

REMEMBERING PAPA CC

Caldwell Taylor

There is a spiritual link between the
deceased and those who are still on earth"
-*E.Bolafi Idowu, "The City of Ibadan"*

He was called home / And is, I am sure, doing
greater work
- *Derek Walcott, "A Letter from Brooklyn"*

"Canute" Emmanuel Caliste , the Carriacouan artist who won international acclaim for his so-called "primitive art", died one year ago today on November 20, 2005 . Canute took up painting at the age of nine, following a fateful encounter with a Mamaglo -a mermaid- who gave him his "gift" and steadfastly nourished his artistic imagination for more than seven decades: He was already in his fifties when his paintings were discovered by Jean Capets , a member of the Carriacou Madonna House Catholic Order which was then led by Canadian Trudi Cortens. The Madonna House women - Trudi Cortens, Jean Capets, Linda Lambeth and Genevieve Enoe-brought Canute's 'quirky' paintings to the attention of art galleries and art critics and in the space of a few short years he would catch the eyes of many well -heeled collectors,including the Queen of England , President George Bush the Elder, and United States Congressmen Ted Weiss and Dante Fascell.

"Mr. Canute" was a man of immense social and ritual authority, who remained a practicing Roman Catholic while being deeply rooted in the world of the Big Drum, a socio-religious rite which venerates "the long time [African]people". Therefore, we begin this tribute with a filial bow before the long time people, the ancestors whom Mr. Canute has joined.

THE ANCESTRAL DEAD

The ancestral dead are ever present in belief systems of Carriacouan, Petite Martinican, and "mainland" Grenadian folk. Indeed, the Dead are historical and psychic agents who "clear the way" and "fix up things" for their obedient children. They are venerated and appeased in Shango, Big Drum, Saraka, and Praise, and even the Jab Jab's - Devil's devil- sexually-suggestive gyrations are kinetic prayers that beg the "Old Heads" to impregnate the earth and fatten the crops. The Dead are in the backyard cemeteries, in the awe-inspiring silk cotton trees and in the bustling crossroads where humans traffic with anthropomorphic gods.

The Dead are even in the rum shops, where men who drink to drown their "worries" somehow remember to pour generous libations in honour of " the ones who have gone ahead" .For the Grenadian folk,death is not a terminal condition but a dynamic eternity in the never-ending ring (circle) of life. Homage is offered to the dead because death is a return to the source: There are countless stories that tell of Africans- "Flying Africans"-who flew all the way back home to Guinea (Africa).

My own great-grandmother delighted in telling me these contes about dem Afrikens who went back. She was sure of that . She knew that the old people fly back.... They didn't eat salt at all at all and so they was able to fly back. Salt make you too heavy to fly back. So the ones that really wanted to go back never ever ever touched even one single grain ah salt.

FLYING AFRICANS

Flying Africans also caught the attention of Esteban Montejo. According to this foul-mouthed Cuban ex-slave, "Negroes escaped by flying back" [to Africa].
(Montejo,1969:43)

In the United States stories of Flying Africans punctuated the childhood of Avey Johnson,the African-American protagonist in Paule Marshall's 1983 novel Praisesong for the Widow. These stories were told by an aunt, who took the young Avey to a place called "Ibo Landing" (located off the coast of Georgia and south Carolina Sea Islands) where many such flights famously took off.

Many years later, Avey would revisit these childhood stories in a series of dreams which came to her while she was doing a Caribbean cruise (an annual rite) with two girlfriends. The dreams seemed to have induced physical and psychic illness and as a result Avey Johnson decided to cut-short her trip and return to the United States. Indeed, with this in mind she abandoned the cruise when her boat stopped at Grenada.

AVEY JOHNSON MEETS KAYAK LEBERT JOSEPH

Avey booked herself into a hotel in the Grenadian capital as there were no flights that evening to the United States. Later on that very evening she left the hotel and went outdoors to catch a glimpse of Grenadian night life, when she ran into a man who introduced her to the Big Drum. The man ,Lebert Joseph, was a "Kayak" who ran a grog shop- "Rock Haven Bar"- on the

"mainland" (p.163). Lebert invited the visitor to accompany him to Carriacou where he was going to celebrate an annual Big Drum event; Avey accepted after some initial hesitation.

The trip to Carriacou, aboard a vessel named "Emmanuel C" - (p.193) was harrowing experience that put Avey in mind of what her African ancestors might have suffered during the crossing. Avey was sick throughout the voyage and upon her arrival in Carriacou she was put in the care of Lebert's daughter, Rosalie Parvey, who gave the 'Merican visitor a bath (p.217), introducing her to the cultic use of water . Water (or the scarcity of water) looms large in everyday life in Carriacou, a drought-prone island where annual rainfall is a miserly 30 to 55 inches.

