

A Note on Truth, Fact and Tradition in Carriacou

The gist of Mr. W.A. Redhead's recent contribution to this journal¹ is that my account of Carriacou² is superficial, false and rather lurid, and that I am either mendacious, gullible or both, but in either case an unreliable ethnographer. Such charges merit comment, and if possible rebuttal, not merely on personal grounds, since these are of little interest to myself or others, but in order to set straight the record of Carriacou culture. Unfortunately an appropriate reply requires citation of evidence. Hence the length of this paper.

Mr. Redhead's critique falls into two sections. His major argument is that I have misrepresented the folk rituals of Carriacou as an ancestor cult; but this is prefaced and supported by various minor criticisms that are best taken first. In conclusion I shall offer a few general remarks on the nature and functions of the orientation that informs comments such as those of Mr. Redhead; but first let me say that this is not an *ad hominem* attack. Mr. Redhead's devotion to Carriacou and its people is well known. Having administered the island for several years, he has had ample opportunity to meet its people and observe their activities. These and other aspects of Mr. Redhead's administrative career deserve respect. However his various insinuations and misrepresentations cannot be allowed to pass uncorrected.

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Writing in 1970, Mr. Redhead is "sure that Dr. Smith would like his readers to take it all (i.e. my account of Carriacou) very seriously – even after 12 years of his investigations (sic)".³ I am not sure what is meant by the phrase "take it all seriously;" but I have never thought that anyone could regard my book as a piece of fiction. Further, as its Preface pointed out, "the present tense in the text refers to Carriacou in 1953. Several changes may have developed since then."⁴ In short, I was not unaware when writing of changes under way.

Mr. Redhead next reassures his readers that Carriacou was never "so primitive a society as the Author would have us believe."⁵ But, having had the privilege of studying two primitive societies, the Kadara and the Kagoro

of Northern Nigeria, and having visited several others, I have never regarded Carriacou as 'primitive,' but have instead written at some length about its mixed economy of peasant farming, seafaring and emigration to work abroad.⁶ Presumably Mr. Redhead credits me with the intention to paint a picture of 'primitive Carriacou' because I discuss several institutions he either disbelieves or disapproves. Among such disapproved 'customs' or 'traditions,' the ancestor cult occupies a prominent place. But does anyone seriously regard the Chinese as 'primitive' because they practise a similar cult?

Mr. Redhead then illustrates the 'inaccuracies' of my account by lifting two remarks from an introductory list of institutions that distinguish the folk of Carriacou and Grenada. First he says I "fell into the error of **presuming** that a Maroon is a co-operative effort to get work done on community projects 'such as work on the roads or to clean the ponds.' In point of fact, road work and pond cleaning are Government paid projects and work on the roads has been much sought after from time immemorial. A **Maroon** in Carriacou, unlike Grenada, is a Spring Feast – every village has one – and occurs just before the rains come. Every villager is expected to contribute to the Feast."⁷

Mr. Redhead regards this as an 'error of presumption'⁸ on my part; but ethnography consists in observing and learning instead of "presuming" the form of events and the meanings of words. Whether the "Spring Feast" to which he refers corresponds with the dry-season pond-cleaning carried out independently by the young men in each community, I cannot say;⁹ but I have never anywhere heard the Carriacou Maroon described as a "Spring Feast", perhaps because Carriacou has no "Spring" and its rainy season normally starts late in May. Moreover, whatever Mr. Redhead understands by the term Maroon, I have simply reported the meaning and usage communicated to me by the Carriacou folk and provided illustrations in my text.¹⁰ Fortunately we need not leave this difference unresolved. In his account of the launching of a schooner at Windward, Carriacou in 1953, Bruce Procope provides an extended description of a Carriacou maroon. Procope introduces his account as follows: "The eve of launching is a **helping day**. No one is paid and people come from all parts of the district to lend a hand with the work to be done. The owner provides rum, wine and food and this provision of food for those helping is called a salaca, saraca or maroon."¹¹

As regards Mr. Redhead's remark that "roadwork and pond cleaning are Government paid projects," this is certainly correct for the last few decades of Carriacou history. It is questionable how far this was the case before 1951;¹² and the statement is quite misleading if intended to mean that **all** work on roads or pond-cleaning in Carriacou was thereafter government-organised and paid, since the L'Esterre pond was cleaned by free communal labour on the people's initiative in 1953.

