

**IN SPITE OF THE OCEAN.... GOD GOES SHOPPING
AND SPEAKS JAMAICAN CREOLE... GEEZAM!**

**A Discussion about “Ocean Experience”
And Caribbean Survival.**

An Idea Paper

Submitted by

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Abstract

Caribbean “Ocean Experience” provides a basis for Creole language expression in Contemporary Jamaican Christian Religious Music.

An analysis of this “Ocean Experience” offers an explanation for Caribbean desolation and alienation; the drive to transcend this reality and to survive by meeting with God. This psychological development is evidenced in the emerging lyrics of contemporary Jamaican Christian Religious musicians such as Glacier Robinson, a Jamaica Cultural Development Commission, Gospel Festival Gold Medallist and “Stitichie” Cleve Laing . The work of Cooper, Alleyene, Marley, Allen, Bernabe, Chamouiseau, Confiant, Pereira and Cliff creates a theoretical framework in understanding the phenomena of an “Ocean Identity” among Caribbean peoples. There is a particular focus on the Jamaican experience as well as accounting for a broader Caribbean discourse on the issue. Both the

geographic concerns of island states the “journey” on physical and metaphysical oceans have shaped who we are today. We must analyze the monsters in our Caribbean sea and the Leviathans of the “ocean”. The voices of our ancestors, their stories and bones, “in the bottomless pit”ⁱ of forgotten memory, however perilous and painful our new consciousness will be.

To be lost in the middle of an ocean
Or have no place to lay your head
To be caught in a web of indifference
Cast aside if you're just as dead
To be forgotten like the wind of yesterday
Neglected and beaten and worn
The pain that you're feeling is just as real
As the breath you take with this song
But it's not over now....

Extract from the song
"It's not over now"
Glacia Robinson 1999.

Many rivers to cross
And I can't seem to find
My way over
Wondering I am lost
As I travel along
White cliffs of Dover

I've been licked, washed up
For years
And I merely survive
Because of my pride...

Sometimes I find myself
Thinking of committing
Some dreadful crime...

Extract from the
song
"Many Rivers to
Cross"
Jimmy Cliff 1973.

And if loneliness
Won't leave me alone
It's such a drag to be on your own
My woman left
|And she didn't say why,
So I guess I'll have to cry...

Extract from the song
"Many Rivers to Cross"
Jimmy Cliff 1973.

...I know you're heart's been torn
You say there's no point
In carrying on...
The Race is not over
It's not over now...

Extract from the song
"It's not over now"
Glacier Robinson 1999.

Introduction

This paper discusses the idea of “ocean experience”, identity”, and “ocean encounter” offering a partial explanation of Caribbean alienation and desolation. The readings that inform this discussion include, the introduction to The Repeating Island by Rojo, “In Praise of Creoleness” from Callaloo by Bernabe, Chamoiseau, Confiant, translated by Mohamed B. Taleb Khyar; African Ideology in Jamaican Popular Music by Pereira, “Creole Then and Now: The problem of Definition” by Allen; the introduction to “Elaborated and Restricted Codes: Their Social Origins and Some Consequences” from The Ethnography of Communication by Bernstein; “A Tale of Two States: Language, Literature and the Two Jamaicans by Cooper and Devonish; the introduction to Acculturation and the Cultural Matrix of Creolization by Alleyne; “Approaches.” In Edouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation ; and

“Chanting down Babylon: Bob Marley’s song as literary text” by Cooper in Noises in the Blood.

There is also an exploration of the texts of songs It’s not over now”, “I’ve got Jesus” by Glacia Robinson , a Jamaica Cultural Development Commission, Gospel Gold Medal winner and “Stitichie” Cleve Laing a former Dancehall icon recently converted to Christianity has a new CD with songs like “Shopping” and “Give I Strength” hitting the charts.