CARRIACOU-A DROUGH-PRONE PLACE

In fact, Carriacou has suffered many severe droughts going all the way back to the days of slavery when imported camels were the key means of transport on the island (Smith,1961:456). A nasty spell of extremely dry weather greeted the abolition of slavery in 1834 and continued into the early years of the 1840s. Roman Catholic priest Father Maurice Tabore wrote that the prolonged drought occasioned "misery" on the island. He told of how he implored God's mercy on behalf of the "poor people", by means of a novena. "The object of the Novena" , said Father Maurice was "to obtain from heaven- weather favourable to the crops".

So Carriacou's journey to freedom was begun under very trying conditions which forced many Kayaks to take to the sea in order to make ends meet. Ever since that time the sea has tended to be kinder and more generous than the land, which, by the way, came rather late to Carriacouans: it took the 1897 Norman Commission to call for measures to relieve the extreme land hunger on the island. One member of the Norman Commission, the Fabian activist and self-described "socialist" ,Sydney Olivier (Lord Olivier), described Carriacou as a "little decaying island where all the people were wretchedly poor." (Devas, 1961, quoted in Hill, 1972p.19).

MIGRATION BEGINS

The Commission's call for land for Carriacou's landless led to the island's first land settlement scheme in 1903 at Harveyvale. But the distribution of a few hundred acres did not satiate the dire land hunger and emigration soon came to be regarded as the highway to betterment; what began as a trickle in the 1850s grew into a fast running stream by the end of the century as more and more young men went "away" to earn bread.

Some went to mainland Grenada, others to Trinidad, to Tobago. By the opening years of the twentieth century others went to Panama to dig the canal, to Maracaibo (Venezuela), to Demarara (British Guiana), Aruba, Curacao and to the United States. These waves of male migrants led to a sex imbalance in the island's population, a phenomenon that was noted from as early as the 1870s. The "shortage of men" had its consequences, one of these being lesbianism (zami) as noted by M.G. Smith in his 1952 study of the island (Smith, 1961:474).

In 1946 Carriacou had a population of 2,570 males and 4,201 females. There were 7,000 persons on the island at the time of Canute's birth in 1914. Fifty -three years later the population stood at at 6,000!

NINE NATIONS, ONE DRUM

At the end of the Big Drum festival a spiritually revived Avey Johnson returned to Grenada to catch her flight back to the United States. Doubtless many things ran through the American woman's mind on her way back home. Perhaps she replayed many of her conversations with Lebert, one of which introduced her to a world of Big Drum nation-ness".

"It's a Chamba! From my father's side of the family", Lebert told Avey. Assuming that all black people were aware of their specific ethnic identities, Lebert turned to Avey and asked: "What is your nation?" Is you Arada? Cromanti maybe?" Yarriba? Moko?" Is you a Manding like my mother, maybe?" (Marshall, 1983:167)

Avey was African-American and African nationhood as conceived in Lebert's Carriacou meant nothing to her . Lebert's interrogations and Avey's puzzlement remind this writer of one of the more dramatic dialogues in George Lamming's "In the Castle of My Skin":

'I like it', I said. 'That was really very beautiful'. You know the voice?" Trumper asked. He was very serious now. I tried to recall whether I might have heard it. I couldn't. 'Paul Robeson', he said. One of the greats o' my people. 'What people?' I asked. I was a bit puzzled. "My people", said Trumper. His tone was insistent. Then he softened into a smile. I didn't know whether he was smiling at my ignorance, or whether he was smiling his satisfaction with the box and the voice and above all Paul Robeson. 'Who are your people?' I asked . It seemed a kind of huge joke. 'The Negro race', said

Trumper. The smile had left his face, and his manner had turned grave again... He knew I was puzzled... At first I thought he meant the village. This allegiance was something bigger. I wanted to understand it... (Lamming, 1953: 331)

In Carriacou some allegiances run along ethnic lines and very many Kayaks self-identify as members of one of the following "nations": Arada (Rada), Banda, Chamba, Congo, Cromanti, Manding, Moko (Ibibio), Temne, Ibo (Igbo). These nine nations form the Big Drum, the central rite of Carriacouan society.