Mr. Redhead fastens another "error of presumption" on me by lifting the underlined clause from the following sentence. "It is important to recognise the nature and extent of the cultural differences between the folk of Grenada and Carriacou, both of whom have similar institutions of land tenure, are **bilingual in English and a French patois, and share common cycles of Zien (Anancy) stories** and common wakes, prayer-meetings and beliefs in witchcraft (*lougarou*)."¹³

Mr. Redhead comments: "Another error of presumption is that Carriacouans are bilingual in English and a French patois, and share common cycles of Zien (Anancy) stories. The truth is that Carriacou is divided into three Groups. Those of Scottish descent in the North-Eastern Sector, those of African descent, who speak English only, in the middle sector, and those of African descent, but are bilingual in English and French patois."¹⁴ This sociology of Carriacou can be compared with that given in my book;¹⁵ but Mr. Redhead omits the French-patois speakers of Petit Martinique in "the North-Eastern Sector," who claim French ancestry, and he sweepingly denies the knowledge or use of French patois among the "African" population of "the middle sector." Nonetheless I have attended wakes at Top Hill where patois was spoken as well as English; and I have also encountered patois at Beausejour and Mount Pleasant, all in Mr. Redhead's "middle sector." Finally, it seems rather odd that although the Big Drum or Nation Dance and the folk rituals associated with it are common to all Negroes in Carriacou, a large section of them do not understand the French patois that is used in these events.

Mr. Redhead concludes his critique with some scathing comments on the category of 'Women's houses' reported in my book. These are (or were) one-roomed thatch-covered structures of daub-and-wattle built for and owned by the women who lived in them with or without their male partners and children. In Carriacou such units were described synonymously as "dirt houses" or "women's houses" since men would neither build them for themselves nor own them. Indeed, those men who lived in such houses thereby identified themselves as social failures. At the same time, it was virtually taboo for women to cohabit consensually with unmarried men in houses of wood, concrete or stone, whoever owned them. Thus females living in such unions had no need to fear eviction, as most consensual cohabitations took place in "women's houses."¹⁶

Since he failed to find any wattle houses on returning to Carriacou in 1961, Mr. Redhead concluded that "all these 'women houses' (Sic) were blown away in the hurricane of 1955, and so must quite a lot of other things the Author relates."¹⁷ The insinuation here is that I have either "invented" or "presumed" this folk category, along with much else in my account. However, the distribution of these and all other types of houses in L'Esterre in 1953 is mapped on p. 75 of my book; and the occupants of these women's

houses were listed clearly: "Of the fifteen 'dirt houses' at L'Esterre in 1953, ten were inhabited by women and their children, and the other five by couples keeping,"¹⁸ that is, cohabiting consensually.

Since Carriacou norms at that time forbade married couples to live in such houses, by obliging all men to provide houses for their spouse and family, if wattle houses are indeed no longer to be found in Carriacou, I would either expect that the old distinction between women's and men's houses is now drawn between inferior and superior buildings of other types; or that there has been a significant increase in the relative incidence of consensual cohabitation, perhaps as an effect of changes in the opportunities for emigration. The significant social distinction between "men's" and "women's" houses is not something that a hurricane can blow away.

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However, Mr. Redhead's critique is primarily addressed to my representation of the Carriacou folk religion which I observed in 1953 as an 'ancestor cult.' "Ancestor worship?" he asks in conclusion, "That's fiction."¹⁹ Let us then begin by citing what my critic says.

"Carriacouans show great reverence for their dead ancestors. The Church bids them always to pray for the dead and there is no more popular form of prayer than the offering of Mass for the dead. . . (But) To say that Carriacouans are Ancestor Worshipers is strictly not true. . . Carriacouans are good, christian people and if their traditions sometimes get mixed up with religious practise, it is in the time honoured habit of peoples all over the world in the Christian Church which is tolerant of ancient customs and seek to wed them with true Christianity."²⁰

Further, "Belief in spirits and the invocation of spirits is not peculiar to Carriacou, so on that score it is hardly worth troubling about. But dreams about dead parents being hungry and yet not eating what is prepared for them is a fantasy sometimes evoked by the drummers and dancers who may need 'a little change'. . . and foist sinister interpretations of dreams on a well-to-do neighbour who has not had a Feast for a long time."²¹

Thus Mr. Redhead allows that Carriacou folk prepare food for the 'dead parents' who are believed to be 'hungry' without pressure from drummers and without public festivities. Then, if dreams subsequently indicate that the ancestors have refused the food 'prepared for them,' their descendants become susceptible to 'sinister interpretations' and other persuasions by drummers and dancers who advocate 'a Feast,' to secure 'a little change.' Mr. Redhead neither considers the state or nature of belief that informs the original offering the ancestors refused, nor the subsequent decision to finance a Feast.