The classic “Many Rivers to Cross” by Jimmy Cliff is reviewed in this discussion.ⁱⁱ

In a quick conversation with Dr. Clinton Huttonⁱⁱⁱ with whom I shared ideas about this paper, confirmed that there was insufficient analysis of Cliff’s music . He agreed that the lyrics of Glacia Robinson’s song which I quoted may be regarded as a response to Cliff’s call in “Many Rivers to Cross”.

Many rivers to cross
And I can't seem to find
My way over...

Robinson responds that the “race” either the Christian race or if a Pan-Africanist interpretation is imposed, the “African race” is “not over”.

It's not over now
You've got to hold on my brother...
It's not over now...

The idea of an “ocean experience” embraces the phenomena of the “Middle passage”, other commercial voyages, plantation life, trade and commerce which impacted on physique of the people in the Caribbean. Though “ocean encounter” produces “bastards” ; rejected language forms, people and events and other deep wounds^{iv}, it is not a knife drawn from which the Caribbean peoples have no defense.

In Spite of the Ocean....God goes Shopping and Speaks Jamaican Creole....GeeZam!

“To be lost in the middle of an ocean”, is a continuing metaphor of the struggle for existence in the Caribbean.

While it is not within the scope of this paper to make a scientific corelationship between the physiological experience faced by the descendants of the middle passage voyage and the realties of the ocean from an oceanographic perspective; it is well worth noting that this vast expanse of water, in particular, the Atlantic Ocean has shaped Caribbean life and culture today.

Each Island stands alone in the sea grappling with an “ocean past”. The urgent cries for change and revolution are intermingled with the voices of the forefathers in the ocean who also demand recognition. The expression “To be lost in the middle of an ocean” makes reference to the “dumping” of

live slave cargo. It can also be related to various kinds of contemporary deportation of human and commercial resources, now being witnessed in the region. In the case of Jamaica, the widely publicized “Street People Affair” is one such example as well as the “deportation” of second-hand vehicles and Caribbean born rejects from the metropolises. The alienation expressed in Robinson’s song occurs in many places in the literature which critically examines Caribbean culture and identity. Rojo points out the Caribbean has evolved physically out of “chaos”; specifically, sporadic volcanic eruptions. The ocean too has been the vehicle for the turbulent passage of colonialism, imperialism and slavery. This ocean has equally violently erupted on the void landscape, lost souls with their blood spilling like lava on both land and sea, creating new realities of space and time. The Caribbean is a part of this unknown history. There is serious dislocation and dysfunction. There is no escape of

this past reality, which rapidly pursues us into the present tense. The search for identity is a dark road to revelation for we “see through a glass dimly”^v

The concept of the ocean provides an important physical metaphor for the struggle of the Caribbean person. Glacia expresses this desolation by the cry “To be lost in the middle of an ocean”. Colliers Encyclopaedia 1999 surmised that is theorized that the ocean depths are full of desolation.

Although there are a variety of life forms present, the volume of the water and the expensive nature of exploration, make this search difficult and sometimes insurmountable. To attempt to make a voyage then in the psychological sense can therefore be no easier.

Edouard Glissant makes a poignant contribution to the discourse about the ocean in “Approaches”... Poetics of Relation:

“Je te salue, vieil Ocean!
you still preserve on your crests
the silent boats of our births, your
chasms are our own unconscious,
furrowed with fugitive memories.
Then you lay out these new shores,
where we hook our tar-streaked
wounds reddened mouths and stifled
outcries.^{vi}

The second dark of night fell as tortures and the deterioration of person, the result of so many incredible Gehennas. Imagine two hundred human beings crammed in to a space barely capable of containing a third of them. Imagine vomit, naked flesh, swarming lice, the dead slumped, the dying Crouched. Imagine if you can, the swirling red of mounting to the deck, the ramp they climbed, the black sun on the horizon, vertigo this dizzying sky plastered the waves. Over the course of more than two centuries, twenty, thirty million people departed. Worn down, in a debasement more eternal than apocalypse ...^{vii}

Experience of the abyss lies inside and outside the abyss. The torment of those who never escaped it: straight from the belly of the Slave ship into the violet belly of the ocean depths, they went. But their ordeal did not die, it quickened into this continuous/discontinuous thing:

the panic of the new land, the haunting of the former land, finally the alliance with the haunting of the former land, finally the alliance with the imposed land, suffered and redeemed.^{viii}

Thus a new “Redemption Song” must be played to overcome the darkness of that landscape. This must be done in order to soothe the horrors of the night and “dry” many tears.^{ix}

In developing these ideas, synthesis must be found in a wide body of knowledge, sight, sound, memory and music.

