



Ashanti Influence in Jamaica

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Tom head first. He lit on a big stone nigh the mill. His head was in so tight the miller couldn't pull him loose no way he tried. So his woman come up with an ax and cut it off.

"Then John Tom set there looking sorta dazed. 'Where's Gabriel?' he asked. 'What yer want with him?' asked the miller sorta laughing behind his hand. The old woman 'low he hain't got good sense since his fall. Well, sir, they got the meal ground someway and the last the miller seen of him he was carying the poke hoe home peck-a-back."

"Surenuf, that's a good un. It minds me of some grandsir uster tell."

"What were they about? I won't name it to a soul."

"First one thing then tuther. We uster favor the one about the fox."

"Name it, won't yer?"

"I cain't, I disremember."

"I know where there's a quart of lickier hid."

"Well, it was way back in the eighties, so grandsir said. One January day come a blizzard, the wind was blowing big guns. It was a good time ter hunt down a fox beast that had been bothering the chickens. So he and grandsir went out with Long Tom, Short Tom and Sweet Mary Jane. 'At top of Tater Knob,' says grandsir, 'I gave my horn a blow fer I seed a beast hidin' behind a big stone. The dogs come arunnin' just as it frisk atop, its brush as big as a poke and blue, the purtiest blue yer ever seed. I hated ter but Uncle Joe let fly at it, and, young uns, hit musta been bewitched. The shot went thru it like air. Then hit leaped over the dogs easy like, and was off thirty feet at a jump. Uncle Joe built us a fire, and we passed the time with a quart of lickier.

"'Pretty soon Sweet Mary Jane and tuther dogs slunk back like we knowed they would, nary a dog on earth could catch such a fox critter. We started home thru the snow, when what should we meet but the critter friskin' around a big tree trunk, eyes as big as dishpans. I set down and pulled a spike outa my shoe heel. Then I sliped around and nailed the brush of the critter to the tree trunk. Uncle Joe lit a pine knot and waved it in front of its eyes. The fox beast scrambled out of its skin and was gone. Hit musta been cold without the kiverin'. Hit was a sight ter see maw when we brought in the skin. Hit filled the whole room. We cut it up into twenty-nine small skins and sold them to a travelin' hawker fer nigh three dollars each. Takin' hit all in all hit payed us ter go huntin' in the cold. I hain't been nigh Tater Knob since.'"

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ASHANTI INFLUENCE IN JAMAICA.¹ — Gardner in his History of Jamaica states: "Great numbers of negro slaves were imported from Africa, representing tribes as diverse in character as different European nations. Among these the fierce Coromantyns occupied a very prominent place, but though their dangerous character was so well known, their superior strength was so highly valued as to lead to the rejection of all measures proposed to check their importation." Later on the same author, while describing the various

¹ This article was contributed without signature.

classes of slaves, tells us: "The negroes from the Gold Coast were known generally as Coromantyns. The Ashantees and the Fans described by Chaillu were included in this term. They were strong and active, and on this account valued by the planters. The Spanish and French colonists shunned them on account of their ferocious tendencies; but attempts to prohibit their importation into Jamaica failed, though they were the instigators and leaders of every rebellion."

Who, then, were these Coromantyns, who, as a matter of fact, maintained a commanding influence over all the other types of slaves, even imposing upon them their superstitions and religious practices, and who have left their impress on the general population of the Island to such an extent that they may undoubtedly be declared the dominant influence in evolving our Jamaican peasant of the present day?

The term Coromantyn, or as we more frequently find it spelt, Koromantyn, was not the name of any particular race or tribe. It was applied in general to those slaves who were brought from the Gold Coast in Africa. Its derivation can only be conjectured.

Captain Rattray in *Ashanti Proverbs*, while describing the great oath of the Ashanti whereby they appeal for justice directly to the paramount chief, seems to throw some light on the subject. This solemn oath was taken by merely uttering the words "Memeneda Koromante," that is literally, "Koromante Saturday," and the real import of the words was this: If the king or paramount chief did not render justice to the taker of the oath, might the same evil befall the people as had happened at Koromante on a Saturday. Thus the oath was in reality a conditional curse. The author then goes on to state: "Koromante is a place on the Fantee coast where Ossai Panyin of Coomasie was defeated and slain by the Fantees. This calamity was considered so terrible that even the name came to be proscribed and became known as simply *ntam kese*, the great oath." Just when this battle occurred, it is impossible to conjecture. However, as the main supply of slaves, especially at the start, was drawn from the prisoners of war, it is not unlikely that the captives taken at Koromante may well have been the first of a type that was henceforth to be classified as Koromantyns.