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Clearly, unless someone genuinely believed or feared that the ancestors might 'punish' him for refusing to hold the 'Feast', he would be foolish indeed to undertake the relatively substantial expense involved merely on the report of someone else's dream. While some weak characters could easily be misguided thus, others would surely reject and discredit such demands and beliefs.

However, according to Mr. Redhead, not only do the drummers befuddle the natives, but other 'knowledgeable persons' also delude strangers like myself with "yarns of days gone by" until we also believe that Carriacou folk 'worship' their ancestors. This reads rather like a thumb-nail caricature of the 'conspiracy theory' of Carriacou culture. Yet in 1953, and probably today also, private and public offerings to the 'dead parents' were common practice among the Negro population of Carriacou; and we cannot account for such offerings by saying that "The Church bids them always to pray for the dead."²²

Fortunately, on this point also, we can cite the observations of other visitors who are familiar with Carriacou. For example, Andrew Pearse remarks that Carriacouans "have retained a vivid sense of the continuing power of their deceased ancestors and the Big Drum Dance is given for them as a means of ensuring safety from their disfavour." Among the four common occasions for this Nation Dance, Pearse mentions "ill-health or ill-fortune, usually instigated by a friend or relative who dreams of the subject's ancestor, and who reports that the ancestor's appearance expressed or implied a desire for the festival."²³ As for the dance itself, Pearse remarks its "ritualistic elements. . .such as the calling of the ancestors by beating a hoe with a spoon to the Cromanti opening song, the libations made by the members of the family, the 'free-ring' for the spirit dancers, the 'Beg Pardon' dance, in which the family kneel and sing, "Si m^we merité, pini m^we, si m^we ba mérite, padoné m^we" – "If I deserve it, punish me, if I don't deserve it, pardon me."²⁴ This is clearly a prayer addressed to the ancestors.

Pearse's account of the Cromanti dance brings out its ancestral reference even more clearly. "A Big Drum Dance usually opens with a warming up piece such as Gr^a Belè. This is followed by the music proper to the 'nation' of the giver of the feast, during which members of the family wet the ring, the man of the household sprinkling rum and the woman water. Thus the ancestral 'yard' is blessed and prepared for the ancestors. It sometimes happens that the present yard is not the site of the old parents' home, in which case the first part of the feast is held on that part of the domain where their yard was, usually marked by the ruined cornerstones or 'pillar-trees'. After the wetting of the ring, the solemn opening takes place, the drum being accompanied by the head of a hoe beaten with a spoon. The purpose of this is to call up the spirits of the ancestors. All members of the family dance while this

is being played. It is followed immediately by another Cromanti usually called a Free Ring, that is to say, the ring is left open for the spirits of the ancestors to dance from time to time. In the old days people used to see them. You know of their arrival because the music becomes 'brisk'. Misfortune is said to have come on those who carelessly or presumptuously danced in a free ring. Sometimes a Spirit may take non-human form, such as a crab or a bird."²⁵

Norman Paul, a former participant in Grenadian Nation Dances, compares them specifically with the Big Drum Dance of Carriacou,²⁶ and gives a similar account of the rituals held before weddings. "In the old days they used to have a saraca first at the woman's house – the Big Drum, a Nation Dance. They give a sacrifice for that, on the Thursday night if the wedding is on Saturday, Friday night if it is on Sunday. The girl's father would be in charge; my grandmother used to cook for a sacrifice like that. The girl's father. . . issues orders to the people, and anything that is concerning the purpose is under his care to settle; himself, the mother, and the mother and the father of the young man that is to be married, they would arrange the saraca (sacrifice).

