of thinking suit every body. Everybody got to do their thing a little different, you ain feel so? Cuba is Cuba. Russia is Russia. America is America. Guyana is Guyana. We thing different. I ain think Jagessar feel so till now. He hold one thing to he heart and tell he self was the *only* answer. He didn't know how to cultivate he own garden and da's the thing boy. He Hart ain ready. Is a poor legacy he holding on to. Is like something raw in he blood. No mind what he do, is in he blood and nothing cant drum it out. Right now seem like he sporting with dollars like he ain have sense and is going back fire. He think them people going vote for he. They ain going vote for he. You watch. Them people done smell victory. Is so them white people leading we a dance. One time they do like is black people side they deh pon. But they ain business bout none of we. They ain business how coolie and black fighting. Is so it been all the time. And is so they want it stay. New times coming but some things fix good. Not everything can undo once it do up one way.'

'You know how long I know Ram?' Is like Joey ain hear nothing Kofi saying, he been studying Ram and how he do he so. 'I get licks for Ram. He get licks for me. We use to sleep in the same bed all. Ketch crab and fish with one another. Is not just now I know Ram.'

'Sometimes I's want know how I would stay if things was different for we black people,' Kofi say like if he ain hear what Joey saying neither.

'How you mean?'

'Say you wake up a day and you know you people them was never enslaved. That no white man ain have to come and tell we how we must conduct we election. That no white people ever did rule we. That we was not poor people. I ain saying we have 'nough money. But we's not poor. What you would do. How you would feel. I's ask me self who I would be if things was another way round. Not like how it is.'

Joey ain say nothing. He ketch he self thinking bout Vashti and he children. He trying to remember when last he see she and when last he see them rest he children. Is not foh say he's be working so hard at the shop. Look where he deh now. He know he sisters searching foh he all now. He thinking how he and Vashti did 'greeing good. But is Lall. Lall ain like he foh he daughter. Why Lall ain like he, he ask Vashti a time. She stay long to tell he what she got to tell he. She say she father say he wotless, that how he don't look after them res he children so how he going look after she and Sasi and Sammy. The more she talking, the more he want she hurry up and done talk. But she ain done talking. She tell he that how Lall say who God she going be worshipping if she and he

marry. She's a Hindu she say. Joey thinking he know that so why it always coming down to who God and who God when we's people. When we's all woman and man. So it come that Joey ketch he self thinking bout the thing he sister them plan foh do tomorrow. He hear people say is ground work. He want to go and he ain want to go. He ain really know is what is ground work but since he small he hearing people saying things bout he family. And what them Rastaman he's lime with going say? Is obeah they going to say he people them dealing with. Seem to Joey, the way he looking at it that Rasta make a man they God. He thinking how that must have power in it. And is a long time now he want to grow back he locks. Ever since he small he try growing locks. But it bring plenty problem. And besides he like lash back two beer. Rum too when my spirit take he. How beer and rum going work with Rasta? And woman too. No control he ain got with woman. If was not for she father Lall, he and Vashti and them children would deh living good. She father ain want me see them, Joey thinking. But is not for he decide, Joey telling he self. I want see me children. I's their father, I get me rights. I know my rights. He cant tell me nothing if I waltz in there and take them children. Is then he swing back and ask he self is what this man Kofi really saying. A man already know what he know. How a man can have problem and don't feel is problem he have. If a man was born a king he see heself as a king. If a man born poor is not poor he poor. If he black is not black he black. If slave....and he just stop sudden like he ain know what more he must think. But he start back - if a man born a king he see heself as a king. If he born poor is poor he poor. If he know he people them was slave is not da he know. Must be more, Joey self telling he. Must be more. I didn't born a slave. I ain calling Ram no slave neither. Is what really wrong to he? If my people hundred years back was slaves and I didn't born a slave what da make me. All this Joey self telling he and he trying foh buss out and talk back to Kofi but we ketch he because is a thing going round and round inside he and is just so we get foh know he light not so dull after all.

'What happening Cudjoe,' Kofi trying to ask Joey. 'Cudjoe. Cudjoe.' Joey hearing Kofi saying 'Cudjoe' and ain clicking say is he Kofi calling. Is when Kofi say it a third time is then he hear it and connect say is he he been calling all the time. He look cross at Kofi, and first time he notice Kofi forehead shape like a triangle and inside the triangle shine shine. Joey looking up to see if is the light overhead making it shine so. But they ain sitting under no light.

'Cudjoe.' The way how Kofi call he name make it sound...make it sound strange Joey telling he self. Make it sound like a name out of the Bible. Like what name from the Bible? Moses. Joshua. Elijah. Yeah like Elijah Joey thinking. Joey want to know if is high he high from all the beer they knocking back cause he feeling something he ain understanding. He membering a thing he know ain happen to

he. And he still drinking the beer cause he ain sure if Kofi could see how he feeling. Is like he's not there in Jensens now. But he and Kofi still talking. Them is two ole man talking. Strong talk. And is like if people fighting outside. Or like if people frighten outside. He ain sure is what. But he feel is something serious. And he and Kofi two old men making plans. He and Kofi ain deh in the same place. They making plans far from one another. But they talking. In he head Joey hearing a drum knocking one time. Then stop. Then it knock one knock again. And stop. When it stop is then he hearing Kofi. Or like is Kofi. Not how he stay now but like how he going to be when he old. Kofi telling he he must use the old people power. Make it new with he own thing. Even self it seem like is something he looking at from far, something he ain seeing too good, is da he hearing Kofi telling he. The ole people power is what you know brother Cudjoe from before you know time. Make it new like a man out of clay. Is all you know. Is old and is new. And Joey hear he self telling Kofi to watch with two eyes the way of brotherhood. Watch with two eyes. The interpreter of dreams you are, Kofi telling Cudjoe and Joey hearing. So you must dream dreams. Son of Akan you will see yourself in the book the whitepeople give you. I too am son of Akan there in the book from beginning and end. Akan is there too among the book of kings and dukes. You are who you are Cudjoe son of Akan. You are who you are not who made you how you are. Not who made you what you are. You are who you are. A reborning. A reborning. You are who you are.

The more he hearing Kofi saying you are who you are, the more Joey telling heself I am who I am. And is so this thing going and ketching he. He start hearing Kofi calling he again. Three times again he hear he say 'Cudjoe. Cudjoe. Cudjoe.' And is now he answer Kofi. He take he time to answer he.

'I deh right here.' Don't think Kofi ain know Joey sound strange all at a sudden. And if he was anywhere else he'da say it strange for truth. But he see too much and know too much to ever tell he self that.

Kofi tell Joey he got to go to he room but he must wait he want to give he something. When he come back he tell Joey 'I want give you this. Is a Guyanese writer write it.' *They Came Before Columbus*— Joey read is by Ivan Van Sertima. Joey feel strange, heavy, but not because he ain sure if he could read the book. He ain know what to say cause he ain expect nothing from Kofi and he want to know why Kofi gi'ing he the book. He take it anyhow and tell he self is just so outside people strange.

'It's no big time reader you know. You read it?'

'Yes. Plenty times. Look man even self it take yoh whole life, you must read it. Read man. Read everything you find. Read till you get to know what there is to know about the universe. A page a time, eh? Just how them old people does say one one dutty build dam is so you must read it. Till it come together for you. Till

it make sense to you. Till you get to understand is who you are.' And Joey hear the old Kofi again and he feel something within he self he never to this day can explain is what to anybody.

Joey ain know this was the last time he going see Kofi. Kofi neither. When Kofi head back outside he lamentation going be so great he people them going set foh he go back East. He going end up in Egypt cause is there he think he thing deh. Is going take a lil while but he going find he way to Ifa. There he will be in the belly of spirit. Is not easy for no man to end back up in the kingdom of spirit and stay alive. He own strong lamentations make it so for Kofi. But is not so for every man. Every man own thing is he thing.

Joey make a glance across the bed at Lurline next morning when he wake up and curse he self. Not loud. He ain want she wake up. The youngie part of she he ain seeing again. Now she look crumple up and old to he. He hurry out the room cause Vashti and them children running cross he mind steady since Kofi bail out to he room last night. Now he mind running cross all what Kofi say. He put the book Kofi give he in a black plastic bag in case it rain and he head out. The roads look quiet cause must be 7, 7.30 in the morning. Rain fall through the night and it set up again. Joey remember is polling day and want to know how it feel quiet so. It feel like is only he alone out on the street. But when he bank a corner onto Regent Street heading for the bus park he hearing sheer "Vote PNP. Vote FREE AND FAIRLY. Vote PNP. Today is Polling Day. Today is your day. Today have your say. Today vote for freedom. Vote for independence. Vote for Guyana. Vote PNP. And vote PDP. Vote PNP. Vote PDP. Vote for free. Vote PNP. Vote for Hart today. Vote for Jagessar. Return to democracy. Vote PDP. Vote PNP. Independence. Free. Vote. Vote. PDP. Vote. PNP". Is so the loudspeaker stuffing up Joey ears with all kind reports, sounding to he like rumours coming out a big pipe. And a calypso tune blaring from out of the loudspeaker, like if is Mashramani, blasting through the quiet he left round the corner just outside the hotel. People look like they all in a hurry but is still slow they going. He ain sure if he seeing the same people over and over. But he thinking everybody look the same like they going somewhere and then turning back on themselves. And a next thing he hearing which he know is not outside he self. He hearing the last thing Kofi tell he before he haul he self to go to he room. He remember Kofi saying, 'tomorrow is a god people voting for, you know. Is not no man. And is a god who no mine what he doing to people there's going to be no end to worshipping he. If I had to put a bet on it, ain too much people see Hart like he's any god. And if Brownham was black people god, well is long now he dead and gone?'

Is now the headache I lash he down with last night ketching he. He raise he hand to he head telling he self is all them beers he lash back. When he reach

near Sunrise bus park he see a big crowd bending down over someone. It look to he like trouble and he ain want nothing to do with it. As he stepping onto a bus he ask a tout what going on. The tout say is some coolie get beat up. All he trying foh see is who the crowd block off the man. When lil space open Joey get a good look at the man.

'Shit.' Joey shout out and jump out the bus, running over to the man. He get to see was Vashti father. He mouth buss up. Blood all over the shirt he's always wear. He got to wash it now, Joey thinking quick. The hat he's normally have on ain on he head. Joey make a sweep with he eyes to see if it lying near by. But he ain see it. One side he glass crack but Lall don't see too good without he eyeglass so it still hanging from he face. He look frighten. Shock, Joey could see and he feel sorry for he.

'Lall. Lall who do this.' He ain really asking Lall he looking through the crowd. He ask again. Vex now, 'who do this? Who do this to he?'

'Is he own people do he so.' A man say, but the way how he say it, like is nothing to he, Joey feel is lie he hearing. Is then he look round and see not one coolie ain deh bout. But he ain sure is who beat up Lall, no mine what the people saying, he ain sure.

'Come. Let we go Lall.' Lall Rambarran reach to put he hand in Joey own and Joey help he to he feet. Lall was small against Joey tall, lanky build. Joey help Lall into the mini bus. Lall mouth buss open so till he couldn't speak. And he and Joey ride alongside one another the whole way to Sunrise without a word exchange between them.

\*

Ms Somner had instructed the sisters and other members of the family to change their clothes. They were now dressed in crisp white clothing, each of them floating from the house like descending clouds. Joey was still dazed from the release of pain that seemed both within and outside his own hurt and need. He went outside and sat down, not too far from where the Chief too had returned to rest his legs. They shared between them the same intimacy of space and time. Samuel had followed his son outside and observed the silence of many years between his son and the Chief.

Joseph Ambrose had not moved from where he was earlier seated before his perturbation at his wife's sudden change of clothing. He wanted to stretch his legs, and perhaps to experience the sea breeze that he could barely feel blowing into the house. But he remained in his seat, unable to move as if something pinned him there. The vision of his wife slapping her brother and speaking in a way that seemed uncomfortably familiar and yet strange replayed in his head.

Now he observed that a few of the guests and some of the family – including his wife– were bent over, spinning in between each other and around the lavishly redressed table.

‘The one true presence and mighty power is here. It is good,’ Ms Somner was saying. We can tell you for you must know that Ms Somner was uncertain in the craft. The young son, Joey’s wilful defilement was no small deterrent for the heights which yet Ms Somner could not attain in this work. She reached for a candle and began to walk with it several times around the table which she had so carefully furbished though not to our truest purpose and design. A candle was knocked from the table; a sign Ms Somner averted her eyes from seeing.

‘What sign is that?’ a voice eagerly asked. There was no reply. Ms Somner held the candle high above her face and began to sing ‘God Save Guyana’ to England’s tune. Others joined in the disjointed rhythm. Joseph heard the tune in the base of his stomach and with wilful self-propriety he held himself together firmly in his seat. His back was stiff and straight, he looked neither to the right of him nor to the left whilst trying with Samsonian might to eschew his suspicion that he was being mocked.

\*

From the briskness of their movements, the sudden hush of their voices, the pinched mouth edges, Bess knew that Thamar and Euna were trying to keep her from some knowing. She had been seeing their slights of movements, their shiftiness when ever she entered the room all her life. Thamar and Euna were never aware that Bess could see these slights because to them their demeanours had remained unchanged.

‘What happen? Why y’all jumping so?’

‘Is nothing Bess.’

‘Is always nothing, till is something.’

‘Bess, Thamar say is nothing. What wrong to you?’

‘I know Titty daughter dead.’

The affected composure Thamar had been trying to perfect was crushed by the familiar pertinence of sight and sound that Bess had thrown at her sisters since they were children. Thamar dropped the knife she was using to chop garlic; she had nearly sliced one of her fingers straining to understand how Bess knew.

Ineze and Festus, the elders were sitting side by side in their rocking chairs, smirking at Thamar's attempts to settle the uneasiness she always felt when Bess declared her knowing.