As Glissant recounts we need creative expression we need our “poetry”.^x One must find anchors to contend with this past and thus an exploration of musical text. The usefulness of such analysis in the Caribbean and Jamaican has already been executed by Roheler, Cooper, Hutton, Periera and may others.

While Periera for example presents a case on African retentions in Jamaican music, Cooper is well known for her analysis of Marley’s music. Current discussion about

religious music must be informed by Cooper's genius.

Cooper in her own analysis of Marley's music noted that there was a broad spectrum of interpretations and an occurrence not peculiar to Marley's music. Marley himself she notes was surprised about responses to his own music.

Cooper discloses that the "power of the word cannot be contained within the boundaries of the individual author's intention"^{xi} If this is borne in mind, interpretations of Robinsons' and Stitiche's work by this author may be equally surprising to the authors and their audiences.

Like Marley, both Robinson and "Stichie" operate in an religious environment and their music is replete with "biblical allusion".^{xii} The song writers clearly express the harshness of their experience but conclude like Marley , "but my hand was made strong by the help of the Almighty"^{xiii}.

In order to further contend with this “ocean experience” one must not only interrogate musical texts but an appreciation of the language of discourse, primarily Creole must be explored. These explorations are all bound up in our understanding of Caribbean identity and culture. Our rich oral history provides an “intelligence” and cunning. This “intelligence” is critical if one is to survive and operate in a Creole culture “created in the plantation system through questioning dynamics made of acceptances and denials, resignations and assertions.” The authors’ of “In Praise of Creoleness” celebrate creole “counter culture” and the application of “ordinary genius” devoted to “resistance” and “survival”.^{xiv} This Caribbean culture is one that is dynamic:

Culture is a daily lift and thrust, that ancestors are born every day and are not fixed in an immemorial past; that tradition takes shape everyday, and that culture is also the link we ought to keep alive between past and present.

Both language and culture then provide additional anchors in the battle on the ocean. An investigation of the use of Jamaican creole in these songs is justified as Jamaican creole is part of the wider Caribbean reality. As Allen asserts “Though Creole may be shared by all the territories of the region, it must be recognized as belonging to each in its own way” . “Creole” is and expresses the result of the Atlantic crossing and colonization”. Future study can specifically ascertain the impact of the new arrivants on the language patterns in the Caribbean, although Devonish^{xv} insists that the founders’ principle would apply and although “spice and variety” would be added to the vocabulary, language patterns would have been determined by the earliest slave populations in Jamaica, imported from the Eastern Caribbean.

Notwithstanding these concerns and debates, there is agreement, that “songs” are part of that rich oral history.

Alleyene in his sociohistorical and linguistical analysis of the development of Creole languages in the Caribbean also informs of the significance of religious songs, folk tales and proverbs. Alleyene cites many important factors in the transfer of language in Jamaica. These observations are crucial to our understanding of why these artists have chosen to express their ideology in Jamaican Creole and dialogue about distinct Creole experiences which would not normally be considered appropriate. In this genre, Creole is now a dominant tongue and there is no need to “shelf”^{xvi} this otherself. Alleyene makes this important analysis :

Songs and folktales differ from the major channel of communication, which is speech. Songs in particular preserve older forms of language, and old songs are sometimes preserved even when they are no longer generally understood. Songs in African languages make religious ceremonies and folk festivals seem more mystical and esoteric.^{xvii}