Then, again, the great oath or curse might itself indicate a like origin of this particular class of slaves. For, aside from the prisoners taken in battle, it was no uncommon thing for the native tribes to sell into bondage debtors and criminals generally. At times, too, the petty chieftains helped along their revenues by assessing different villages a certain number of victims who were to be exchanged at the coast for rum and powder. What more natural than that the victim of his chieftain's greed should utter the great oath or curse against him, and with "Memeneda Koromante" on his lips, should be started into bondage, his curse mistaken by the slavers for a homesick wail for his people and his country. This, however, is a mere conjecture.

Sir William Butler, who arrived on the Gold Coast to take part in the Ashanti Campaign in October, 1873, tells us in his autobiography: "This coast has been for two hundred and more years the greatest slave preserve in the world. All these castles dotted along the surf-beaten shore at ten or twelve mile intervals were the prisons where, in the days of the slave-trade, millions of wretched negroes had been immured, waiting the arrival of slave-

ships from Bristol or Liverpool to load the human cargo for West Indian or American ports. It would not be too much to say that from each of these prison castles to some West Indian port, a cable of slave skeletons must be lying at the bottom of the ocean. In that terrible trade the protected tribes of the coast were the prime brokers. They bought from the black interior kingdoms of Dahomey and Ashanti, and they sold to the white merchant traders of Europe; slaves, rum and gunpowder were the chief items in the bills of lading. The gunpowder went to the interior, the rum was drunk on the coast, the slaves, or those who survived among them, went to America. If two in ten lived through the horrors of the middle passage the trade paid."

This would indicate, first of all, that the Koromantyn was not a native of the coast, but was brought from the interior; and secondly, it directly indicates the Ashanti as the source of supply.

This theory, that the Koromantyns were in reality Ashanti, is strongly supported by the folk-lore and present-day customs of the Jamaica "bush." Even Obeah, as it is practiced in the interior of the Island, and its cognate branches of Duppyism and Myalism are directly traceable to the superstitions and practices of a people, of whom it was said in the British House of Commons even before the close of the days of slavery: "The Ashanti are the most civil and well-bred people that I have seen in Africa."

Through the folk-lore of a people we may at times trace its origin as well as contacts with other peoples. The Jamaica Anancy tales resemble in many respects the Brer Rabbit stories of Uncle Remus, which in one form or another are common to all the tribes of Africa. However, as the name implies, in Jamaica folk-lore it is the spider, and not the rabbit or hare, that forms the central figure, and here we have a strong argument for the origin of these stories, as the Ashanti word for spider is Ananse. Nay more, while the term is used in the folk-lore of the Gold Coast to-day under a slightly different form, Anansi, we find that the spider's son is there called Kweku, while among the Ashanti themselves the name is Ntikuma. Is it a mere coincidence that the same individual is named Tacooma in the Jamaica "bush"?

Incidentally, the Ashanti have a proverb: "No one tells stories to Ntikuma." Captain Rattray gives the explanation: "As the spider is the fount and origin of all stories, the son, Ntikuma, would be supposed to know every story in the world, having heard them from his father. The saying is used in the sense of 'I know all about that, tell me something I do not know.'" In Jamaica they say, "I'm not asking you. I'm telling you."

In this connection, it may be objected that the Jamaica Anancy's wife is called Crookie, while the present-day Ashanti speak of her as Konori or Konoro, which would seem to militate against our argument. Frank R. Cana in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* states: "The most probable tradition represents the Ashanti as deriving their origin from bands of fugitives, who in the 16th or 17th century were driven before the Moslem tribes migrating southward from the countries on the Niger and Senegal." Now among the Hausas of Northern Nigeria, where Major Tremearne assures us that distinction of sex is rare, an exception is made in the case of the spider, perhaps to mark its superior position. The male spider is called Gizzo in the folk-lore, the female is known as Koki. Might not this imply that the Jamaica Crookie

is a survival of the earlier term still in use when the slaves were dragged from their Ashanti forests?

The Jamaica Anancy stories have been passed along in living tradition by the old Nanas, or creole nurses, who correspond in many respects to the Mammies of the Southern States. The word Nana is itself pure Ashanti and means Granny. Thus nana-barima, a maternal grandparent; oba-nana, a grandchild. To-day the term Nana is almost disappearing from common use in Jamaica, and in its place Granny is generally heard in reference to the type formerly called Nanas. On the other hand, elderly people speak of any of their offspring beyond their immediate children by the general term, "Hiim me granny," that is, "He (or she) is my grandchild."