-Festus, I know is you tell Bess

-Is me tell Bess what? Girl rest yoh self. Is not dream she dream the thing

They laughed then like young lovers. Bess glanced at them and put her hand to her mouth indicating that they should be quiet. This was in part due to a pressure none of them could understand. Bess had been troubled by the truth of an old knowing, a living memory that she had seen returning months before her sister Titty was to endure her own unforeseen torments. When they saw Bess raise a finger to her mouth Thamar and Euna exchanged terrified glances as they had done many times when pelted back to the screaming time of their sister's certain knowing. Thamar had crossed the room and now stood above Ineze and Festus. Her head was bent, hands clasped as if she was praying. Ineze and Festus were now silent – lest by her unwitting actions Thamar should vanquish them from the living room where their rocking chairs now ceased their toing and froing.

'Bess is who tell you 'bout Titty daughter?'

'She's not my niece too? I must know what happen. She's my niece - I must know is what happen to she. '

'We know she's your niece. We just want to know how you know when is only I receive Titty phone call last night.' Titty had telephoned Euna in Georgetown because there was no phone at their home in Sunrise. Euna telephoned her school to say she would not be in that day before she headed to Sunrise where now she stood trying to comprehend how Bess knew what she and Thamar, to whom she had first relayed the tragedy, barely had time to know themselves.

Bess felt a familiar feeling. She felt as though she might faint. She was slightly rocking. This was not nerves. She looked at Ineze and Festus. Festus shook his head, slowly, tense. Bess was feeling a headiness that was the words of our assurances that she must hold her stillness firm. She wanted to go outside, for the air, which she suddenly felt she desperately needed. She began to walk towards the door, but Thamar, who had barely recovered from the earlier drop of the knife and her lost composure held her back.

'Bess is where you going?'

Bess stopped; her steps now uncertain. Her head floated. The night was the same dark night. The boy child was a girl child. The breathing was the same sounding silence. She was there but she had never been outside. Her head rolled back, eyes flickered nervously. Her sisters waited, breaths held in, heart beats wild, afraid. The earlier self-assurance had retreated and Bess was disturbed by the effort it took to gain control of her thoughts. She saw too that like Thamar and Euna



hanging in a frame, her grandmother Ineze and grandfather Festus were still, quiet, waiting. And she saw too the boy child and the girl child and heard the breathing sounding silence. She wanted to tell them it was a dream, but what use now or what use had there ever been for hearing and deaf, seeing and blind.

‘Is Pa tell me.’

Ineze looked accusingly at Festus, but all he could do was shake his head.

### *Joseph and Titty - the Queen's invitation letter*

Titty half fell to the ground, but regained herself with a measure of Samsonian strength that helped her to scramble for a chair. She doubled over, clutching her stomach as if she was in excruciating pain. Her mouth stretched wide and though it was bound to rupture the years of ornamental pleasures, the holler was suspended for a while before ripping through from another screaming time. Her head was swaying back and forth between hers and Bess' screaming. Through the torment of doubling screams, she remembered hearing the doctor say that they did everything. "Everything, they could" – she heard him say. But in the rewound reel of recent sound vibration there was an elliptic sensation that was a familiar terror of memory. Our terror. Our memory. And hers now too. How, she wondered could they have done everything? A rush of blood fire and unbound anger stifled the good sense and reason she knew Joseph was expecting her to display. But what he really know? She heard herself think. What did they really know? Flung into the chasm of relived terror, she knew that her staged flight from the memory of this episodic drama had finally come; nothing would again seem infinite.

'What they really know?' she repeated loudly, not directly to Joseph and their twin sons, Roderick and Milton, who were hanging in the scene like shadows against whitened walls. If they did do everything, everything they could as they say they do my baby girl would still be alive. Wouldn't she? She would still be alive. Two weeks them have the child in here doing all they could do. How them can fix what them ain know. "The actual cause of death is not clear .... We wont be sure...until...until....unless we do a post mortem..." until the post martem...da post martem...until dead until dead...we wont be sure until Loise dead...until the Eloise dead...we wont be sure how Loise dead...how Loise dead... It feel like meh head holding me, and like if me belly on fire. I call for Ma. I call Ma and I hear I asking she why, why, why? Then is like I feel Ma deh beside me and ain saying nothing. She just stay quiet. Then is like, is Auntie Nelia voice I hear. She whispering something. I not catching good what she saying. Then it sound like she laughing. Not really laughing, but it sound so. Then I see Bess when she small. Wearing the green and yellow dress that Pandit wife make for she. I see she standing beside Joseph saying is Ife neck break and how Ife dead and how more going come or like if she asking Joseph to go with she and come. And Joseph ain saying nothing, he just standing like he stick up in a picture. Then he look at me, eye dry dry, he face look dead like he blood done. Must be then I hear

he telling me to "come come T pull yourself together." That get me mad you see - "pull my self together." Why I must pull myself together. I want to know is what this blasted man saying and I jump up from the chair and holler some more "why, why, why?" Is only now when I looking at it, it seem like my head must be didn't look good for truth. But Joseph didn't have to look at me that way. He look like I frightening he cause first I calling for Loise and then next thing I start calling Ife and everything mix up and Joseph just standing there looking like if he never see me before. I 'member thinking how he look strange like he didn't know what to do with he self and I feel sorry. I feel sorry for he. but I never tell him so. And don't know is when now, but I know I try, but I couldn't remember if I did ever see him cry. And even now when we baby girl just dead the man didn't shed one single tear.

It was 1974, I knew this. But the time of year, I was struggling to recall. There was some meddling in my thoughts about my great uncle Joseph, after whom I was christened. It later came to me that he had passed away in the month of his one hundredth birthday. It was that very month. August. The month of my uncle's near one hundredth birthday. He bowed out days before the elaborate feast my mother had planned for him in anticipation of an honorary note or something from the Queen. I had to know what month it was to explain to myself the rain. It still made no sense because there was both rain and sun. Until then, at the hospital with T and the boys, listening to the doctor, hearing T's outburst, watching her, until then I had put aside the matter, filed it amongst a well spring of other secrecies, one of which was T's stance against my quizzing her about her family. Whilst I agreed that in marriage there were two pairs of hands that only by necessity must be joined together, I was frustrated that there was so much about my wife that I didn't know. Truly it could be said that we lived mostly in separate worlds. Futile was my resisting T's idea that we should spread out a bit, "the house big enough", she had said. "We should use up that spare room, why it should be left empty - would be good to have our own space." After some time I convinced myself that it was not a bad arrangement. I allowed myself to believe that it gave me time to gather my thoughts which a man needed sometimes. But of course I felt that the arrangement was indeed that, an arrangement, and that made it seem less than good and over time it was like a dreadful secret which I dreaded anyone ever finding out.

I'd been given my own office at our Lombard Street branch, where I'd now been promoted to Company Secretary. I had my very own neat little typist who spoiled me with impromptu cups of earl grey. I don't remember anything out of the ordinary happening earlier that day. There were the usual round of

meetings with Atler Sims, the area director, copious amounts of reports to complete and drab letters dictated to Stella.

I do mark the rain, though. Because it had been warm, I recall thinking it strange how suddenly the rain had come. It lashed so hard I had to close my window. And as suddenly as it came, it stopped. Exasperated I walked back again to open the window. It was then I noticed what appeared to me like lightning, though there was no accompanying thunder. More than lightning it appeared to be a sustained spark that both held me and moved me. I could see myself in a stiffened posture, somehow framed like one in a photograph. And although I saw in this constrained pose that I was alive, I was no longer feeling that I was alive. It seemed from my face, now drained of blood and movement that I was dead. I saw my right hand reaching toward my face, to touch it to see for certain whether I was dead. My face was transformed before I could touch it and I was now my own child, though the boys had not yet been born. I was my son in a coffin. My son seemed so tragically innocent that my watching self was choked but unable to cry. I wanted to scream, and I tried. But as in a dream there was no sound, but I was sure I could hear a screaming. The muteness of the scream was unbearable and it gave me the sensation of feeling trapped inside my own image of my self. I knew for certain what I now felt, that I was dead. For the image of me was my son and he too was dead. I noticed bruises circling the lines of his neck. But they faded as I peered in closer to examine them. As I leaned closer to my son's image I was now staring down at myself in the coffin, which was ruffled with white satin edges. My corpse smelled like rotten pus. As I gazed upon myself unable to scream the terror I felt, my eyes opened and I saw that I was now dressed as one of the Royal guards. It was in that image that I saw that I had become my great uncle Joseph who was returning my gaze back at me and I heard him ask me to bring him another cup of earl grey tea. He was terribly upset, frowning, and almost pitiable. Despite his sombreness, he gave me a quick wink as I watched him from outside myself and with that he began to back away from me. As he reached some way into a darkened chamber, he turned his back on me, but this was not before I had the chance to see that he was now holding what I could see was my dead son in his arms as delicately as one would carry a stricken lamb.

Although she had pressed the buzzer, Stella had the good sense to walk straight in because I was leaning over my desk seized by this prank of my mind, which made it momentarily impossible for me to speak or comprehend anything. Perhaps Stella had asked if she could come in – that would be nothing out of the ordinary. But I know I gave no response to anything the poor girl might have said.

'Before I go Mr Ambrose, I wanted to remind you that the agency is sending a temp to cover my leave. Gosh, you might have a better chance pronouncing her name. Ti..ti..layo Qua...mee...na. Though there's no need to bother, the brief says we can call her Titty. The agency has some links with the FCO to give postings to our Commonwealth alliances.....She's from Guyana. Somewhere in Africa, I presume. Her resume says she's doing a teaching diploma here, but she's also worked as a stenographer. Do be nice, Mr Ambrose. And do speak slowly so the poor girl will have a devil of a chance understanding you! Anything you want me to pick up from Madeira, Sir, Sir.... Oh well Goodnight Mr Ambrose. See you in a fortnight.'

The following morning when I met her I had only moments to notice that Stella had been wrong about one particular thing. Later, I realised that she had made other inaccuracies too. It was that T was hardly a girl as I was expecting from the vague last words Stella said before she left that night. She was a woman. It was not however her beauty, for she was beautiful, that pinned me to the spot when she entered my office. It was neither the pearly whites of her eyes on top of which nested amber brown pupils; the whole of which were slanted and enchanting. There was something in the way she looked at me. She seemed unafraid – unafraid I remembered thinking later - to look into my eyes. Her eyes seemed so steady and so certain, so unwavering and I felt that in them I could see and know my own limits and strength. She seemed so perfectly sure of herself I thought until I shook her hands. They were soft as the silken wings of the rarest butterfly – soft I couldn't help but notice and trembling too.

And Stella, though the poor girl could not have known it, was wrong about two more things. She never made it to Madeira. She did not see me for another six months because that very night she was knocked from the back of her boyfriend's motorcycle and spent those six months being patched up and ambling about on crutches. I sent the poor girl – for she really was a dear, sweet girl- flowers and a note wishing that she would recover quickly. And although I had never been persuaded much about fate and all such things I didn't fail to acknowledge when time permitted the memory that Stella's accident meant that I had T for more than the two weeks it otherwise would have been.

It took me three months to invite her to attend a showing of *The Entertainer* at Greenwich theatre with me. Between the moment of asking and waiting for her to say – well to say yes (it hadn't occurred to me until I had asked that she might say no) there seemed to be an eternity. And she didn't in fact say 'yes'. I had noticed before then – and this I very much cherished about her – that T sang her words rather than speak them.

'Why not? I never been to the theatre since I arrive in London. Thank you.'

Stella had been wrong about one final thing. She had said that T had come from Africa. I knew that Guyana had been one of our colonies but it was a place about which I knew nothing and although I pressed T in my own stunted way she hardly told me anything about it. When she did, and those were rare, spirited and impromptu moments when it seemed that she was unable to contain it within herself, she spoke as if it was a dream she somehow needed to but which she could hardly remember. After a while I stopped asking, consigned myself to believe that it was not important for me to know. But when she lay beside me, looking so soft and in her own peace I wondered whether that special, secret something was there inside her dreaming the dream she would never remember upon waking.

T was drumming up a terrible racket. It was unnecessary and exasperating. At least to me, at least so I thought. When I reverted my attention to the doctor's pronouncement that Eloise, my daughter, our daughter Eloise had died in circumstances that none of the medical team could fathom, it seemed to me clear that T was making a nuisance of herself when things were already so difficult. I didn't see what sense it made to lash out at the doctor. We all felt the burden that something had gone awfully wrong. No one knew how or why a perfectly healthy nine year old could fall suddenly into a coma and not be revived with all the best medical efforts in the world. There was no one, save God, whom we could blame. It seemed clear enough to me that the doctors had done all they could. Roderick seemed surprisingly calm, though it surely must have been as terrifying for him as it was for Milton who lost control of his emotions and became inconsolable. He wouldn't let me near him, bawled into the atmosphere like something was trying to gut him. Roderick tried to hold him, but he pushed him away. But I was confused by what I regarded as T's performance, for it was impossible for me to understand it. She flew madly at the doctor as if he had committed the fiendish tragedy. I could barely make out what she was saying. It was mangled in shouts and fits of hysterical outbursts. Sounds that seemed to resemble another language, sounds that were so peculiar I became alarmed. When first I met her, I found that she spoke in a way that I found as charming as a bird song. Over the years it had lost the original charm, but I hadn't noticed it – perhaps I had not accepted it, until then. For what I was hearing now did not seem to me like a charming song. This was something far less than a song and no language that I had ever heard. And there were the names; several names, I'd not heard before. And she was wailing and hollering hoarsely, so that it seemed to me that she was in some stranger and stronger agony than the situation warranted, though who could determine the severity of a mother's anguish when faced with the death of her child. At intervals during

her outburst she would glare – it was a glaring not a mere look- at me, so that I too felt as though I was being accused. But of what, what was there to accuse me of? And yet knowing this, knowing that I was innocent of any hand in what had happened to our daughter, I somehow felt a guiltiness I would struggle the rest of my life to understand. I feared that she might be losing a portion of her mind. And so I begged her to pull herself together. The intermittent glares she gave me were mortifying. For this was my wife. And yet it was not my wife. The child that had died was my daughter Eloise. And yet some pressing, relentless force made me feel that I had misunderstood some vital thing. That Eloise was neither mine nor T's daughter. The quiet child she had been, always smiling at nothing it seemed, was not our child at all. And speaking too at nothing- her child's experience of fantasies that somehow I knew and understood for I too had been that child. Then I would hear my mother tell my father 'I do worry about that boy, he lives in his own world you know.' My father had assured her time and again in my memory that I would grow out of it. I had - until that day in August 1974.