Alleyene discovered that in the Maroon communities, their music have strong African retentions and in order for Jamaica's Kumina religion to survive, the Kongo language had to be used. This is supported by Warner Lewis, who Alleyene cites in his work "This language is a powerful tool, for without it, the Kuyu i.e. the spirits or duppies, will not hear your summons or invocations"^{xviii}

In a similar vein, Alleyene cites that the Rastafari production of the use of "I" in their language is "the most productive derivational device in the Jamaican language"^{xix} This religion has documented their resistance to a "down pressing"^{xx} society and expresses the need for repatriation to Africa. This is this group's coming to terms with the ocean experience. "Stichie" borrows this use of "I" in his song "Give I Strength". The protagonist in this song has no food on the table and has an "empty home" and cries out to God in

despair to provide with extraordinary emotional resources to cope with a “hand to mouth”^{xxi} existence.

Alleyene elaborates about the importance and significance of the use of “P”:

The most positive force is perception, physically realized through the eye by means of the sight and leading to the metaphysical realization of the self, the ego, the “P”. Language, and especially words, have a relationship that is not accidental but necessary with these forces, therefore words are these forces rather than merely symbolizing them. It is therefore not accident that the word “sight” contains the sound sequence ai, which reoccurs in the word “eye”, instrument of perception and in the pronoun “P”. This also results in a major morphological departure from general Jamaican in the pronominal system.

This Rastafarian ideology and defiance to “Babylon” is also captured in the song of Lieutenant Stiche, “Give I strength”. Robinson too in the opening words of another song recounts, “I may be a bastard child of natural birth, but He made me His own.” Although “P” is used in the correct standard

English manner, it has overtones of a consciousness that is radical and refreshing. To acknowledge this past in Christian religious music is a departure from music which does not connect with Caribbean creole reality.

The “ocean experience” is then a physical and emotional metaphor. Rojo in his book, Repeating Islands attests to the undefinableness of the Caribbean and the birth of the Atlantic Ocean. However he negates the pain in this “experience” by an insistence on a “certain way” which does not reflect the sentiments expressed by other writers.

Rojo agrees that that the Caribbean is a “geographical accident”^{xxii}, he does subscribe to the notion of “apocalypse” describing the Caribbean, rather he contends that a “certain way” and an approach to “chaos”, makes the “beaten”

Caribbean say : “The thing to do is not to die,” or perhaps: “Here I am fucked but happy.” Rojo seems to contradicting himself. There can be no happiness with the memory of rape,

the Caribbean archipelago who in his own words had it's "vagina", "stretched between continental clamps" to give painful birth to it's child, the Atlantic ocean. This author will reserve a feminist response for another engagement.

This ocean which Rogue describes as one of "such universal prestige" is the one we find ourselves lost. One is trapped in the triangular trade, "the web of indifference", "to be cast aside" "to be "weighed" at ports and sold.^{xxiii}

Rogue by insisting on this "certain way", undermines the tragic sense of loss that many in the region experience. The feelings of desolation, alienation and suffering are undeniable. There is "laughing on the outside, crying on the inside"^{xxiv} As Cliff recounts, "I've been licked, washed up for years and I merely survive because of my pride". This "stripping" produces a real desolation of soul "sometimes, I find myself thinking of committing some dreadful crime".

Cliff breathes a death wish: “thinking of committing... White Cliffs of Dover.....”:

Certainly, no “I am fucked but happy” philosophy.

Though there is this “certain way” as Rogue contends, it is a “certain way” that is masked with humour and cynicism at the same time. There is no “happy go lucky” attitude to a horrific past and a most likely debilitating future. The protagonist in Stitiche's song “Shopping” has no money but is still able to enter the supermarket and make purchases.

This Christian with all the faith in the world has “sense” but needs “cents”.

This Christian “sense” is that of the archetypal Anansi but one that is converted. Again this character repeats itself in Caribbean literature and Cooper claims that it is also represented in Marley's music. She contends that Marley's music “raises questions about the Anansi-like mutability of the oral/scribal literary continuum in Jamaica”^{xxv}

Stitiche's song "Shopping" is full of that double meaning and subject to a variety of meanings. One is able to leave the supermarket with a full basket without paying as "Jesus pay for that wid Him blood".