Canute identified himself as Ibo, the "second nation" (after the Cromati) in the Big Drum hierarchy. The Ibos, whose homeland is in southeastern Nigeria, were well represented among the millions of Africans who were violently extracted from the land and brought to the Americas in what was largest involuntary transoceanic migration in human history. According to historical sociologist Orlando Patterson about three quarters of the Africans sold into slavery at the port of Bonny (Nigeria) were Ibos. (Patterson, 1969: 24). Patterson also tells us that the Ibos constituted roughly 45 per cent of the human cargoes shipped from the Niger and Cross deltas between 1775 and 1807, the year the British brought their slave trading to an end. It bears saying that Ibo captives were often listed in the ships manifests as Calabars or Calabaris, a term used to describe the neighbouring Ijo, Efik and and Ibibio (Moko) peoples.

The Ibos were largely responsible for spreading the belief that Africans had the supernatural power to fly, says historian Jermaine O. Archer (Archer, 2006: 99). Bryan Edwards, the Jamaican planter-historian described them as being given to "timidity and despondency of the mind", and in Haiti there was an old saying "Ibos pend cor' a yo" -The Ibo hang themselves (Herskovits, : 36). No such negatives attached to the Ibo people of Carriacou, Canute Caliste's people.

But on what did Canute base his claim to being Ibo? We note that he did not have an acknowledged Ibo surname, for in Carriacou the known Ibo family names are the following: Adam, Frazier, Mitchel, Lawrence, and Clement (of L'Esterre). (Hill, 1972: 409)

But Canute's claim to Ibo blood doesn't fail just because he did not have an Ibo last name; he could have gained "Ibo-ness" from his mother's side of the family. Such transfers were rare but not unknown in this staunchly patrilineal Carriacouan society where "blood comes from the man".

Finally, we note that in Carriacou claims of nation-ness are sometimes made to rest on skin colour and body type. Therefore,

an informant told Hill, "Ibo race not so big. Ibo race is slender bone man". (Hill, 1972:)

All the same, Mr Canute believed himself to be Ibo and those who knew him testify that a special sweetness came to his violin whenever he played Ibo songs. Songs like Iama Diama and Gwenade Ibo.

Iama Diama

Ibo lay- lay
Iama
Mwer polin Ibo
eye eh ba ka fay Ibo

Iama Diama
Ibo lay lay
I is a polin Ibo
nothing could do we Ibo
Iama Diama
Ibo lay lay

Ibo Gwenade-o

Mwer ba tini mamai
teeway mwer kooma mwer
Ibo gwenade -oh
Mwer ba tini papa
teeway mwer komma mwer
Grenadian Ibo-o
Ah doh have no mother
Bury me as Ah is
Grenadian Ibo-o
Ah doh have no father
Bury me as Ah is.

A fragment of the Ibo language is preserved in the song Iama Diama, for the phrase "Ibo lay lay" actually means "look at the Ibo people". Once upon a time the song would have said, "Ibo bia lay lay"- come and see the Ibo people.

The Ibos may have given Carriacou many songs. Or perhaps Ibo song forms were accepted by non-Ibo elements of Kayak society. We feel this is a reasonable speculation in light of the fact that so many Kayak songs are punctuated with the Ibo exclamation "nennen-o!" (grandmother-o!)

It is very likely that the majority of these topical songs (carisos) were composed by women.

Young Canute would have heard many stories about Ibo..And having been born in 1914 he would definitely have heard the story of the Ibo king, Jaja"of Opobo,who was brought to Grenada (aboard the Icarus) on June 8, 1888; Jaja (1821-1891) was deposed and banished to the West Indies for defying the British in his Ibo Nigerian homeland. The news of Jaja's arrival sprinted across Grenada like a September wind , causing many to leave their homes to go to Town to see for themselves. Many threats and angry words were pelted in the direction of the colonial authorities and it is possible that the subsequent decision to send Jaja to St. Vincent was a concession to the Grenadians' strong demonstration of solidarity with the king. Jaja remained in St. Vincent until he was brought to Barbados on March 21, 1891. In Barbados, the folk welcomed the king with open arms and crowds gathered whenever he went. An ailing King Jaja was eventually "pardoned" and given "permission" to leave Barbados on 11 May to return to his homeland. The King set out for home but died at Tenerife (Canary islands) on 7 July 1891.

Bajans remember Jaja in a folk song which contains a suggestion that the king was smitten by a Bajan lady named Dovie:

CHORUS

King Jaja won leh Dovie 'lone
King Jaja won leh Dovie 'lone
King Jaja won leh Dovie 'lone
What Dovie got um is all she own.

THE MAN AND HIS ART

Emmanuel "Canute" Caliste was born in Carriacou on Wednesday, July 15, 1914 and apart from a few trips up and down the islands and two sponsored tours to the U.S, in his advanced years, he passed his entire life in his natal village, L'Esterre, within earshot of the lyrical rage of the sea. The sea of course exerted a profound influence on Canute's artistic imagination, and so also did the Big Drum, the island's festival arts, and mamaglo, the mermaid, as well as other folkloric characters. Being born just two weeks prior to the outbreak of the First World War' meant that Canute heard the words "war" and "hard times" many hundreds of time before he could speak.

