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Magic, Myths, and Storytelling in Colonial Caribbean Literature

Like the Afro-Caribbean people themselves, traditions and practices were uprooted from lands far away and carried hundreds of miles across deep oceans to a new world where they continued to exist and adapt; Practices rooted in magic, myths, and the oral tradition of storytelling. These stories and practices, like the people who perpetuated them, were displaced, abused, and stripped of their original identity. Traditions provided the Caribbean people with a connection to their homelands and ancestors, and may have provided them with a sense of community and freedom. Contrarily, some traditions and practices were just as controlling as the colonizers and settlers that enslaved them. This paper explores some of the many ways that magic, myths, and the tradition of storytelling persisted in colonial Caribbean, and how they are represented in literature and other media characterizing the region, as well as the roles they played in colonial Afro-Caribbean society, and possible effects they had on the islands' enslaved inhabitants.

As a result of thousands of Africans being shipped as commodities to the Americas and forced to adapt and meld with their new brethren and surroundings, theological and mythological hybrids began to form in the islands in a process known as syncretism ("Syncretism"). Well known syncretic religions in the Caribbean include

Rastafarianism (a combination of Old Testament, Caribbean culture, and Marcus Garvey's political movement), as well as Santeria and voodoo (combinations of Western Africa, native Caribbean, and Christian/Catholic beliefs) (Donnell 108) ("Syncretism"). Syncretism takes place when there is an attempt to reconcile disparate or contradictory beliefs often resulting in a combination of those beliefs. As the African slaves were brought to foreign lands, their religious practices were considered to be "heathen" and were often outlawed by their colonizers. Many were forced to convert to Christianity and to practice a religion and worship a God that was unfamiliar to them. In order to preserve their ways of thinking, many continued to secretly observe their beliefs and adhere to old traditions, which resulted in the hybrid, or syncretized, religions.

Practices considered by the colonizers to be heathen included rituals involving sorcery and magic, trance states, possessions, dancing and drumbeating, and sacrifices of the living (often animal, but sometimes human) (Williams vi-xix). Evidence of these non-Christian practices can be found throughout literature and other media representing this region. In *Sugar Cane Alley* (a film adaptation of Joseph Zobel's novel Black Shack Alley), the slave children are seen fashioning a grass charm for the main character José to keep his grandmother from beating him after one of her bowls is accidentally broken. In the Haile Gerima movie *Sankofa*, the character Mona is magically transported back to "reclaim the past" (translation of the word "sankofa") as she becomes a plantation slave named Shula. It appears in the film as though she may have been sent to the past by way of incantations and drumming from a mysterious old man known as "Sankofa". During her experiences in the past, Shula the slave encounters a clash of religious beliefs where many of the characters secretly hold rituals and "initiations" (or forms of baptism) into

the non-Christian faith that they practiced. One of the characters, Shongul, makes use of charms and potions to protect himself and others, while also turning them upon others against their will. At one point, the religiously conflicted Shula is agonizingly forced by the colonizers to renounce her heathen religion and profess loyalty to God and Christianity.

Storytelling was another way for slaves to connect with their past and ancestry. The oral tradition of storytelling was often times the only way for imported slaves to pass down historical and embellished accounts of their homeland, as well as time-honored tales and fables. One character that turns up time and time again in Caribbean storytelling is that of Anansi, a West African trickster - part spider, part man (and sometimes one or the other) - whose stories exist for entertainment, as well as to teach lessons. Many stories depict the crafty Anansi using his wits to trick his fellow beings (insects and animals) into forfeiting food or possessions, sometimes getting himself into more trouble than he was prior to his foolery. A parallel can be drawn between the lessons of Anansi and one particular scene in the film *Sugar Cane Alley*. The slave children, left to their own devices while their parents work in the sugarcane fields, find an egg and decide to cook it. However, without matches, they are unable to light a fire on which to cook the egg. One young girl, seemingly innocent, uses deception and her knowledge of the “tab” or credit system in place at the plantation store to fool the store clerk into giving her matches and a bottle of rum. Instead of cooking the egg, the children get drunk off of the rum and end up burning down one of the shacks with the matches.