This intervention of unrelenting and relived agonies held Titty to an unfilled promise which she had kept from Joseph. There was no need she had felt, to talk all the halves with him. And though she felt somewhere extreme within herself that now was the time to tell him, she could not. What the man must know, he will know. And she said that to herself with the wilfulness that was a trait of her mother, Petromella. She made up her mind that it was now expedient for them to travel. She hoped Joseph would understand. And though it was not a good time, as Euna had said when she telephoned to let her know that her daughter had died, she was as determined as we had hoped to make the return flight. Euna had warned that it was election time and asked if she could wait until it had passed, but Titty knew that some calls were urgent beyond time and circumstance.

She felt too that it made no sense to alarm Joseph, as Euna tried to do, about the raids on travellers from Timehri airport. So with the stubbornness of pharaoh when confronted by Moses to let his people go, Titty remained stoically undeterred. We inclined her determination with a strength that no longer feared the violence she knew, and the dying of her brother Ife, and her own misery now that Eloise too had returned. The good times with Joseph and Roderick and Milton and Eloise seemed now like an ancient dream. When Euna said it was not a good time, she heard a shadow saying that it had never seemed a good time. Good times were finite, transient pleasures. For the more she had heard of the old violence, the more she had put off her over planned trip with Joseph and the

children. After some time, she accepted, and Joseph stopped hoping and asking though she had never taken pains to notice when, that she might never go back.

She had not known that the government scholarship she had received would in time entitle her to become the Head of Blairmont's Lodge high school which she now was. But we had seen her light and inclined her to a temporal destiny that we hoped she would recompense. She was bright. The light is not always wasted though its source misunderstood. Her former English teacher at Demerara County College, Mrs Llewellyn, had every faith in her abilities and had suggested she applied for the scholarship. And it was from the magnitude of that faith and to the memory of that teacher's careful grooming that Titty in her own imaginations settled upon the decision to become a teacher. When she received the scholarship Titty considered it a personal invitation by the Queen of England herself. 'The Queen's letter' she thought of it – as if she had personally been invited by the Queen of England to come and perform much needed service. And how proudly and expeditiously she was doing that service? A gallant repayment for the chance, the opportunities, the good fortune that came to her so far away from the Sunrise coast. She had worked hard to earn her right of stay, to remain indefinitely, no longer as a privileged invitee of the Queen. She was now a citizen with an earned and enviable right to be there after such service. And she had prospered too, through her own thrift and intelligence inherited, she often wondered from heaven knows where. Her family? Surely not, she felt as she remembered Bess' flightiness and the blight of Ife and now her own daughter Eloise. How had she stumbled into her own light and fortune; her own transient good times? Why of all her family had she been the one to make it out and freed from that undying memory as she had thought? It was that special, that most fortunate letter from the Queen, she often told herself, that letter that was personally addressed to her and none other. For the scholarship she had been awarded by the government of Guyana had long been a figment that Titty convinced herself had never truly existed.

Although Titty knew that she had barely looked back after the original flight and scramble, she poured the unease and disquiet in her heart in the several barrels and boxes she sent home. She proudly packed her children's old clothes, old shoes, old Peter and Jane books and old toys into a box or barrel. For she never thought these were hand me downs, after all, her children always had the best of everything and the best old things, she felt, were better than cheap nothings. There were occasions when she brought new things to send home. The patent leather high heeled shoes and matching patent leather bag for Bess, she'd bought in one of St Michael's sales. She had once sent Tamar a few new brassieres, nighties, panties and stockings too. For Euna, she had sent a box set of English literature books. And a leather bound volume of Shakespeare's works.



These were hardly cheap. She knew it was of poor constitution to expect gratefulness but wondered why she never received any words of thanks. What of the several dollies –for nieces whose names alone she knew. And for the boys, what treasures in toy soldiers, toy tanks and water guns. At Christmas, she packed nuts of all varieties, sweets of every kind, in round tins that would double up to store sponge and black cake. Corned beef and sardines (tinned) and baked beans - Heinz, of course, which she had long lost the taste for but which she knew were prized culinaryies there. And she packed stacks of Family Circle biscuits. Pity, she often thought that Edam cheese wouldn't last the journey.

And though it was costly, she called home whenever she could. She preferred to write, however, for when she wrote she would not hear in their voices the expectation that she was gifted with the ability to perform miracles. Still, in those letters carefully drafted, she had sometimes promised, as she had done that very first time when they gathered to wish her farewell, that she would send for one of them because she understood - she knew how bad things were at home.

\*

The drummers backed their way into the yard, beating the drums jutting from between their legs borning our memories in their sound. The head drummer splashed high wine over the heads of the sisters and over each drum before raising our hearts to the rhythm of our calling. What's in the blood is in the blood and hearts sang our memories to the pounding pace of the beating drums.

*Nation a whe yoh nation*

*Nation a whe dem deh*

*Nation a whe you nation*

*Nation a whe dem deh*

Bess began to move her upper body. She stretched her arms toward the skies swaying to the driving nation rhythm. When the drummers changed to another rhythm she stood gazing into the distance of the night to the seacoast. She saw our light in the night's darkness and waved to the drums' beat.

*'Mo mora, meyee ee, mo mora*

*Mo mora, meyee ee, mo mora*

Our words only she could understand. "Come she was calling, come and we will do well for you." Ms Somner took some of the high wine and brushed it across Bess' face, but Bess did not move.

'Mo mora meyee ee, mo mora', Bess repeated.

'What she saying?' Titty asked Ms Somner.

'I not sure. I don't know is what.'

Titty led Bess inside the house and gave her a sip of coconut water from a calabash.

'You're burning up, Bess. Drink more. How you're so hot?'

'I alright T, I alright. They was dancing. Some of them. They hearing the drums but they couldn't come. Something keep them back Titty.'

Outside the drums were beating with a driving pace. Maya was dancing in her own rhythm and light when she felt the voluminous weights of the short, vile, old man from Ithaca breathing beside her. His weights pressed on her and forced her to the ground where she was seen gyrating her hips and lifting up her jersey, as if a fire raged inside her.

Bess and Titty went outside to see what discontents were being played out. Bess, her eyes brighter now in their seeing, saw the old man with an oversized head running to the gate. It was a quick dashing movement, but he didn't leave for his brazenness was bold and unrelenting. He would not cease until he had devoured the child. He had claimed the child as his vessel whom a long while hence he had beguiled the elder, Festus to bury in his sleep before she yet was born.

Maya was still on the ground, groaning and screeching frantically. Ms Somner and her assistants lifted her from the ground and poured high wine on her head. One of her assistants helped Ms Somner to smear eggs on Maya's head and over her face. This provoked the child's great aunt who had kept her distance, for she knew Ms Somner was not fit for the work. When Samuel saw Ms Somner smearing the eggs over Maya, he cupped his hands in his face; shrieking inside himself. Festus and Ineze clung to each other. The Chief shook his head and walked to the coconut tree where Samuel was now sitting.

A young boy, who had been sitting beside Joseph in the house, trampled through the yard with a speed and force that met the relentless rhythm of the drums.

'Look is what them doing the child.'

Joseph Ambrose finally rose to his feet when he saw the young man push the Mother Leader away from Maya. He was concerned that Titty might be hurt in the ensuing chaos he found it impossible to understand. The boy took hold of Maya's hand and the two of them started to dance. A short time after, he let go of her hand and began to shimmy dance in front of the drummers.

'Look, look. He dancing like Aunt Nelia.' Thamar whispered to Titty.

'Where she been till now?'

'This is wickedness, this not suppose to happen,' Ms Somner was saying. 'Hold the boy down. Is wickedness he doing. He disrupting the thing.'

Bess and Euna took Maya into the house and washed away the rankness of the eggs.

'Look your daughter.' Bess Told Euna before hurrying out of the house toward the gate in pursuit of the abominable creature.

-You let her walk my ground. You let her walk late

Bess heard him sound his heavy weights in the deep darkness of the night.

'What you want with Maya. Who are you?' Bess spoke loudly and impassioned, her anger firm and unrestrained.

-I was born of the earth's immense furies and the vessel there is mine. Is mine

'Leave this place. Go from here. Move yourself.' Her voice took on the spirit of a drum, fierce and throbbing its base rhythm. She was not afraid, and the creature became vexed and extolled his malignancy to our will and design.

-Nelia son sexing the child and you see and blind. I come from your belly and the child's waters I grow

'What you saying?'

-Nelia son sexing the child but you hearing and deaf

'Leave this place. Leave.'

-You seeing and blind

## *Maya - You like walk late*

Maya was praying to reach home before it turned dark. Dusk was quickening the darkness as she paced through unpaved streets in the village of Ithaca headed to catch a bus to Sunrise. The streets were emptying as people hustled to light their homes from the imminent thick darkness that would soon hide from their eyes sheets of vengeful and merciless mosquitoes. She could smell burning wood, as coal pots were heating up milk, rice or cornmeal porridge for tea. She could hear the comforting laughter coming from the houses off the main road, and children being scolded to do their evening chores.

She was a good way from Sunrise; far from Beaufield School which had ended in brighter daylight hours some time before. As she banked a corner nearing the main road where she could hail the mini bus that would take her home to Sunrise, she felt a heaviness in her head as I breathed my voluminous weights inside her. Her feet too became heavy, for I was rooting her as I had been rooted to this tempestuous ground.

She had never felt me this strongly before, though I'd long been nestled here within her belly and line. She was thinking of Kurt now, as if the feeling in her head reminded her of him, still lying where she too had just laid, appearing drained but untormented. Absently, as if he was swatting away a fly Kurt had handed her some change for the bus ride home. I prized a dollar more from him, against his greedy will, so that she could buy my sweets.

"Here, take this too, get some sweets for you and them two rascals," he meant her aunt Thamar's young boys.

She had a fugacious thought of returning to him, to fling herself like a simple sprite into his blood pumped arms if only to experience the aching rawness that made her cry. For she was a child, you must know this, and my weights blighted her bright reason and light. We two, Kurt and me, were what she craved to experience the enormity of a desperate pain to which wretchedly she clung. Kurt liked it when she cried. And I liked it too. Her tears, at once brown sugar sweet and sea salty, we both licked and lapped into the heart of our wickedness. Her tears were my will and ravenous desire.

It was not through my malicious prompting, but through his own malignancy that Kurt had set in her head the imaginings of a marriage he knew could never be. And I watched him and heard him and it gave me my own portion of pleasure. What else was I to do? I too have my demands, my needs always unmet. I long to make a permanent journey from Ithaca where for centuries I have sauntered alone in this unspeaking darkness, hungry, thirsting, droning. Until she came and prospered my will to breed and to own. He would

marry her, "cousin or no cousin," he had told the child, who like the good, but flighty girl she was, called him uncle. He had promised her too that he would soon be in Canada, where his brother, another uncle lived, and he would send for her. "When you get big," he had said.

It was wilfulness though not yet the fulsome violence and aggression I was nurturing in her that she had shown him when she told him, "aunty Titty going send for me to go England. I ain know nothing bout Canada." I laughed without heart and feeling, for what of that had I, when she said this for I knew of that wretched promise too. But for now she was mine and I have my uses on this earth as her people would tell you.

The pressure, the weight in her head rapped deeper when she heard me say as clear as if she was speaking it herself - -You like walk late

She looked around, and at first saw nothing but the darkening dusk behind her. She pressed faster towards the main road. Fear gripped the foetal waters of her belly and I grinned beside her as I walked the ground.

-You making your people worry you walking too late - she heard me say again.

'Is who?' Spoken aloud, her own words seemed like a distant echo coming from someone else. Indeed, knowing how extreme was the terror and helplessness she was feeling my energy stirred and I moderated and magnified my sound to echo hers and repeat again -

-Is who

Her skin crawled as she turned and saw me, squatting a little shorter than her own height, crooked, raggedly aged. I stepped out from the dusk and times she has never known and stood in front of her, straightening myself and leering my own bloodsoaked eyes to meet her eyes. She saw me and she heard me because she too, like many in her line and time had the gift of primordial sight and sound. I knew I was not alone with her, but it was me she now faced, it was me and only me whom she could see in this very moment of my foulest need. As she looked at me, terrified by my blood stained eyes, she at once longed for Kurt and to be hurried home to Sunrise. And she felt that presence other than mine beside her and tried to see if Kurt had verily manifested from her desperate longing for him and home. But my heavy darkness blighted her perfect sight and sound, so she saw nothing. She noticed my smile, and something in it reminded her of Kurt. My mouth filled with teeth yet not blackened or reddened from eating dirt all my days in these deep fields seemed too like Kurt's. With pride matched only by Eve's seducer I knew in him I had chosen well. His was an easy and ancient wickedness from which he had never been scoured. And now who could

convince him that there was any need. His wickedness is deeply soaked like a branding in his soul. He and his kin have become and will be evermore my home and vessel. And he had brought her to my sojourn in this line. His fortune is yet meagre but so much more could be his claim. But my hunger is an enormity, my thirst unquenchable and I am and will ever be his blight and greatest need.

She soon reached the main road, but being late in the afternoon buses were few; caught up as they were in the election tussles in the Town and further along the Coast.