The Jamaican peasant every day makes use of words which seem meaningless in themselves, and yet they are pure Ashanti and their signification has been preserved in use. To cite a single instance: The staple food of the Ashanti is fufu, which consists of mashed yam or plantain, preferably the former. Its derivation is from the word fu, meaning white. In the Jamaica "bush" a very superior species of white yam is known as fufu yam.

Again, in matters of customs, a no less striking coincidence exists, unless we are ready to accept these facts as a verification of the lasting influence the Ashanti have exercised on the peasant population of the Island. A "bush" funeral is almost invariably marked by a peculiar custom. Before the departure for the burial ground, the coffin is raised and lowered three times. No one can give any real explanation for the act. Nor does any superstition seem to be attached to it. It is always done that way, and that is all there is about it, as far as the peasant is concerned. However, the very same practice has been in vogue among the Ashanti from prehistoric times, and so sacred had the custom become that after the Ashanti had developed into a conquering nation with the advent of the famous Golden Stool, the symbol of power and national vitality, the ceremony at the enthroning, or rather enstooling, of each new king required that he should feign three times to sit upon the Golden Stool, — actually he might never sit upon it, — raising and lowering his body three times, as it would be raised and lowered after death. It is almost as if he were reminded, "Remember man that thou art dust, and into dust thou shalt return."

Jamaica Obeah, or witchcraft, likewise seems clearly of Ashanti origin. The Ashanti word for wizard or witch is Obayifo, derived from Bayi, sorcery. When the personal suffix 'fo' is dropped, Obayi easily passes into the present form, which, it must be remembered, is the white man's effort to express the spoken word of the early slaves, and which has been variously set down as obeah, obia, obi, etc.

Obeah in its present form I would trace directly to the Ashanti fetish priest, Okomfo-Anotchi, i. e. Anotchi, the priest, who, as Captain Rattray tells us, about the year 1700, after committing a capital offence: "fled for his life to the Obi country. Here he had made a study of 'fetish' medicine and became the greatest 'fetish' man the Ashanti have ever had." Referring to the Obi country, Captain Rattray notes: "I have so far been unable to trace this place, but to this day in Ashanti any big fetish priest is called Obi Okomfo, that is Obi priest." The very practice of Obeah, too, the Jamaican "makes obeah," is a close imitation of what Captain Rattray witnessed

among the Ashanti. For example, his description of the making of a suman, or fetish charm, has its counterpart in the weird incantation and grotesque fabrication that produce a similar bundle of sticks in the Jamaica "bush" as a protection against thief or evil spirit.

Gardner records the commonly accepted theory as to the ultimate origin of Obeah as follows: "Of all powers, temporal or spiritual, the one of whom the negroes stood most in awe was that of the Obeah man. The word was sometimes spelt Obia or Obi; the latter term refers rather to the practice of the art than to the practitioner. This dread superstition is evidently a perverted form of one far more ancient, and may probably be traced back to Egypt. There the name of a serpent was Ob, Oub, or Obion. The Israelites were commanded not to inquire of Ob;" etc.

T. E. Bowditch, one of the Commissioners sent by the British to the Ashanti in 1817, an acknowledged authority on the subject, reports traditions that would indicate that the Ashanti derived their origin from ancient migratory colonies from Abyssinia and Egypt. Moreover, the Ashanti Supreme Being, Nyame, really seems to be the Jahve of the Children of Israel, the true pronounciation of which is now a matter of conjecture and may be nearer the Ashanti Nyame than the sound actually ascribed to it. Again, the attributes and titles in both are strikingly similar, e. g. the Ashanti Bore, Creator, is practically the Hebrew Bora. In fact the roots of the two languages are startling in their similarity, but all that is another question, and too far afield from the Ashanti influence in Jamaica to be considered here.

WAR VERSES. — The following verses were composed by Albert Cruchtfried, Fredericksburg, Va. while sergeant in a colored regiment in France.

I'll come back
 When de elephant roo'ts in de tree.
 I'll come back
 When de whale makes love to de bee.
 I'll come back
 When the sun refuse to shine.
 I'll come back
 When the snow turn from white to blue.
 I'll come back
 When de Yankee boys forget about de hob nail shoe.
 I'll come back
 When the statue of Veen execute the skirt dance.
 Maybe I'll come back to France.

ELSIE CLEWS PARSONS.

New York City.