Not all Anansi stories result in trouble for the spider. Depending upon the lesson of the story, listeners are told to beware of Anansi's folly, or sometimes to follow his example (Auld). In the quote below from Martha Warren Beckwith, there is a description of an Anansi character that represents more than the trickster of folklore. Beckwith suggests that Anansi took on the role of a hero and exemplified revolution; perhaps even encouraging decolonization:

Anansi is the spirit of rebellion; he is able to overturn the social order; he can marry the Kings' daughter, create wealth out of thin air; baffle the Devil and cheat Death... For an oppressed people Anansi conveyed a simple message from one generation to the next--that freedom and dignity are worth fighting for, at any odds (Beckwith).

The folklore of Anansi survived the journey on slave ships, but his stories are seldom heard in modern times. Mary Adella Wolcott expresses this sentiment in her poem *Nana* from 1904: "The strange 'Anancy' stories, / And legends weird and old / Which after patient coaxing / Were in the twilight told / To breathless, wide-eyed children - / We hardly hear to-day; / A few faint echoes linger - / The rest have passed away," (Donnell 42-3).

In the December 2007 issue of Caribbean Beat magazine, Emily Zobel Marshall provides written accounts of her doctoral research in an article titled "Tracking Anansi," in which she travels to the isolated Jamaican Maroon country to see whether Anansi still maintained cultural influence in Jamaica today. The Maroon people of Jamaica are descendents of slaves who escaped captivity and fled to the hills of the island where they live today. While many people that Marshall encountered along her journey echoed the

same sentiment as Walcott's poem *Nana* - that Anansi stories are rapidly vanishing from modern memory - several people identified Anansi as an important cultural icon and a symbol of survival; one that should never be forgotten. Marshall describes her meeting with Lynette Wilkes, a cultural and community activist living in the Maroon country. Wilkes explained that there was a danger that Jamaican people were losing touch with their cultural heritage, and Anansi was a key part of that heritage. "You can pass down your family oral history through the tales. It is a form of wisdom. Everything that we have around us is from outside, the books, TV, films. But our music, our dance and our folklore is our greatest form of resistance because it retains tremendous elements of our African history. We have to go back to go forward," (Marshall).

Wilkes recognized that storytelling, and specifically Anansi stories, were an integral part of the Afro-Caribbean heritage and culture. "We have to go back to go forward," is a translation of the word "Sankofa", which urges African descendants to "reclaim the past". By perpetuating practices and traditions in the face of adversity, the perpetuation was, and continues to be, a form of resistance against brutal plantation regimes of the past, and modern media invasions today. Another of Marshall's interview sources, Captain Smith of the Windward Maroons in Moore Town, explained how storytelling brings the community together. "When I was a boy an Anansi story was told after ever cook and eat... Grandma and Grandpa would take you up in an Anansi story. You would have children coming from other homes to listen, and that would last for late night." The captain said that, unlike the English nursery rhymes, stories, and sayings that he learned in school, which felt "alien" to him, Anansi stories described his world. "Without a doubt, learning about Anansi, it's an education. You can identify." Captain

Smith felt that by renewing an appreciation of Jamaica's history and culture in today's youth, it would help to combat crime and corrupt attitudes (Marshall).

Historically, colonizers often referred to, and otherwise treated, their slaves as animals or beasts in order to objectify them. Interestingly, the fact that Anansi is depicted as part spider and part man – in other words, not completely human – does not seem to imply that identifying with Anansi is to submit to methods of dehumanization and objectification. It seems, instead, to have the opposite effect. Anansi demonstrates that the oppressed “other” is capable of intelligent thought, and can even be successful at overtaking the oppressor, in some cases. The weak spider is capable of defeating the powerful Tiger. Emily Zobel Marshall wraps up her article with the following statement, identifying the impact that Anansi may have had on the people of Jamaica, and in turn, the rest of the Caribbean:

Anansi and other resistance figures inspired slaves and runaways in their struggle for freedom. Through song, music, dance and folktales they preserved their humanity and their heritage, challenged the systems of their oppression and kept alive their belief that one day they could be free.