She reeked the fear I prized. She tried to walk around me and imagined she had done so but I had rooted her with my weights.

-You want to know is who

-Yes. Friend or foe? Who sent you? From where have you come

It was not she who had said this; for it was a language I had not heard her speak. It was a language I knew well from my years in their Town, loitering around their roach infested shops, installed there, as I was for a short time by changing masters whose lives were soon bereft of blood and lore and for whom I became of no more use. For I had worked beyond many seasons; tirelessly grinding in the city heat, dying for my older fields beyond Ithaca and this coast. Ever thirsting and hungry, I was grieved so much that little choice had I than to wreak the havoc of blood and vengeance and violence they knew was my truest will and design. Death followed death. Violence spurned itself. Blood spilled and soiled their hearts and land. They lived and dreamed of my violence and blood. Families feud and blame; the frivolity of my dance. There's no cause, no reason. And I have no care, no style nor preference. Trust became a suspect shadow that darkened their light and reason.

Maya, my claim and vessel imagined the words were hers because with her primordial knowing she understood what they meant. But it was the one whom she could yet not see who had spoken. I had seen him with her many times before weeping into his cassava white beard for reasons beyond my darkness. He chanced this time to come close to me though he knew that I am no friend, no brother, no sister, no mother, no father, no cousin, no God. Not even the deviant dark devil am I. But it was a trap to reveal to him my name and master. The bearded one knew that my kind will speak wickedly plain when prompted for our truth, for we too have primordial purpose, but he knew too that idleness is our muse. I might choose not to speak myself into expulsion which is his design. But there is a beat to which we too must dance, but no one has played for us a long time here so that we might be freed and do the work of our first calling. For some time now I have heard the distant drums tuning in their blood, which urged me to this deed. I encircled the child in my veil which

his chancing alone could not unseal for our worlds diverge and part. His white vestments were the light of her dreams but my weights endure. I chanced to answer the bearded one for I believed to myself that my dark power was too rooted to be provoked and sullied by his perfecting design and purpose.

*I was born from the belly of the earth's immense furies. I have no heights to be attained unto. I am the weights harbingering eternal lure, desire and abysmal cleavages. Furiously my stones bruise, maim and blight. My first procurement, along with a female of my despised kind, was in the time of her people's greatest desolation. That female of my kind yet torments in her own vile capacity and calling. You must know of a certainty that we are many and timeless; our propagations are too strong for futile efforts for the disinheritation of our guileful terror. The ancients of her people procured and yielded me the burden of tormenting the bilious master who sought to breed their women folk. I wreaked such havoc – physical impairment, seizures, disease and sumptuous death on these attempts that their women, unlike many families who had not secured one like me, were spared this brutal bruising by their vicious masters. But I have remained without their care and observation for eternities and years. And that was their desperate plea and bargain. Desolate and hungered my only reward has been to inflict them with vicious molestation. When their masters ordained the silence of their drums I was freed to reborn again and again unto their eternal retrogression and distress. For now so few among them are willing to see and know me in pursuit of my castigation. So long their distant drums have been silent that I have not danced to be returned to my root and source. I breed and breed their sullen envies and disunity. The gains and riches they seek are buried in the soulless void of my dark will. I am no cherisher of their desires. But I'll breed their dark longing and folly; their spite and vilest need. For they believe they have nothing. Nothing they have but the light of their will but they see and are yet blind. They hear and are yet deaf. This is, even to me, the uttermost blight of their interminable desolation. The child whom I have claimed unto my virile wickedness longs for the stifling City. There she believes there is all life and only hope. There too is the mother whose soured milk she yet craves. Is she not a free gift and right of my possession? Friend or foe, you ask me to declare myself, but what need and care has she been shown by those yielded to her tender breasts as kin. I don't claim her for her sweet beauty, though her tears I gorge with the fierceness of my pride. Neither for her innocence do I claim the child and vessel. I have no preference and reason. Wantonness, idleness and destruction are my sole pursuits. My truest promise is the imminent devouring and demise of this unclaimed gift. I will breed my weights into her young foetal waters where she will drink my namelessness which your veritable purpose and design cannot forfend. I have travelled from that near place across these borders where I was cast when the running away was a desperate purpose and strength of the first time people. When they ran I too*

*ran for the hills and there remained until the procuration that has held me to this lineage and my despicable destiny*

Brazenly satisfied with my dispensation with the bearded one, again I turned to the child.

-Why you walking so late? You are far from home. School finished a long time now and it is now you are heading home. Kurt says he will marry you, eh? Take you away, he says he will. Plenty young boys your own age to play with. You don't know that child. You don't know he's your big cousin who you calling uncle all this time. You don't know

Muteness for a moment traced her astonishment that I should know so deeply about Kurt; the wiliest charms with which he had dispossessed her reason and sight. How she wondered could I know this much about her, a meddling peculiarity that strained her witless disposition. This poor, flighty child for whom I had no true pity and remorse, and yet the bearded one who guards her still stood in the midst threatening me with his benign sanctity. It was the fragility of hope that freedom could be my own dream, my own real saving that I marauded her fertile possibilities.

- It is wickedness. Don't you know wickedness. You like wickedness. Wickedness is sweet for you. It will swell your belly child. Wickedness in the day and darkness in your young dreams will swell and full your belly and birth the vilest torments- leave now and go your way straight

Her bewilderment was now strong and clear for these words punctured a place in her heart for they were said by the bearded one. His sword held me for the briefest of moments so he could speak into her heart where she might hear his truth and reason. But though she heard him, she saw only me and riled with her feeble might against my weights.

'Move let me pass. Move from me. Move. I ain got to stay here listening to you. I want to pass. Let me pass. I want go home. Let me pass.' A sweet, desperate, near tearful pleading that could never move me, though the bearded one's sword was aimed and I feared.

In their hustlings out from the falling darkness, passersby mused at the child's flaring hands and fury. But they looked on and passed along for they knew flightiness was in her belly and line.

I sniggered at her as she twisted her movements to find her desperate way beyond me. It seemed like we were dancing. At least I writhed as if there was a tune playing especially for me. My dancing and fulfilment was to be her blight and fear. The bearded one held his sharp sword at his side and in the heart of her



despair. His light was too bright for the darkness of my desires and needs in this lonely field of mine in Ithaca. But, like him, I had the force and strength of ages and it was my blightful darkness that was most alive and rooted in this friendless field.

-Come come let me comfort you - I pressed her with the vilest chortling and charm.

She tried to scream, but her mouth merely gaped as if she was yawning. The scream was sucked back into her throat, as in a nightmare. I reached for her shoulders, pressed my hands on them and lurched forward and upward, seizing her into my dire eternity. She tried to wriggle out of the grasp, but my strength is the relentless work in these fields for many seasons. She was weakened not by my strength. It was the same weakness she felt with Kurt. But my strength had its force, much older and stronger than Kurt's. I compelled her school socked legs apart and violently eased my weights into her. And the bearded one turned his face, shut his eyes and flew from the desolation I was provoking in her tender womb. He burned with the furies of my wicked rite of possession. She leaked her liquid like young jelly coconut as I inhaled her seizure and fear. Her eyes closed down into my darkness. She was giddier now than she had ever known in Kurt's inveiglement and pursuit. She could no longer see me as I writhed my tormented rhythms inside her. It seemed to her that she was pleading with me not to stop, but she had not uttered a sound. I had locked her into my veiled darkness writhing in an upright position on the main road of the village. No one heard her shrilling scream from my ancient weights as it would forever be again and again and again luridly disembodyed in this unclaimed vessel, my pure and sweet possession.

In the darkening village of Ithaca, a few miles away from Sunrise where she lived, people were looking on and passing along as I drained my weights and remained firmly in her path rooting her to my foulest destiny.

When she opened her eyes, he was gone. She looked around to see where he was, but he had been swallowed up by the sudden, mosquito swarming darkness in which she was now fearfully veiled.

She stepped onto the mini bus, bound for Sunrise. The conductor of the bus smiled at her. It was a knowing smile as if he liked the way she smelt, familiar, sickly sugary and the flighty, witless way she looked. Unclaimed, takeable. She giggled back at him; his charm was sweet, tempestuous and besotting. As she giggled at him, coquettishly she rested a finger to her mouth. But suddenly she felt a swirling in her head. She was now overcome by a

desperate feeling of loneliness. And that, you must know from my heights was my own feeling. I could not sit with her in the bus, but I travelled with her, for the wretched creature spoke truly. I have been with her beyond her own eternity and years. It is my purpose and design. His is a devouring power. He speaks with such dismal frankness and eloquence it is doubtless that wickedness were ever his only will. But his tongue is yet a twisting, ravelling twine. His craftiness is a certain and blighting force that contentiously mangles their envisioning. He speaks their damned dissolutions without measure to curtail his wily tongue like a championer of an abhorrent primeval cause. But from my heights I must tell you that his weights are branded by their own dismal fine tuning. His furies are refined in their unseen light, in the unplayed rhythm of their drums.

Unlike his weighted darkness my light does not throng nor cloak. When it is blinding it can once more return an ingrate soul to the piercing void that yet is the source and vision of light. But the soul must own what of the light it knows and sees. Facile apprehensions are undesirable. In this child, my ward, aberrations are potent and tumultuous. The craft to which she was born is the silent drum of pristine memory.

Climbing down from the mini bus, and stepping into the cloaking darkness, she felt relieved to be back in Sunrise. Lights had been promised to the entire villages along the coasts but blackouts were the presiding, expected norm against which mouths merely moaned. As she walked from the darkened main road a mixture of explanations about why she was so late and foul frenzy determined her weighty steps toward the old house where her people lived.

It would be some days before my heights could reach her where she dreams her people's many dreams. But my design is wilting in the face of her dire befouling by the wretchedness that has claimed her as his rite of possession. His expulsion, her first time people know may never again be possible so comforting has been his wretchedness, yielding its own spurious viability, its own peculiar rhythm.

I positioned myself outside her room, a familiar place to which I had become accustomed. I cried as she cried against the door of a deepened distress. Her aunty Thamar did not fail to notice her subtle movements when she had slipped into the house. And she smelt her too. But thrivingly in preparation for prayer meeting, Thamar only huffed at the child.

'That girl got too much of she own way. One of these days she going find she self in serious problems with them boys she fooling round with.' It was as if she was speaking to herself, although Joey was at home and was fastened in front of the television. He said nothing, for he didn't think he was expected to. The two boys, Ricky and Marcel, her youngest whose fathers had not chanced to send for them

to live in Town, or Canada or England where Tamar's other children now lived, were spooning reheated sago porridge from the morning into their mouths. They scoffed as quickly as they could, fervidly anticipating the sweets Maya had thrust onto the table in front of their beaming eyes when she sidled into the house.

'Joey. You hear what I say? Maya just come in from school. What wrong to she? She ain know what time it is?' It seemed the greatest effort, but Joey managed to look up from the fuzzing television screen, his head seemingly befuddled and slow. Reluctantly he asked Tamar what was it that she expected him to do about Maya.

'Look I don't have time for this. I leading Bible class tonight. I gone.'

Joey returned his heavy head to the screen as if there were only two positions it was trained for; one that slowly looked toward and one that ever more slowly looked away from the television screen. The two young boys soon joined him, annoying his concentration with the seemingly competitive chacking sounds they made with the sweets.

Maya's aunt Bess was still downstairs at the shop. It had been remorsefully quiet all week. Bess wondered whether it had anything to do with the election. She kept the shop open as long into the evening as her strength could carry her, praying things would pick up. Her craft too was enmeshed in these earthbound and necessary efforts. Heights were yet unattainable in the urgency of her daily struggles. Bread and food were never frivolous indulgences, though they often appeared to be so. Eating too was hardly a pastime that she could choose to dispense with so her craft like that of her young niece Maya was held in the silent drum and womb of memory.

Nestling outside the door, my sword resting upright against it, I heard Maya in her deep longing and secret pain. I felt the vile discontents that tormented the far reaches of her simple heart. She cried for all she knew that was real and unburdened in an erstwhile incarnation. She struggled to comprehend the simultaneity of fear and enchantment in the grasp of blightful terror. For disparate chimings and discordances are portentous euphonies. They are the pertinent vagaries of a desolate heart springing an unbound rhythm and sound by which impetuously she is spun. She distressfully anticipates the preordained desolation that she knows is wombed within her darkened waters. Maya was reborn from the spirit and depth of her mother Euna's incantations to the heights of St Joseph. Euna's prayers had never ceased and were heard in the pitch and precision of primordial sound where the heart knows its destiny and deepest need. They were full prayers; true prayers with purest faith and highest love. For

Euna's belly did not easily ply and yield its procreative intent. It was sealed in the timeless vexation of her peoples' deepest furies. The seeds split. The dark dot remained in the weights of their furies and unburning memories. But Euna's waters sparked the cleanest and freshest in the light of an ancient and pure promise. It was a purity whose kindling and ripeness could not be hastened in the light. Time dances in the rhythm of light, as her people well know. The Sun does not shine with the dew or in the dark. But it will always shine in its empyreal rhythm. The Moon can be espied sailing the skies in the first light of day, but it is missed most in the darkness. Darkness is the womb of memory and a silent drum. Euna's incantations were the plenitude of unborn memories and primordially Maya heard the beating in her blood. The light was a pure kindling. Maya was roused and returned like an ancient vessel and new. She returned with the vision and sound of that ancient promise to the unburdening of her peoples' dark furies, to unborn memories and dance their peculiar rhythm in the vast waters of her now transgressed womb. But what blights their soul's refined infinitude is that in their heart's eye the myriad rays of the light's bold rhythm are unfuelled. It is in the juncture of light and line that they might find the rhythm of the drums, flutes, waters, trees, suns, rains, moons and living dying gods and of perfecting soul.