The war's many savage battles were fought many thousands of miles away, but it echoes had a profound effect on life in this parched outpost of the British Empire. Between 1914 and 1919 food prices jumped by an average of 122 per cent and clothes skyrocketed between 200 and 500 per cent. Commenting on this situation the editor of the Federalist newspaper described Grenada as being "in a state of siege". (Howe, 2002;172)

The war is probably the reason why so many of Canute's early paintings consisted of battle scenes and battle ships. Jean Capets reports that after seeing battleship and battleship, she said to the artist: "How about painting some pictures with people them?" And he did.

Wars are bloody affairs and their bloody cruelties tend to move people out of their accustomed views and opinions. And that is exactly what happened in Grenada during the years 1914-1918: in the heat of the war the Grenadian people learned important lessons about the nature of British colonialism and its racial chauvinism. One incident involving a coloured doctor, Dr W.S. Mitchell, provided a teachable moment for all of the Grenadian people.

Dr. Mithcell, a well-known coloured physician and acting resident surgeon at the Colony Hospital, filled an application to work for the Royal Army Medical Corps(RAMC). In reply to Mitchell's application ,the British War Office explained that commissions in the RAMC could only be guaranteed to "pure European blood".

Such instances of outright racism led to the radicalization of sections of the population in Grenada. In Grenville, what the West Indian called "a serious protest" occurred and there was a strike in 1916. Over in Trinidad, Grenadians, including many from Carriacou, were prominent among the leaders of the historic 1919 waterfront strike.

These leaders included Sydney de Bourg and James Braithwaite, both of whom suffered heavy consequences for their union activism: Bourg was deported back home to Grenada and James Braithwaite did time in jail. James's nephew, Professor Lloyd Braithwaite, never tired of telling his UWI students of the fact that he was born at a time why his "Kayak uncle" was doing time for his trade union activities. News of Jimmy Braithwaite arrest and imprisonment went home to Carriacou by the vessels plying the Trinidad -Carriacou waters and ounge Canute must have heard the elders chewing on this and other weighty matters respecting the 1919 strike.

Ultimately, Canute was his own man ,an amiable individualist who lived outside the art schools' conventions of time and space. Indeed as Jim Rudin has astutely observed, "each of [Canute] paintings is a story which -like a single frame of a film strip, the element of time is excluded.

And Canute's treatment of perspective is another thing, for he used the pre-renaissance technique known as hierarchical association. Hierarchy of course stands for asymmetrical relationships so the larger men in Canute painting are of greater social substance than the smaller men. This explains why the violinist was always the biggest guy in Canute paintings of quadrille musicians: he was himself a master fiddler and , indeed, in carriacou he was better known as fiddler than as painter.

Canute art is often described as childlike and childish. This writer accepts this characterization but for reasons other than those of the this critics who mean to belittle the artist.

The “childishness” and “childlike” qualities in Canute's art are really aspects of an aesthetic that speaks in the unpretentious and and metallic lilt of a child, perhaps the child who was traumatized in the war of 1914-18. And Mr. Canute was fond of children; he sired 22 of them, nineteen by eight "outside" women.

All the same, Canute was a master communicator whose paintings bore micro-editorials in the manner of Haitian master Philome Obin (1891-1986). These editorials were written in Canute's self-made orthography in which Petite Martinique is rendered as Peteminiquet, Junior Secondary school) is Juner Sex, and Santa Claus is Santer Clars.

Many honours have been heaped on Canute, but perhaps the greatest of these was that conferred by Grenadian artist Henry Ogilvie, who, in a 2003 interview with this writer, rated Canute a Caribbean Master , setting him alongside Camille Pissarro (St. Thomas) Michel -Jean Cazabon (Trinidad) and John Benjamin (Grenada). That is quite a tribute to an artist who learned to write his name in the weeks following his discovery in the mid -1960s , an artist who met one all all of his guests in his trademark white singlet, an artist whose painting of “The Last Supper” seated Jesus and thirteen disciples!

Today we write Papa CC's name in the indestructible Book of Ancestors. Papa CC takes his place next to Cromati Kojo and Mama Nu; next to "Sugar" Ferguson Adams and May Fortune; and next to Cobina (Kwabena), Cuffy (Kofi), Quammy (Kwame), William, George, Sam and Sandy- the unsung heroes of Carriacou's abortive slave uprising of April 22-26 1806.

Long Live Papa CC!

Nennen-O!