(Marshall)

According to Marshall, traditions such as Anansi stories helped Afro-Caribbean slaves to preserve their humanity, not relinquish it. Anansi stories were demonstrations of the statement “The last shall be first and the first last,” or Frantz Fanon's description of decolonization (Fanon 37). Anansi's lessons showed that the small, weak, and powerless have the ability within them to overcome the most fearsome and seemingly invincible adversary, such as Anansi's well-known nemesis, the Tiger. The Maroon people of

Jamaica were renowned for their rebellious nature – having escaped colonialism to live free in the hills of the island. Two of Jamaica’s seven national heroes – Paul Bogle and Nanny of the Maroons - are described as having “Anansi-like” qualities. Paul Bogle led a protest march to the Morant Bay courthouse in 1865, known as the Morant Bay Rebellion. Weeks later he was captured and hanged for his uprising, but his demonstration paved the way for social and economic improvements (“National Heroes”). Emily Zobel Marshall quotes one of the Maroons as saying of Bogle, “When he run from British, the horse him ride, him shoe it back way [backwards]. So anytime him gone through the hill, you think him gone back. That there is an Anansi technique!” (Marshall). Nanny, a Maroon leader in the beginning of the 18th century, is legendary for her cleverness and outstanding military leadership. She maintained a powerful influence over the Maroons; so strong that it is said to have been supernatural and connected to her powers of obeah (“National Heroes”). She was particularly skilled at organizing surprise guerilla attacks, resulting in widespread confusion among the British forces. As the only female represented as one of Jamaica’s national heroes, Nanny further exemplifies the idea of Anansi as the unlikely hero, which makes her story that much more impressive and legendary. Nanny’s wit, clever organization, and leadership skills allowed the Maroon people to fend off British attacks, despite the fact that she is described as a “small, wiry woman” (“National Heroes”). The tiny woman – the unlikely hero – is capable of fending off the British colonizers, just as the weak spider is capable of defeating the mighty Tiger.

While Anansi stories, and those of other legendary Caribbean rebels, helped to instill a sense of hope and community, Emily Zobel Marshall identifies that there may

have also been a practical aspect to the storytelling. "...Through these cultural forms they learnt how to fight back within the confines of the slave system. Stick-fighting dances trained them for combat, songs and drums communicated defiant secret messages and the Anansi folktales illustrated the tactics of survival in the face of oppression," (Marshall).

In addition to magical traditions and storytelling, myths were also an integral part of the colonial Afro-Caribbean culture; Serving as both a means of carrying on tradition as well as, ironically, a means of keeping the population's behavior in check. In his text *Concerning Violence*, Frantz Fanon describes the multitude of "maleficent spirits... leopard-men, serpent-men, six-legged dogs, zombies – a whole series of tiny animals or giants which create around the native a world of prohibitions, or barriers and of inhibitions far more terrifying than the world of the settler," (Fanon 55). The fear instilled by these myths is also evident in the movie *Sugar Cane Alley* during a scene when the schoolchildren are describing such creatures to one of their upper-class mulatto schoolmates; explaining how the creatures punish you if you misbehave or venture outside after dark. The mulatto boy, who apparently was not subject to the influence of such myths during his upbringing, simply does not believe the children and dismisses the stories. Fanon, again, describes the profound influence of these myths:

The atmosphere of myth and magic frightens me and so takes on an undoubted reality. By terrifying me, it integrates me in the traditions and the history of my district or of my tribe, and at the same time it reassures me, it gives me a status, as it were an identification paper. In underdeveloped countries the occult sphere is a sphere belonging to the community which is

entirely under magical jurisdiction. By entangling myself in this inextricable network where actions are repeated with crystalline inevitability, I find the everlasting world which belongs to me, and the perennality which is thereby affirmed of the world belonging to us. Believe me, the zombies are more terrifying than the settlers; and in consequence the problem is no longer that of keeping oneself right with the colonial world and its barbed-wire entanglements, but of considering three times before urinating, spitting, or going out into the night (Fanon 55-6).

In other words, the myths, in some ways, assisted the settlers or colonizers in keeping the slaves from misbehaving. Fanon identifies the fact that the slaves believed that there were forces in existence, far more powerful than the settlers, which were keeping them from lashing out or misbehaving. At the same time, Fanon recognizes that these same forces helped the slaves identify with one another with a sense that they were all part of one community, one world, together.

Magical traditions, myths, and storytelling provided the Afro-Caribbean people with a connection to their heritage while instilling a sense of community and belonging. They existed for the purposes of faith, history, education, and conviction. Some of these traditions taught lessons and provided hope, while others encouraged order, and sometimes *disorder*. Altogether, they make up an integral part of Afro-Caribbean culture and history.

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