The primeval weights to which the child is now abysmally cleaved are innumerable enticements squandering the heart's design. My heights which must be attained unto are prodigious to her heart's will and purpose. But I am yet nestled outside her door, against which my sword rests temperately awaiting the rekindling of the light's pure vessel in the dark waters of her womb.

\*

The young boy continued to fling himself around the table. Joseph could not understand why Ms Somner repeated 'is wickedness' only now. He ventured to help in calming the boy, though this was against his will and reason. A young girl started to dance beside him, grabbing his hand, she nestled it between her legs. Joseph extricated himself from the girl's hand and irritant giggling.

Titty went to him and ushered him to go into the house, but he didn't move.

'This is nonsense, T. What is this? Let's leave. Let's pack our things and leave, T.' It was half said, a whispering he hoped she alone could hear.

'Joseph we cant leave just so. We'll talk later. Try to understand.'

Titty returned to the young girl and gave her some water from the table. The girl stumbled to the ground.

Ms Somner noticed that the drums' rhythm and pace had changed. The drummers had mixed the beats of lines and nations which made several people dance to their own rhythm and time. Ms Somner asked the drummers to play the rhythm as before. Ineze and Festus watched the frenzied dancing and sensed that the Ms Somner had not obtained the divine order she had earlier claimed. They were worried that the chaos was a sign of our displeasure. Our order was not well attended, this was true but a fire does not always alight from the most fervent first strike. We know that rhythms are again learned in the rekindling.

Under the coconut tree where he had been sitting, Samuel wept into his heart. In a short while he raised his burdened head and saw that Ms Somner and her assistants were finally able to sprinkle the high wine on the young boy. Aunt Nelia fell to the ground. Slowly she raised herself. Leaning slightly to one side she took tentative steps towards her brother Samuel at the back of the yard.

-What you been doing Nelia

-Taking care of your family

-Is you family you want to look after. Your son sexing my granddaughter. He know good why he ain come this time. Is set a been setting for he

- I make he stay way. Is shame you want shame me boy na? You stay long to take the responsibility that was yours to take

-Is you make promise. Is you make this thing fall on my children head. And what we teach them bout all this

-The responsibility was yours to take, Samuel, and you never take it

*Thamar - Say poor sinner lovs't thou me*

Lucky thing I catch a bus soon's I reach the main road. Sunrise's get real dark soon's night fall and I didn't too like waiting in the dark for the bus. Is long they promising we light in Sunrise. Jagessar going look out for he mattie coolie and put up light in them villages if he get back in power - you watch. But he Hart making a world of promises to them cooliepeople like he and them is friend and family. He looking out for cooliepeople and Jagessar looking out for them too. That is the thing. But I want to know is who looking out for we black people. Is like we time done. Is blows facing we black people when he get back in power. He going get back in too. They going rig it back for he get back in. Pharaoh didn't use he own enchantments to show Moses he could do just what he do? And is so all that time Jagessar been planning for we, nursing vexation all these years. But revenge belongs to the Lord. Who going to tell he so? Who got right to tell he so when is a thing must be deep inside he and cant move like the heart God give Pharaoh? Power is not no easy thing for a man give up. Must be worse to have it take way from you. But Jagessar want to watch he self cause was a time when you could call *he* Moses but now he must be turn Pharaoh. And look what happen when Pharaoh jump in he chariot and take all he people with he going after the children of Israel. What happen? God tell Moses to stretch out he hand over the sea and divide it. And is that what happen. Thing is it the old time Pharaoh live good good with the Israelites. But he heart get hard hard and all Moses telling he to free the people them he ain hearing Moses. And what he fighting up so for, Egypt was dark more than Sunrise. Imagine scripture say some of the children of Israel asking Moses why he didn't leave them there in Egypt, a place that's so dark dark, stead of bringing them out into the wilderness to die. Look how much signs God show them and Moses show them and is blind their faith blind. That's it... that's what we can discourse in Bible study. The book of Exodus and how Moses free the children of Israel from Egypt. I going lead with a prayer that who ever the overseers put back in power bring light all through the coast not just where cooliepeople live. Sunrise ain get no light so I going say a special prayer for we get light. That's all I want they do. They fancy talk so dress up is who they really expect to understand what they saying. We want power too. This place dark dark when night come and is not to say is late when I leave the house. A time I dream Ma telling me we like walking late. She don't dream me again since the time I tell Pastor how I's dream she and Pa steady. I ask he why I's be dreaming them so steady. If is anything they trying to tell me, cause the dreams does come so mix up mix up with all kind things. I ask he how I can know what they trying to show me. But he say is not them I

dreaming. He say is the devil appearing like if is them cause when you dead, you dead and the soul perish when we dead. He say next time I dream them I must call on the name of Jesus and rebuke them cause is the devil I rebuking really. But ever since I talk to he I ain dream them again. So I ain get to rebuke them. None of them does be in me dream again, not even me own father. Thing is I don't dream now at all since I talk to Pastor. I don't dream again. And it feel strange when you wake up and ain dream. Like after you get baby. When they inside you moving and kicking you's feel nice like you get a extra strength. When they come out is you alone. I want to know if when I dreaming them is like when Saul go to see the obeah woman from Endor in the bible and ask she to raise up Samuel from the dead. When Pastor preaching from the scriptures is so he's call she.

"Make no mistake when you reading this scripture the woman from Endor is nothing other than a obeah woman with familiar spirits she's use to do her evil works. Remember the damnation that befell Saul, Israel's first king when he went and consult with the obeah woman from Endor. Not Saul alone. He whole family get wipe out for the sin he commit against the Almighty. Samuel, prophet of the Lord was vex with he. Turn to your bibles and read for yourself: "and Samuel said to Saul, why has thou disquieted me, to bring me up? And Saul answered, I am sore distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God is departed from me, and answereth me no more, neither by prophets, nor by dream, therefore I have called thee that thou mayest make known unto me what I shall do." Do not do like Saul. Call on the mighty name of Jesus Christ for your salvation. The Almighty Son of our living Father sees and knows all our needs. Remember what he say, you can get to the Father through me. When he was distressed Saul go against his own decree. Saul was a man of little faith. He had no faith in God. No faith in his own self. Be aware of leaders who speak one thing and do another. They make one rule for you and another one for them. The dead cannot help the living for the dead are without souls. Seek first the kingdom of God and all things will be given to you. He will give you everything you need and no man load is more heavy than the next. Unlike Job, Saul didn't understand is test God testing he. Psalm 28 say "wait on the Lord, wait I say on the Lord."

That is how come I tell Bess I don't want any part in what she and Titty planning. But is right home deh they doing it. Where I going go? How it going look? I want to ask Pastor bout it but I ain know how. What he going say? What people going say? I ain saying we mustn't do something. Titty daughter dead, yes. And same way young like Ife. When I tell Pastor that how my sister in England young daughter dead he tell me what I know already that 'the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, blessed be the Lord God.' That is all he say.

And he ask if I want he pray for Eloise soul rest in peace. When he done pray I go to ask he if he think is natural for the Lord to take children when they so young but I ain know how. I thinking how it going sound if I ask he if is 'natural' like if it could be something else take the child life. Besides I know that the Lord is the maker of all things and all things belong to Him so how I could ask he that. I think is only that he could tell me. Even self I know is that he would say I had was to stop myself from asking he.

And what bout Euna daughter, she Maya? What wrong to she? Look how late late she waltzing in. I did want to give she a good talking to, but what use it going make? Besides I get me own worries. God in heaven knows why Euna ain carry the child to see a doctor or somebody...somebody....who somebody....somebody to get she look (somebody *like who*) after. The child strange from the day she born. Just how Bess stay, is same way she stay. I not saying the child is the devil throwback, but is wilful she wilful – she would cuss God and all. And I not saying she evil but, is not evil is...she not evil...she not evil but what - is what really wrong to she? Somebody must can look after she. If I could only bring she a day let Pastor see she. But how Euna going feel? The child is not my child. Not my responsibility. Is Euna to look she. Then again what happen when they carry she Bess to Pastor Millington when we small. Is not same way flighty she flighty. Nothing ain happen. Till now she's be dreaming Pa and Ma, Daddy and them. Till now she's be dreaming all kind things. She's get she dreams and they does be clean clean. She's my sister, yes, but till now I ain know how she stay so. The way she's just lash out when you telling she anything's frighten me. Is like she get...like something...is like something take she over when she's behave so. The other day she tell me how she dream Ife dress up in white clothes and beating drum. He's young still like he was when he dead and he smiling again, like he always smiling when she say she dream he. She always dreaming he, like how I used to dream Ma and Pa them so I ask she why she don't rebuke he. If you hear how she tear off on me when I tell she so.

'Why?' she voice change up and get loud loud when she asking me. 'Why I must rebuke he? He's you and me brother, you ain know that?'

'He's not me brother no more,' I tell she. 'Look how long he dead. Look how long he soul left he. Ife dead Bess like you still ain know that. Why you courtening he spirit? Is dead he dead.' A time in Bible class, I hear Sister Mercy say you can be tie up to a dead person like if you and them courtening. Was that I trying to tell she.

'So tell me why you want I rebuke he. Why. Why.' So she firing she mouth at me, like, like a, like if... like if is a...a demon deh pon she. So's be with she, like something does come over she and she ain know how to control it.



'So he can rest in peace. He ain got work here no more. You talk like if he's living still, and is long long now I be dead.'

'He dead na? You telling me he dead eh?' She asking this over and over, like if it ain making sense. 'He dead na. He dead eh?'

'No man can live without a soul, Bess. You member Ma and Pa use to tell we when you dead your soul perish. Pastor does say the same thing. The devil...' she didn't give me chance to done talk.

'Is how you know so much bout the devil? You's be bringing the devil name in this house steady. Ma and Pa ain dead too?' She stay quiet after asking me that so I know is answer she expect me to answer she. It take a lil while, cause like I ain know how to answer she, like something clamp down my mouth.

'Yes, they dead too.' Even when I said this my tongue feel heavy, like it feel when you eat plenty guinnep.

'So them things they used to tell we must be dead too, eh?'

'That's not what I saying Bess. Why you got to go till so far?'

'Till so far like how? You picking what you want to understand and leffing out what you ain want to hear. But that's alright is not teach they teach we to hear and deaf, see and blind too?' I kiss me teeth and walk off left she cause is pipe she just piping up and I ain want nothing for come up that I cant handle alone. Joey was out and even self he's be home when she start, he's go way.

When the mini bus pull up outside the church, I see Pastor coming toward me. Somehow he look shorter and I only know is he cause I could barely make out he collar, a lil piece white thing sticking out just under he neck. It seem like he taking long to reach me and it seem like I ain moving at all. I batting mosquitoes and in between I notice the church door close. It does usually be open for prayer meeting and bible lesson, but was close now. And I feel something wrong. Pastor taking so long to reach me like something holding he back and I walking slow too like something pulling me back from reaching from the road to the church. I ain use to seeing the church door close. Even though I's stay behind after church to lock up I not use to seeing it close up from so far. It does always be open when I coming.

'Bible reading cancel sister Thamar.' Pastor voice sound heavy heavy.

'Cancel? How it cancel?'

'I cancel it, sister Thamar.'

'How you cancel it and I ain know it cancel and I leading Bible class tonight.'

'I tell sister Loretta to pass on the message to you.'

'She ain tell me nothing. I ain see she since church Sunday?'

'I'm sorry sister Thamar. Truly sorry you come out and have to go back home. But...if you can spare a few moments, I want to discuss something with you. I

wont keep you long till it get late.' The way how he talking get me frighten so till I studying what happen. And I ask he, 'what happen Pastor, you frightening me. What happen?'

'Is best if we talk inside.' He push the church door and it open easy. It did look lock when I walking from the road. But was only pull in it pull in. The lights was on inside and I could hear like people talking in the lil room we's use to keep Sunday school.

'But people deh inside, Pastor, I hearing people inside.'

'Yes. Yes. Some of the sisters decide to hold their own meeting.'

'Their own meeting? How you mean, I think you say meeting cancel?'

'Yes. Yes. That's what I want to discuss with you.' Is so Pastor talking to me like he get Pilate's worries.

'Sister Thamar, you have been a good member of this church. Since you started coming back to church a few years ago you have given one hundred percent service and your faith in Almighty God is strong. Of that I am sure. You have experienced your share of hurt from the world. The church welcomed you back after...after, well you know what I'm trying to say. But some of the members are concerned that... you know how it is sister Thamar, and I'm sure is nothing you cant explain. But some of the members are concerned that your faith in the church, your faith in God get compromise since you hear you sister daughter die.' If you hear how my heart pumping when he talking and was not only nervous I nervous is vex I blasted vex. How he saying my faith in God strong in one breath and saying it get compromise in a next. I waiting for he done talk but he na done. So he going on.

'You came to me the other week and ask me to pray for your sister daughter who dead. That was enough, yes. I pray for the child soul rest in peace. Because you ask me I pray for the child, even though she's not a child the church know. She was a child of God. All children are. But people talk sister Thamar. There's only a lil breeze between here and Sunrise. And people talk...' Is what he saying really? I looking at how he look old and crinkle up. He face look dry dry and dull too besides like he forget to oil it this evening. He look more small than how he's normally look when he preaching. I hearing what he saying and it sound like something I hear he telling me before, only thing I know he never tell me nothing like what he saying now.

'Yes, Pastor. I know people talk. What people saying.' I buss in on he cause I getting disgust he taking so long to done talk like if he spreading tar 'pon road.

'They saying your people planning to do a 'wok'.' He top and bottom lip coming like if they going kiss me and then decide not to bother again when he say 'wok'.

'oh.'

'Yes, yes. It would be a shame to lose you, sister Thamar, from our church. Your father and your grandparents was devoted to their faith, you self tell me. And you yourself have been a valuable member of the church and there is so much work to do that we could still use your service for.'