"They sprinkle rum in their yard and they go about with an old hoe and a spoon, they would beat that old hoe with the spoon right round the ring, calling the spirits with them. They leave the ring open, they leave a road from the East leading to the West and one from the North to the South. The purpose of the road is to say the spirits would come in and dance first, the dead spirits of the old people; they would call the spirits both in the father's and mother's family, and they beat three rounds before anybody could come in and dance. The girl's father does not kill anything, but they would kill fowls, sometimes a sheep, sometimes a goat. If they kill a pig they must not do that in the yard, they kill that outside the yard."²⁷

It is obvious that the Nation Dances that Norman Paul describes for the Grenada of his youth are identical in their elements, purposes and underlying beliefs with those that Pearse, Procope and myself independently observed in Carriacou in 1953.²⁸ However, Norman Paul's firsthand account of the beliefs and purposes of these rites is especially valuable since it should excuse us from being charged once more with "errors of presumption" in report or interpretation. Or would Mr. Redhead have us believe that those identical ritual forms were inspired by two distinct and contrasted ideologies?

Evidently this last remark is not as rhetorical as it seems, since this is precisely the point implicit in Mr. Redhead's discussion of the 'parents' plate.' 'The 'parents' plate' is an offering of unseasoned and unsalted food which has been specially prepared from the sacrifice by two old women like Norman Paul's grandmother, who must first sprinkle the sacrificial beast with rum and water and must remain beside the Plate inside the house until the sacrifice is

distributed to the family and their guests.²⁹ Procope's account of the parents' plate and Big Drum Dance that preceded the launching of the **Rival Dean** at Windward, Carriacou in September 1953 nicely illustrates the various points made above. However, Mr. Redhead sees things rather differently. "The **Parents' Plate** which is traditional at all big feasts, if the people really believed that their ancestors were at all present for this offering, the taboo against touching it would have been so strong as to preclude the necessity for having a woman to watch it, or a Gan-Gan as she is known, to stop the young people from stealing. Young people grow into old men and women and this practice has been going on for many years before the Author arrived on the scene."³⁰ In short, having accepted the stock reason given to explain why the old woman who prepared the sacrifice remains beside it, Mr. Redhead proceeds to infer popular dis-belief on the basis of his own misunderstanding and assumptions of the appropriate conduct in the presence of ancestral spirits.

Andrew Pearse, Bruce Procope and myself were not the only ethnographers who visited Carriacou in 1953 and observed the 'customs' that Mr. Redhead discusses. I also met Miss Pearl Primus, the dancer, and Norman Paul in the island at that time;³¹ and if further support were required, I could cite several other West Indians whose familiarity with Carriacou is not in doubt. Mr. Redhead may regard our independent reports of folk rituals that involve sacrifices and prayers addressed to the ancestors as 'fiction,' but as he has adduced no contrary facts, his denigration fails for lack of evidence.

Apparently what disturbs Mr. Redhead, besides the indecency and tastelessness of my account, is the question it raises in his mind about "the relation of Customs to belief."³² In a flash of unusual generosity he declares that "I have no doubt that most of what the Author relates is customary among some of the people, but how far is custom or tradition the centre of their belief?"³³ His comforting answers to this inappropriate question have already been cited: "Carriacouans are good, christian people," and "Ancestor Worship? That's fiction." However the only evidence he cites for either conclusion is the remark of "one good peasant farmer": "It (ancestral sacrifices??) doesn't do any harm and it might not be good either. But our forefathers always did this and we follow the custom out of respect."³⁴ Given Mr. Redhead's official status in the island, this statement hardly reads like the disavowal he imagines.

As far as I could determine in 1953, neither Christianity nor the ancestor cult occupied 'the centre' of folk belief, since each supplemented the deficiencies of the other. Rather it then seemed that "Carriacou contains two quite distinct religious systems – one of which, Christianity, is characterised by formal places and times of worship, a priesthood, creed, organisation and activity too well known to require description; while the other, an ancestor

cult, lacks priesthood, organisation, set places or times of worship, and indeed almost everything that we habitually associate with sect or *ecclesia*. However, although the priests regard these two religious systems as in conflict, in the folk view, as shown already, Christianity and the ancestor cult are both essential. The church deals directly with God through its hierarchy of priests, saints and Madonna, while the folk deal with their ancestors and other spirits, who are also the servants of God.”³⁵ I then illustrated the point by the remark of a local elder, which Mr. Redhead cites and misconstrues, concluding as usual that “The truth is that the Author misunderstood completely what his informant was trying to say and drew his own conclusions, like in so many instances, which do not tally with the facts.”³⁶

This passage, which sets the ancestor cult beside Christianity as part of the people’s living religion, evidently upset Mr. Redhead, a devout Christian and a great friend of Carriacou. Yet insofar as a people’s religion consists of their ritual action and beliefs, there can be no doubt that the cult that Pearse, myself and several other visitors observed in Carriacou in 1953 merits this description no less than Christianity.