'Yes, Pastor. I hearing you.' I hearing he yes. If was not for the church and my faith I'da done run mad when my children father they go way left me. One gone here, a next one gone there and what? Is me and them children left. I only too glad Joan and Rashan fathers send for them, give them lil chance that they never would get if they stay in Sunrise. I ain looking no husband again cause is long now I get to understand "my maker is my husband." But like is shame Pastor trying to shame me and bruise me with stone like how they did want to do Mary Magdalene. The talking in the back where meeting holding without me stop now. And I know is listening they listening to me and Pastor.

'Why you didn't come see me and discuss this problem your people having? Is my duty to you as a member of the church to assist you so far as the Almighty decree me with his power.'

'I ain know how to ask you. I tell them I ain want to take part in the work. But...'

'Well that must be what you decide. And don't let nobody deter you.'

'But...I want to ask you if you think is natural...if is a natural thing happen to my niece?'

'I tell you again, the 'Lord giveth and the Lord taketh. Everything belongs to Him. No one else have power to give and take life. No mortal man. The ways of the Almighty are mysterious, sister Thamar. You know that. But all we need is in the good book. The good book is the source and fount of all knowledge, all wisdoms.'

'Yes Pastor. Amen. So is natural what happen, is da I hearing you say? And my brother Ife who dead the same way when he was the same age as my niece die natural too?'

'Yes, yes. For the "earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." Only He alone have power to manipulate the works of His creation. It is He alone who laid the foundations of the earth and it cannot be removed. Everything is bequeathed with life through the spirit of God. When he take away His breath, we die and return to dust. Dust. You must not take counsel from the superstitious. It is mindless sister Thamar, mindless.' Whilst he talking a kind of fear licking me in truth and I hearing 'mindless', 'mindless', 'mindless' rolling round in my head till a next minute this thing just buss out and I start talking slowly in a heavy heavy voice like if something choking me.

*'My father worketh hitherto and I work.'*

'Sorry sister Thamar. I didn't hear good what you said.' I try tell he again what I just tell he but the words ain come out again. And my voice start speaking back more fast than before.

'My sister say the doctors up there, in London, them ain know what happen to Eloise. That's why she coming home cause is not the first time it happen and is like it ain going stop till we do the work that's what my sister Bess say too.'

'Oh nonsense, nonsense. Why don't you bring them to me? I will talk to Bess. Would be good to see her back in church after so long. I ain know if Titty and Euna still Catholic but we Lutherans see everyone who believe in the Almighty God as our brethren and sistren. The belief in this power is the only foundation. Tell them they must come and see me sister Thamar. I will explain that they must walk in the path of their ancestors and trust the Almighty God for their salvation.'

'But Bess say is we ancestor work they doing, Pastor.'

'Those were in the dark days of Egypt but we are not in bondage no more. We are free. I speak of our bible ancestors sister Thamar. The prophets and saints who...'

*And a woman having an issue of blood twelve years, which had spent all her living upon physicians neither could be healed of any*

'Sister Thamar? I ain getting you. You ok, sister Thamar? How you sounding...'

*Is blood*

'What blood, sister Thamar? Who blood? What happen to you?'

*What's in the blood is in the blood. She followed him and immediately her issue of blood stanch'd*

'Uh...Yes. Sister Thamar...that woman Luke write bout she was sick and healed of our Lord when she touch his clothes. What of it? What of it sister Thamar?

*He that hear my word and believe in them that sent me has everlasting life and shall not come into condemnation but pass from death to life*

'Sister Thamar? It seems you're tired. You should leave now. We can continue a next time.' Pastor telling me and is like my eyes was close cause the church light seem bright bright all at a sudden. Pastor stand up and only left for he lift me up from the seat. Some of the ladies was coming out from the back room. Pastor looking at me like he disgust and he eyes ain staying steady, they jumping like something sticking them.

'Come. I'll walk out with you. Oh, but look sister Bridget coming, she can put you on the bus to Sunrise. Come sister Bridget. Walk with sister Thamar please for me, she going back to Sunrise.'

'Thank you. Thank you Pastor. Goodnight ladies. Sister Bridget, don't worry I'll make my own way out.' Was a group of them club up together watching me. My belly feeling tight when I walking to the church door. Was like a long walk and I

ain remember to put a torchlight inside my bag. But I straighten myself and keep walking. I telling myself don't look back cause I ain want freeze like Lot wife. Anyhow I look back and Pastor was coming to me. I see something in he eye. Water maybe, I ain too sure. It glistening like is water.

'Sister Thamar. Let me walk with you. Let me...'

'No Pastor...no. Is a long time Pastor I been thinking is a good way for me to come to go to church. A new church putting up in Sunrise. Bess say she going go when it open. I thinking I could go with she. No mine they say is going to be a clap hand church. I more closer. People talk Pastor, they does talk for truth. But is a good good thing I don't receive honor from people.'

\*

Ms Somner was lighting a fire in a large calabash. The elder Festus asked Ineze to fetch him some water. He was feeling thirsty.

-Why you don't go and get the water yourself, Festus. Some deh right there on the table. What you frighten? Nothing wrong with your blasted leg. This she had said out of a vexation that he should believe he still needed support of his infirmed leg.

Festus took a deep breath, raised himself and began slowly walking to the table, huffing and cursing his wife. The sisters were dancing around the calabash of fire. Euna bumped into her grandfather and so it was by our will and design that he was landed into the fire. Festus felt the heat swiftly move through his entire body – up to the tip of his head. He was surprised to feel no pain. Ineze, who had risen too to walk behind him, for she knew he was afraid, held her breath as she watched him floating in the red and gold flames. And she cried our sweetest tears for her husband. He waved at her as he bounced to the beat of the drums. He took hold of Euna and held her in his arms. Euna now was dancing in the fire. She held out her hands to her sisters and the family and then to the ancients in the heights. Her hands seemed like large white wings, she seemed to be leaping toward the skies. Her head was so upraised that in the flame's light Bess saw her grandfather's face shining with a tranquillity she had before seen in her meditation of him.

From the distance where he looked on, it greatly pleased the Chief to see Festus dancing in the fire. He knew and felt within him that his time too had come but he felt a daunting, painful pressure that pinned him to the spot. Ineze went to help her husband out of the fire. When he stepped away, Euna felt her head swaying from side to side. Bess gave her a sip of coconut water and the sisters embraced one another. Festus sighed deeply as he realised that the stroke had

lived on in his imagination. And we could do nothing for the swell of tears choking his heart and pride.

-It gone, Ineze. It gone

-we can't do nothing about we mix up history. Them whitepeople fool we. Tell we when we die we soul perish. But is we history we been fighting. We own thing we frighten. We make a wrong move with she Bess. And look how it gone just so, Ineze. Just so it gone

His wife said that the stroke had long gone but the burdens were those he had made for himself and those in whose memory they will ever have their rhythm and light.

## *Euna - There in the blood*

It would soon be dark, but there was yet enough light to drop into South to pick up a few things to take to Sunrise. She didn't like travelling to Sunrise in the dark but what choice did she have. How convincing – without leaking out particularities could she make any excuse to the governors about why she needed more than two days away from the School.

Although the Head Mistress, to whom she had been deputy for over five years, had made it candidly clear that she would not tolerate party politics in the school, members of staff clenched their teeth only when they thought coasts were clear. A few days ago she had overheard Mrs Rodriguez and Miss Jackson in a near muted discourse about who they thought they might vote for in the election.

'What they doing for the Amerindians really, is only use they using we again. Imagine is we must give them majority. Talking their big talk about how they going to review Integration Policies. So is exclude we exclude for truth? Is not that they saying really? How they can put we back into we country? Is out we been out all this time? They going to create heritage sites in our communities like we want to live in any museum like Roth's.' This was Mrs Rodriguez, she was not full Amerindian but her Portuguese father must have had weak genes because to anyone who saw her she seemed divest of any impressions he thought he was making on her mother's Wapishana ancestry. Euna listened quietly, vaguely amused to hear Mrs Rodriguez being so unusually lively. She'd always considered her to be quiet, unassuming, someone who allowed others to speak whilst she tried in her own silent way to understand what they were saying. And that silence, Euna had thought, seemed to be the kind that could make even a fool appear to have intelligence. But listening to the varied pitches of Mrs Rodriguez's discourse, momentarily lapsed into vernacularism from its teacher's constrained pronouncements Euna now reconfigured Mrs Rodriguez as quiet perhaps but a dark horse too.

'I thinking I might vote for Jagessar,' Miss Jackson said, but it seemed to Mrs Rodriguez as if the words had fallen involuntarily from Miss Jackson's mouth to test her in some way.

'I mean, is not like just cause he's coolie, I can't vote for he.' Another test, Mrs Rodriguez pondered. The effort it took to stiffen her lips, to restrain any signs of laughter, not that she wanted to laugh, but something about the way Miss Jackson was trying to prize something from her seemed comical. It was, Mrs Rodriguez was thinking, as comical as that fraudulent snipe at Jagessar by Sandra Birbalsingh earlier in the week when she'd said that, 'he so old now what he want with being president again.' Mrs Rodriguez was always suspicious of

anything Sandra said because she once heard her refer to herself as a Hindu Catholic. Prompted by the incredulous cackle that followed in the staff room, Sandra explained, with a hint of seriousness that Hindu was her culture not her religion. Her religion she said was Catholic. Mrs Rodriguez wondered who on this green and watery earth she could ask to help her unpick the sense from what seemed to her to be complete nonsense.

But what she really felt was that Sandra had regretted her conversion to Catholicism which she had made a song and dance about doing some months before making this curious statement. Mrs Rodriguez didn't know how else to understand what Sandra Birbalsingh had said. It made her ponder the meaning of her own faith. Was it real? Was it unreal? And what would it mean to be in a faith that no longer felt real to you, but was yet the faith you knew. The faith you practiced. But Mrs Rodriguez was not ignorant of the fact that her own people hailed plenty Marys but knew that the name Lucifer was no where near as terrifying as Kanaima. People called their children names that sounded like Lucifer, Mrs Rodriguez thought, like Lucy Richards in her geography class but who would dare name their child anything that could in any way sound so near to Kanaima. They knew too that no new God could rival those who trembled trees without a blowing breeze or darkened waters and rivers from the sheer might of their own tumultuous furies and who did not ask to be spared of immortality but chose it by unhampered leaps from rock faces now forever gushing their bold eternities.

It was Sandra Birbalsingh's uncouthness about this false accommodation that unsettled Mrs Rodriguez. Everyone held on to their thing but they were not brazen enough to drop humorous hints about it to others. At the time though it made her ponder for a while whether she should consider herself an Amerindian Catholic. And there was no one on the green earth she could seriously ask.

'My father would kill me,' Miss Jackson went on, in that infantile manner she had when she spoke about anything. Thankfully, Mrs Rodriguez was thinking Miss Jackson knew how to conceal her ineptness from the children. Her appointment was a coup influenced by the reputation of the father about whom she was now speaking. 'We always vote PNP. Is like a law in our house. One time I hear Daddy say that he father was a PDP supporter but that was back in the 50s. Things ain like it was in the 50s I hear he saying. Then everybody knew who was the enemy. And every country have to have a enemy to call itself one country and if the enemy's not outside then it must be inside that's what he and he friend sit down day in day out talking. One of he friend always telling a story about a PDP supporter, a woman name Artemey- something. From Buxton. He say that when they win in 1961 and marching from Crabwood Creek, they insulting all black people. Even Artemey -what she name - who did like Jagessar



and only come out to join in the celebration. You know I think Daddy would prefer I marry a coolie than put one in government, tell you the honest truth. You believe da?' She didn't, so Mrs Rodriguez didn't reply.

She was glad she didn't reply because she noticed that Euna had edged into view and must have overheard them speaking. The two teachers made a lame attempt to mask their talk and fumbled a feeble good afternoon to Euna. What Euna wondered would happen if she was away for more than two days. Ernestine couldn't be everywhere monitoring such talk amongst the staff. And what if the pupils did indeed become entrenched in party politics? Filthy politics polluting their impressionable minds, Euna thought. What would that do to the good reputation of Demerara County College (DCC as it was commonly called), so reputed for having pupils birthed from the so called six peoples of the land and none of whom seemed presently concerned with the stale politics punctuating their young lives at every electoral turn. But that might change, Euna thought. If she was away for more than two days – anything could happen. She had to think about the pupils. Her darling pupils. The girls in their starched white dresses, knee high white socks and piercingly white pumps sent from relatives overseas, their hair flowering white ribbons seemed to Euna to be gliding on an English lake. The boys in their pressed short sleeved white shirts and navy blue knee length shorts and ankle white socks were her gallant young heroes. What would happen to them, her girls, her boys if she stayed away too long? They needed to be protected from the likes of Mrs Rodriguez and Miss Jackson who dared to bring such talk into the school despite Mrs Luncheon's candid warning. She'd never had time for politics. Politics seemed to Euna like a rewritten account of a story she'd read about a long time ago but about which she couldn't remember details nor even what the story was called. It had always seemed to her like those things that came from somewhere else, like Irish potatoes, corned (tinned) beef, ice apples; like those old cars that sputtered and coughed poisonous smoke and spent more time being fixed up in garages than moving along any road.

When she had told Ernestine Luncheon that her sister would be travelling from England – did she say England or London – she couldn't now remember – but when she told her that her sister had been away for nearly twenty years and that her English husband – she did remember stressing *English*- husband would be joining her, she noticed that Mrs Luncheon didn't hesitate to grant her the time off. She didn't even feign incapacity to manage those wilful teachers on her own and at such an unstable time, Euna remembered thinking.

'Sure, of course Mrs Thomas. You haven't taken much leave this year. See you in a few days.' A few days, does that mean she could have asked for three? It was

too late, too late to change it now. Besides two days were more than enough, Euna convinced herself.

After leaving Ernestine's office Euna wondered why the request for leave was not as strained as she had imagined it would be. It must have been the English stress. It must have been that, what Ernestine heard her say when she stressed the *English* was that *Princess Titilayo and her English husband Prince Joseph of Buckingham, England* would be visiting and that her services would be vitally needed for their royal accommodation. Something like that she thought Mrs Luncheon must have heard her say.

What, Euna now wondered, would Ernestine have said if she knew that the truth of her sister Titty and her English husband's royal visit was to wake up the dead with blood bestirring drum beats, skin crawling jumbie dancing and unimaginable vulgarities that were contradistinctive to the good Anglican faith she knew. What would she say if she knew that, Euna thought, as she brisked past school children, grouped in deep colours of maroons and pawpaw orange and yellows, leafy combat greens and government toffee uniforms, giggling and going nowhere in no particular hurry. She didn't like these bold school children colours. She thought it made them seem like they were always going to or prepared for Mash. When she and Titty had been school girls at Demerara County they wore blue pleated skirts, white blouses with red blue or white ribbons in their hair. But she now preferred the crisp and functional coolness of the white uniform worn by the girls. Paddling through the waves of mini buses and their touts Euna caught snatches from idlers flapping their mouths about nothing in particular about the election, stuffing one another's ears with rumours and all kinds of reports. But how loudly they were doing it and how busy their idleness seemed, Euna thought, as she was manacled by a tout and stuffed into an overstuffed South bus to make her quick stop home.

She didn't like to travel in the dark nor through the rain. But by the time she'd reached home the rain which the clouds had upheld all day finally bolted the skies, force ripening the dusk. For a moment it crossed Euna's mind to delay the trip and travel in the morning but it dawned on her that the darkness was good. It would be good to sneak into Sunrise, especially now when her sisters were forcing her to join them in awakening those things she felt were better left dead.

Because it was raining and she was leaving much later than she'd planned, she decided to take a taxi to Sunrise. Why not arrive in style. She too was royalty – an empress, Dawuud had once called her. He'd said too that Candace, the name which appeared first on her birth certificate though she never used it, was special unusual, royal, he'd said. He'd said it so sincerely, now that she was remembering it, so seriously in that way he had about him. She had not

admitted to herself (until a few days ago) how much she missed him. After his secondment – so brief those six months had been – he spent another two months (with her) before he returned (without her) to Trinidad. She was thinking about him now because she knew he would have approved of her going to do this work with her sisters. And she missed him for that because she felt afraid and alone. She would have asked him to go with her, if only to face Titty after all these years; to face Titty and her English husband and her stories about England.

But she remembered how sullen their relationship had become after she told him she thought his Shango thing was an abomination. It seemed that some kind of destructive force lit up his eyes that day in the Promenade Gardens when she said this to him. So different was this look he gave her from moments before when he had asked her what her family's name was. She had said it casually, simply, flinging it from her mouth without particularly attending to the Q and the U it contained so that it seemed to Dawuud as if she was trying to clear her throat. So he repeated it back to her, firstly to confirm it was what she had said. Once confirmed (by Euna saying 'yes, you hear me right...Quamina'), he repeated it a few more times 'Quamina, Quamina, Quamina eh' before saying, 'you like Thomas more than this? A name and history that inspire a Carter poem?' She remembered how silly she felt that day after he recited the poem to her. They didn't speak very much after that and it was so near the end of their time together. She now felt sorry because she wished he was there to go with her to Sunrise.

She had convinced her self that their troubles began in any case from the day they met when she had refused to call him Dawuud, which he'd told her meant David in English. He later felt that it was an unforeseen error on his part to tell her the meaning of his name because he never got to hear her call him Dawuud in that special way she spoke without ever knowing how lovely it sounded to him.

'I think I like David better,' she had said without the faintest smile, Dawuud noticed.

'When I marry my husband,' she now remembered telling him and wished she had not, 'I was glad to go by he name Thomas. One of the Saints. My mother (God rest her soul) said is a good Catholic name and she say it mean 'twin.' Must mean I going to have twins, she tell me. But is my sister who coming, Titty who get the twins. Anyhow, I like it. Is an old name. Certainly it lasted longer than my marriage to that blasted camoudi.'

Perhaps, Dawuud had thought when she said this, that a smile *was* there at the back of someplace, camouflaged like the charm he knew was there too, had to be for she was quite a beauty. Why would such a beautiful woman hide her charm and barely smile he often wondered when he spoke with her. A guard

maybe, he pondered. It wasn't just the douglarish mix to which he was attracted – that was hardly special. In Trinidad practically everyone, himself included, was a mix of some kind. It didn't seem obvious if you were expecting it to be but his father was Muslim (Dawuud Snr), as black as a Sudanese and his mother deep black too had Madras in her blood. It wasn't how beautiful she looked that appealed to Dawuud it was something, he felt, which the light in his eyes saw in the light in her eyes but he didn't realise this until he had returned to Trinidad.

'Shango old more than all them Saints you and me could name.' Dawuud had said.

'Is so? If you say so. But you calling you Shango a god. I don't say Thomas or Peter or Mathew and John are gods. Only saints. God is the one true God. How many gods must there be for one mortal to labour over in worship when we have the saints to call on already?'

'Numbers without end girl.' Euna never liked the way he called her 'girl.' She told him so one day and he'd said she was right, it was wrong to call her a girl, when after all she was an empress. And even then she did not smile. At least not so that he might see.

'Is up to you what you want to believe,' Dawuud continued, 'I can't make you know what I know. Everybody thing come to them how they would recognise it – a little way different from the next body. But is nothing new coming to them really. Just revisions of the past – things that already part of who they are, the light they born with. In Trinidad we don't draw fine fine lines between Catholic and Shango like all you doing here. Home you can be Catholic, Anglican or Hindu, Muslim and so and still have your own shrine. We take a lil thing from the past, some things we get now and mix it to how we like it. So we does do it. My shrine is for Shango. When you come to Trinidad I'll show you.' He said that as if he meant it to seem like a half joke. But still no smile from her, he was thinking. Dawuud was sure though that the eye roll she gave him and the half pouting mouth mutating what would otherwise have been kissed teeth were signs that he had heard her snigger at his flimsy invitation.

Euna didn't see the need to say it but she knew there was no way she would be going to Trinidad, for that would run the risk of bumping into her adulterous ex husband where chroniclers had it that he was now shackled up with a new woman –woman, not wife (how could he remarry with Euna refusing to grant a divorce and risk being downgraded to 'Ms' by everyone at the School, everyone everywhere) and a bundle of hungry bellies for children. She praised God often that it was only the one daughter she had had with the snake. And how, she remembered, she and her mother had prayed to St Joseph to bless her with that child. Her only daughter, who reminded her a little of her sister Bess –

flighty the same way - and worse, she looked so strikingly, like her camoudi father that Euna never appreciated St Joseph's gift.

Only a few people who really knew her would have told Dawuud (had he stayed long enough to ask) that Euna would never go with him to Trinidad (he had asked her to marry him after one of their botanical strolls – it was after saying something beautiful she was remembering – some bits of a Carter poem – *where you are, I am...if a child drowns it's the sky's fault. If sea birds stray, the Sun's. O my companion.* He did that often, sang sometimes too, songs he said he had made up; sometimes excitedly and impromptu he would clasp her into the whole of him and spin her around the garden until she became as giddy as a...an *empress*; how she would cuss and hit him as she fixed her hair with darting eyes checking to see if any one had noticed them) because she had always told herself that if she ever left Guyana it would be to go to no place other than England; London, England.

It was a lottery who stayed and who went. And Titty had won one of the draws back in 1974, hadn't she? An English man too for a husband. She had won. She had arrived. Hadn't she? Euna had several times imagined how Titty and her English husband had romanced in London parks and waltzed together at great galas, glittering with chandeliers that never once blacked out. What gowns Titty must now own; perfectly tailored, couture English linen and silks in cerise pinks and blue turquoise worn with rose corsages always clipped somewhere on her person (and real pearls clasped by her husband round her neck and delicately tucked into the piercings in her ears) when they dined and danced together. She must have enchanted that Englishman with her beauty everyone said was unrivalled by her sisters. She had the look of their mother, every drop of the part Portuguese blood expended there. How besotted the lover who asked for her hand in marriage must have been by those soft dark curls in her hair when they had met on that summer's day she'd wrote and told them about. *Joseph and I are to be married*, she'd written less than two years later which made Euna imagine the curious way he must have asked her to do it, as if Titty's acquiescence would be to him a highly prized honour. She was now an Ambrose but somehow it failed to convey the likely sweetness of any blissful union when joined together with Titty, Euna felt. Still Titty had it all, hadn't she? Years she had lived with that special everything, that *all* Titty had, keeping it to herself. Oh, but Euna remembered the Shakespeare volumes, leather bound and still intact. She had read a few, not all of the volumes, taking as she read the words therein scribed, the utmost care when turning the pages so they would not be ruined as the heat had so often done to feebler works people from overseas had sent her. But when called upon by some unexpected need, she could not remember

Shakespeare's words, but David's she realised now, David's sang and sang and sang.

Euna always felt that England, the Englishman, and being a true 'Mrs' were only parts of the prize Titty had won. For her to be the named Head Mistress of Blairmont's Lodge High School in the greenest heart of a place she had written and said was called 'Wiltshire' - that was Titty's grandest prize. Euna imagined how serene that board that stood before the brown stone building of the school must look to passersby or to those hoping to send their children to that mellifluously run establishment; crested with the Blairmont's Lodge High School logo and the bold golden letters that followed: Head Mistress, Mrs Tititlayo Ambrose, Dip. Ed, B.A (Hons) History, Pg. Dip Ed and other abbreviated triumphs Titty omitted to write and tell them about. And perhaps in lowercases beneath the gold printed letters the name of Blairmont's Deputy would seem to the same passersby a functional and administrative gesture; an important one, though, and of course very, very necessary. (*And Titty daughter dead*)

Gazing out of the taxi into the darkness travelling with them to Sunrise Euna felt a little safer now that the rain had stopped falling. But now that she thought about it, the rain had seemed strange. It had started just as she had turned the key to open her front door. (*And Titty daughter dead*) It seemed as though the rain had followed her into the house, not as though it was leaking into the house from a hole in the aging zincked roof, but that the rain - she found it impossible to think it out loud inside her head what she was feeling - but she felt that the rain seemed to be raining inside of her; as if she and it were one inseparable thing. (*And Titty daughter dead*) Perhaps, she thought, it was the anxiety she had been feeling about seeing Titty. That must be it. But although she knew that she was feeling anxious about seeing Titty she felt that there was something else that bothered her. She knew it was not fear alone. It seemed as if it was more or less than fear, but she could not be sure what it was. (*Titty daughter dead*) And though she couldn't see it from the taxicab's window she felt as though the sea, like the darkness travelling with her to Sunrise and the rain that had now ceased to fall - she felt like they were all trying to communicate something to her. And the sea had a voice like David's. It was singing David's songs and reciting poetry the way David did and so she could hear the sea saying just in the way David would say

*Oh Jesus Christ man!*

*it is as if the soul of slavery*

*crouching like a tiger on the edge of the world*

*waits for the slave to leave his house  
across the dark face of the river  
the hill of fire glows red like fresh blood  
like the blood of Quamina  
flowing through the green forest  
the green green forest*

And somewhere deep inside herself (*like the blood of Quamina*) she could hear David say what she'd always felt about him. That he loved her, though she couldn't remember him ever saying it. She knew he must have said it (*like the blood of Quamina*) or meant to say it but she had never heard him say it because he was always singing and when he wasn't singing or reciting Martin Carter (*like the blood of Quamina*) he argued with her about the way the school was teaching English. And she could change that, he'd said. She could ask the governors to include more Caribbean writers - he'd called them "home grown" and she remembered thinking about vegetables when he'd said that (*flowing through the green forest*). She hadn't been the one to implement very much in the school (*like the blood of Quamina*). She knew, because he'd said so, that he had no objection to the writers who had left the Caribbean because that would be foolish. Really it would he had said. But he thought that they taught English literature at Demerara County as if it was (*the green green forest*) a dying thing. And it shouldn't be so, he had said. It shouldn't be so.

Looking out now at the unsleeping darkened Atlantic Euna realised that (*the green green forest*) she had not disagreed with David. But neither had she told him that she agreed with what he had said. She had said nothing. She wondered now when it was that she had ever said anything at the school that was not what she was expected to say and what really were the impressions she was making on the girls and boys she so dearly loved. David had been there six months as part of an exchange between her school and his school in Trinidad acting as Head of English (*flowing through the green forest*) and he could see the very things that she had imagined she could not see. Even, she found herself thinking those things (*like the blood of Quamina*) deep within her.

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Joseph Ambrose was exhausted. It was two o'clock in the morning of what seemed to him like an interminably long day and the drums, the tambourines were yet pounding and clashing in his head. His eyes were becoming heavy but the drumbeats seemed like an eternal, clamouring call. Not that he had been able to sleep since he and Titty arrived. It was a long time since they had laid together

in such intimate proximity. He watched her sleep and kissed her eyes, one at a time, and then the tip of her nose. She'd fretted and turned away from him, her hair lavender sweet, glistening softly in the wicker lamplight burning through the night. In the mornings, he laid watching her as she stroked a heavily fragranced lotion over her body. He didn't avert his eyes even when she seemed disturbed by the way he watched her. The more she caressed her body with the creamy lotion, the more perspiration slowly trickled down her skin. He didn't much care for the dizzying fragrance of the lotion but he dreamed of licking the gleaming perspiration from his wife's body. As he watched her he was reminded of the times they used to dine and dance and spend Saturday nights in theatres and on Sundays strolling through the royal parks. She had shown him how to waltz, for she had such gracefulness and lightness of feet that he felt himself floating in her arms when they danced. Those times she would ask him to clasp her necklace and she would giggle when he kissed the arch in her neck too. That seemed a long time ago and so far from where they now were with the pervading sounds of an unfamiliar tune which he neither loved nor loathed.