As its former administrator, as a devout churchman and a good Grenadian, Mr. Redhead also rejects my remark that “the churches in Carriacou, despite popular enrolments, are under alien direction, and their creed, worship and organisation leave the folk uncertain, about their place within them.”³⁷ Adopting an essentially pan-Caribbean definition of ‘aliens,’ Mr. Redhead points out that “At the turn of the century, both Churches were directed by West Indians, one at least for 20 years and the other for over 30 years. The seed was too well sown before 1953 for any misdirection or misunderstanding.”³⁸ Undoubtedly. However, even though Mr. Redhead might also deny this, “To the people of Carriacou, Grenada is ‘the mainland,’ an alien society which has for centuries dominated them politically and commercially, a place where they remain strangers.”³⁹ Indeed, Mr. Redhead’s position as the administrator of Carriacou nicely illustrates this ‘alien domination,’ just as his well-intentioned critique of my ethnography illustrates how kindly Grenadians are led by their prejudices to misunderstand and devalue the institutions and customs of Carriacou. Thus, whether administered by ‘West Indians,’ Maltese or Britons, the local churches are, as reported, “under alien direction.” Further, unless their creed, worship and organisation do leave the folk uncertain of their place within them, we cannot understand how the people have developed and maintained such an elaborate and integrated complex of beliefs, rituals and attitudes with regard to their ancestors, despite continuous pressure from both local versions of ‘the Church militant.’

Mr. Redhead’s paper may be regarded from three points of view. As an attack on my professional integrity, it falls flat, since it consists of unsubstantiated opinions, innuendoes and other un scholarly denigrations. As an

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alternative account or interpretation of the culture of Carriacou, its claim to significance suffers also from the absence of data amid the buckets of opinionated mud slung so heartily in my direction. But as an expression of orientations and attitudes that prevail among the Creole elite towards social science and to the 'peasantry' or 'lower classes', this paper is perhaps unrepresentative only in having appeared in this Journal. Herein unfortunately lies its real significance.

Mr. Redhead represents many West Indians who are well-disposed towards their social inferiors, the predominantly black 'peasants' or proletarians of Caribbean society, on certain conditions of which they are themselves hardly if ever aware. Such people identify themselves simultaneously as the best informed about the conditions and culture of the folk they patronise, and as best judges of what is good and proper for them. They also identify the 'good and proper' by reference to the Victorian culture which they uphold as Creole elite. They thus elevate British institutions of the Victorian period to the status of hallowed norms, and in some cases identify civilisation, in contrast to primitivism, by adherence to a particular church, by support of the British Raj, parliamentary institutions, and the like. As a career administrator, whose last important post may well have been in Carriacou, Mr. Redhead is no less committed to British governmental models and the policies appropriate to them than to the doctrines and rites of the church to which he belongs. And because he is so sure that these institutions are the best if not the only sound guides for West Indians to follow along the road that God intended, he accordingly regrets and decries the observations of social scientists who report substantial deviations from these models among the people he has paternalistically adopted. That such procedures consist essentially in discrediting the culture and integrity of their wards can hardly occur to self-appointed elite experts on folk custom for two reasons. Firstly, their social and official positions effectively screen them from much that goes on; and secondly, their preconceptions prejudice acceptance of any observations that are not consistent with the ideas they hold of the character, conditions and culture of those they patronise. It is pathetic and depressing that someone as devoted to the welfare and integrity of the Carriacou people as Mr. Redhead should find it necessary to deny and discredit their deepest values, customs and beliefs in order to qualify them for his sympathy and support. It is amusing that such paternalistic sentiments should require those who hold them to assert like King Canute that what exists is not. But for the region as a whole, the obstinate ostrichism of this small concerned section of the privileged elite, which illustrates the social and cultural pluralism that pervades these unfortunate communities, is little short of tragic.

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