He heard himself muttering as his head nodded from the weight of sleeplessness. He was still lagging, this he knew.

'She was my daughter,' he was saying as his head flopped and flailed. No one seemed to hear him.

'Why am I here? Why am I here?' He felt himself stiffen and thought of his great uncle Joseph who at all times held a straight posture as befitted a royal soldier. The drumming now seemed to be thundering in his blood and heart.

'My daughter... My daughter is dead. Oh Loise, Loise is dead. Why, why, why?' Joseph repeated the words over and over as if compelling the drummers to make from them his sound. And it seemed in truth that a new tune had been made from his words which carried him in its peculiar pull and tugging. He began to clap his hands. Slowly, he clapped his hands as the Chief leapt from his roots and limbered towards him.

'Titty, look your husband.'

'Stop him, somebody, he ain know what he doing. Stop he. Look T husband.' said Euna, anxiously.

'Leave him. Leave him.' No one owned the voice and command. Joseph Ambrose was left alone to dance his dance.

His feet began to shuffle. Suddenly, he was tossed to the ground by a force no one, not even the seeing one could see. He wriggled slowly, as if he was in a straightjacket from which he was trying futilely to remove himself. His head swirled around his body. Slowly he raised himself from the ground and reached for Festus' walking stick which he saw in his own rhythm and light. His head jutted forward. His back arched straight, he held the stick of his light and vision



across his chest and slow marched around the table. Somewhere behind his now closed eyes he could see his uncle Joseph. He was no longer wearing the uniform of a soldier but was topped and tailed in white. Joseph could barely see a young woman standing beside him but she seemed to be crying. His uncle began to cry too. Joseph noticed he was holding a young child's hand in his. 'Eloise, Eloise' Joseph cried. But his cries could not be heard for they were entombed in his private womb of memories.

'Congo, Congo, Congo,' Ms Somner shouted in her jubilant aspirations.

Joseph danced around the red cloth on the ground that had been laid there for Samuel. The sisters followed Joseph once round the tablecloth and then kneeled; heads bowed versing prayers and pleas.

'Praises, praises, Congo come. Praise Congo. Congo come'.

The Chief heard the Mother's incantation, "Congo come" and he tried to wrestle himself from Joseph, but it was no easy dream. He thirsted for high wine, but the Mother did not notice Joseph licking and lapping his tongue so enthralled she was in her imaginings of Congo.

Titty took some water from the cloth on the ground and splashed it on Joseph's face. Joseph's eyes rolled back in his head. He shivered a little and then stumbled.

'Is a Congo Chief,' Ms Somner repeated.

Her incantation reeled in the Chief's head. He felt the slash of water on his face and stepped away from Joseph and walked shakily towards the back of the yard where Samuel was yet sitting. Joseph collapsed to the ground. Titty helped him to his feet and walked with him into the house. Wordlessly. Quietly. Hand in hand and slowly they walked together up the creaking greenheart stairs.

The Chief had stumbled to the ground and slumped beside Samuel. He raised his eyes toward the scene of an ill-timed dancing, searching for Joey among the slowly dispersing crowd. He could not see him anywhere. The Chief felt a heaviness in his heart that he knew was an old burden and hurt.

-Where Joey. Where your son  
-He gone. This thing too much for them  
-They didn't know it was me  
-Is a mix up history Chief, yours and mine  
-They didn't know was me  
-No Chief, they didn't see was you  
-She see me and ain say nothing

Pa was dreaming that an Amerindian man was standing over Bess as she slept. He asked the Amerindian man what he was doing kneeling over his grand daughter. The man said that the child could see at great distances. She must be taught in a school of the spirit until she was ready to understand all she knows. The man was wearing a large colourful, feathered headdress; his only clothes was a covering around his loins. He seemed to be standing firm as gold to the floor but at the same time as if he was hovering just above the floor. When he spoke, his body stiffened and his mouth twitched.

*Put her in a school of the spirit, for she is not yet ready for all she knows* - the man repeated against the golden glow of his face. This time, his voice was as deep as the base of a drum. Bess had been silent throughout the conversation between her grandfather and the Amerindian, until she heard the drum beat in the man's voice. She opened her eyes and took hold of the man's hand. She seemed to recognise him – to know him. They locked eyes for centuries of parting knowledge.

- They steamed your face but you have the caul
- It bury
- Who bury it
- I hear Pa telling Daddy he should never give it to Aunty Nelia. Is she bury it
- Where it bury
- In the yard behind the latrine and the mango tree that don't bear
- You must use it your aunty Nelia suppose to show you the power it have
- She ain show me but I know. I know
- But you see and blind
- Yes
- You get spoil with the steam
- Is so they say
- Only lil bit

When the elder Festus awoke from this sleep which was some months after Bess' first screaming, he yet could feel the presence of the Amerindian. It remained with him for some time, heavy and troubling as though it was a daunting, pressing memory. He told Ineze about the dream but as time drifted the dream was thrown into the far reaches of their everyday until they met the Chief in their separate transitions and knew as we knew that the mediation of the Amerindian was firm in its heights.

When Bess told them that it was Pa who told her that Titty's daughter was dead, Euna heard our distant drumming in her head and realised that there was nowhere to run from the thing that was in their blood. Remembering now the way Bess walked toward the rising steam Euna wondered whether it was possible to be afraid of and yet enchanted by the same terrifying thing.

'It ain going to burn she Mammy?'

'Your grandfather say it going to be quick.'

'It going to be better for she to not see them things.'

'Bess come girl – come.'

Bess took slow, trembling steps towards the kitchen. Euna remembered thinking that it looked as if her sister was trying to measure space with her feet. As she approached the semi circle formed by Pa, Ma, her mother, father, sisters and her brother Joey, Bess seemed mesmerised by the whiteness of the steam rising from the calabash. From that trembling distance, Bess could only imagine that the visible air could hurt. She didn't hear when we said it. From some things the child need protection, they were right about this. But this was not the way. It was our blight to impart this reverberating chime that sealed her sound and sight. She had to see us. She had to hear us. And the others too and learn to know the difference which she would do in time. So we hastened to bind her eyes from being blinded by the prickling steam.

Samuel felt as though something was telling him to stop what he was doing and he made an attempt to say that he wanted them to stop and find some other way but Festus clapped eyes on a weakness in his son which he himself had moments before culled. How could we be so presumptuous as to remove all their autonomy. Elder and son we had given them signs. Samuel had seen our flight – heard our cries in his blood, watched us rapture and swathe the lamb that is our son because his craft had been poorly refined in that return. And even as we tell you this Ife is awaiting his new return. But in an unclean vessel the circumference cannot bear our signs. And precision is the wielding sun journeying East, North, West and South. The elder too did not read our signs in his mortality.

'Samuel – we doing this so the child don't run mad, you hearing me.'

'Yes, he right, he right. Is true what he saying, is true,' we heard Samuel saying to himself but he didn't say it to his father. He looked at him and Festus felt glad within himself that his words had comforted his son. Comfort it might have been but it was the kind, we knew, that was sometimes still uneasy.

Each night, about the same time as the first screaming, Bess jumped out of her sleep and was found pointing at a corner of the living room.

'Ife, Ife, Ife, Mammy, Mammy, Ife neck.' The entire house bolted awake; flicked on lights and heated up water to make tea.

She thought she could still see us holding her beloved brother, our beloved son. The imaginations of the living could be exasperating but how else would they know what is there in the light. Bess was a child and we had redoubled the caul that they had sought to remove. We had foreseen her years and we knew in time she would learn how to see and blind until the light came up once more as bright as it had been in her immortality.

Bess continued to holler and for a time no one was able to stop her from gazing into what seemed to them an empty space in the corner of the living room, shaking and screaming, 'Ife neck, Ife, look Ife.' In her own time, and because we knew how fragile was their energy she would shudder out of the trance.

'Bess – is wha' child – Bess – is wha'? Tell you granny wha you seeing child?' Her grandmother tried to ask her when she found her. She gently brushed Bess' face and wiped the tears that seemed too much for any child to possess. In between tortured gasps Bess would say that 'Ife neck... loose...Ife neck loose... from he body, a man showing me.' It was the same response each time, as if real each time, like the first seeing, the first screaming when the whole house had awakened, flicked on lights, heated up tea water, removed the sleep from their eyes and shuddered simultaneously at the body of their son, our son, their grandson, their baby brother in a corner of the living room crumpled beside the silent mahogany gram.

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## Afterlude

No one, not even Bess when she was old enough to reach into the heart of memory could say how long she had been standing over Ife. Time only travels in the light so in this night that was as dark as unencountered memories time was hushed within our womb. Bess had stopped screaming by the time our beloveds hailed from the wanton fantasies of their sleep. Several years from this night Ineze, wife of the elder Festus, mother to Samuel who unlike their first born Kofi was ordered to stay, would recite that she had been dreaming about a child's blood drenching the white gloves she wore. It was only when she journeyed toward the light that brought her home that she remembered that it was her gloved hand that had performed the soft squeezing of the girl baby's neck to drums beating in her blood. It is only now, we must shamefully admit, that the elder Festus remembered his charmed league with the bacoo as he slept that dark night. As a boy he had spurned the solicitous golden queen, Mammi, as she's known throughout the vastness of her transfigurations, and yet so dazed and humbled he became when he saw this vilest of our creatures, though they too have their uses on earth.

Samuel, the child's father thrice heard her screaming which remained throughout his life like a discordant sound that longed to find its melody. It was after that dark night that his wife, Petromella, no longer looked into his eyes. From then it was that when she lay beside him she could hear the drum beating in his heart from a distant time and unlived memory and returned, as she did when she was a child to bleeding out confessions. For her husband Samuel the drumming in his blood never ceased. In the fields that bear their bitter bond not far from where his forebears were chained, as he dredged for gold that would of a certainty become evanescent, Samuel often heard Bess' screaming and it felt like a curdling in his blood. It was a familiar sound, a sudden shrieking he'd heard somewhere before but couldn't remember where. It was like an off beat drumming in his blood to which he struggled to compose a rhythm of his life and the life of his children. In the light where time travels memory is a dark companion that sometimes walks ahead and sometimes walks behind. Samuel now walks in the light of time reaching into the belly of spirit to where his eldest brother Kofi has returned. His daughter, whom he calls on three times in her everyday, now walks precisely where our light takes him.

Thamar, Titty and Euna were terrified by the sights of both siblings - one dead on the floor, the other transfixed in front of him. Within their own melody of time and light they began to see this as Bess' blight and not theirs. It was she who was there, it was she who saw, and it was she who knew something it

seemed to them that they would never know. And we could do nothing to curb the wilfulness of their hearts until we felt certain that they were ready to dance in the rhythm that light made of time. We reclaimed our vessels until we became certain of that time, but we too must dance in the rhythm of light and time. Her sisters would ever wonder how Bess came to be there. People later said that it was Ole Higue who had sucked the life out of the child. That belief continues to be the most enduring of the various others that chimed through the village after this darkest night. It still chimes to this day even though it was true what the obeah woman, Treen Moore, had told them that it was our design and purpose for we no longer heard the drumming in their blood.

On this dark night Bess was shuttled away from the scene of an undying memory. She remained dazed, her head shaking continuously until finally Ife's body was removed from the corner of the living room and taken away amid the cries of the household and the neighbours' houses. The humming and collective wailing clung to the morning air like a distant drumming and it was then that Bess first felt the drumming in her blood. It made her sleep until the memory was born again in the moment of her first screaming. After two months of reliving the terror in its sameness – reliving a relived terror, Festus and Ineze felt that the child needed a bath. They exchanged dollars with Ms Moore who never sought our permission to drench the child in oils and unblessed waters that suited no purpose but her own. This did no harm to the child for the caul held its power, and the bath she gave without knowing the girl's particular gifts and needs did not have the effect her parents had hoped for. It did not stop the relived screaming and terror so they took the child to an old Congo who still lived on the edge of the village, where he had always lived through all his lives and memories.

Congo told them that the child had the sight of hundreds of years past, and of years to come, that she must walk a certain path - that in time she should be taught, if she could not learn herself -how to use the gift and live by her craft. He told them to keep a drum work for their people. If it was possible to hear the heart of silence beating either Samuel or Festus would have heard how quiet she had become in the nearness of Congo. Congo never once lifted the lids of his eyes to look at Bess. Samuel and Festus never saw it, but Bess never once lifted the lids of her eyes to look at Congo either. If we had made it possible for Samuel and Festus to see, they would see that between Bess and the Congo there were many suns, many souls in the far reaches of oceans and rivers and waters. They never heard when Congo told Bess that her tears were those that filled the rivers, creeks and the ocean. If we had made it possible they would have seen Congo show Bess the precise moment when the Sun and Moon parted time so that she could always look directly at the Sun though it blinded others who tried. They

never saw when he showed her how to wave her hand to hold back the rain and how to quell the roaring thunder. They never saw the white candle Congo passed to Bess that formed a pentacle shape on her forehead and lightened her cheeks and chin.

We knew that even if we had made it possible for them to see it would yet be as if they were blind. We knew that being both uncertain about the incomprehensible ramblings of the old African, Festus would not need to strain tirelessly to convince his son Samuel that it was best to leave the fate of the child in the hands of the one true God they accepted and knew. But before this could be done they listened with keen intent and so heard in their hearts the advisement of the man who preached at the Lutheran Church a few villages outside of Sunrise that, lest the child be damned in her eternity, it would be wise to cleanse with steam from piping hot water the wickedness and certain evil they said was in her tender eyes. Time only travels in the light and knowing is borne in the light's immense kindling so we forgive the elder's unwise seeing for they delight in knowing the proud darkness that pulls and reels. What he sees and knows now will not pass beyond the hand of time's eternity. Now clothed in the sun's white vestments, the elder perfects his dance to the reborning of our memories as his progeny beside him waits to bear once more the rhythm of our signs.

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