The protagonist is able to transform a barren landscape of "no money" and still leave the Supermarket with worthwhile purchases. There is a transcendental movement to faith and a "certain" approach to an overdrawn credit card. There is the "tracing" of the world, the "Babylon", the contemporary commercial prisons.

So tell dem s e h^{xxvi}
Mi nuh waa nuh money
Fe buy up all nuh grocery
Cause inna Jesus name mi have
Mi pocket full a grocery....

De Wallet and de money park it
Credit card tell de world mi nuh need
It....

The author is using Jamaican creole to invoke the presence of God may be female (since she would know more about

shopping). If it is taken seriously that the market place is a central memory in slave consciousness a place both of shame and success, one can understand the discourse Stitichie presents. The ability to conqueror this terrain is quite important. The place of sorrow become a place of joy. The items in the store become personified and animated:

As mi walk down di big centre aisle
Me see peace and joy just a smile
Me see faith and hope a pose pan de
top row
So me just tek up a big bundle to go...

Conversion for this Anansi is clear. The protagonist takes “two box of patience” when under stress rather land “two” to an antagonist. The grocery items have a “street wisdom”:

Praise and Worship a hang by
themselves
Inna corner a pose pan a shelf
And Humility a cool out by itself...

Worship becomes truly creolized . The supermarket trolley is the “basket” that “full up flowing like flood”, with “two

box of wisdom”, “two box of patience”, “small, medium, big and dem have it galore... nuff fi de poor”, two bag a strength and courage”, “two bag of grace”, a dozen tins of prayer and the experience of shopping is transformed from economic deprivation to joy as “de place full ah de holy ghost”.

In conclusion then it is clear that the “ocean experience” ahs provided a foundation for Creole language expression which finds its way in contemporary Christian religious music in Jamaica. The new voices of Robinson and Stitichie echo in a call and response to the earlier work of Marley and Cliff. The realization of the “ocean experience:” is one however that still has to be carefully managed in the a face of recurring “old obscenities”^{xxvii} with new names . There is a strength that lies in the Caribbean, it’s people and it’s soil deeper than the ocean depths. Robinson testifies that “I’ve got Jesus , I’ve got Jesus, Deep down in my soul” as that author’s response to the ocean depth. In the same “breath” in

order not to drown in the water or in our sorrows, Robinson implores her audience to “Hold on, it’s not over, It’s not over now”. This an acknowledgment that the struggles do not end by our merely identifying them and that this experience of lost may continue for a long time to come. We may some safe shore, but what awaits us is not necessarily margaritas and Hawaiian dancers. The Caribbean is nonetheless the dregs that the ocean has vomited. Perhaps an elderly Mother cast aside. Thus it’s inhabitants are a testimony of survived, they are the remnant, migration-

] “withstanding”: those who have continued to remain.

Rogue contends that there is a “certain way” and others like Bernie celebrate the beauty of the “Creole” creation.

God is invoked in Creole terminology whether He be “Mass God”, “The Almighty” “Ah”, Jesus or Gee-Am. |”In Praise of Crenels” the authors proclaim:

We may then, through the marriage

Of our trained sense, inseminate
Creole in the new writing. In short,
We shall create a literature, which
Will obey all the demands of modern
Writing while taking roots in the
Traditional configurations of our
orally.^{xxviii}

Rastafari call the new perception of the "I", once we understand who we are our "creoleness" and if we like we can throw that term "creole" over board like Gutzmore and replace with "Caribbeaness" "ocean expereincers" "Pan Africanist", the truth remains that the 'gold" robbed from us by "pirates" in the transatlantic journey must be returned to our memory and possession. The world must be challenged by our presence, whether or not the Caribbean is regarded as a "bastard child" or "scum" of the World's "society".

Bernabe et al confirmed that this new vision, perhaps what the Rastafari call the new perception of thee”, once we understand who we are our “crenels” and if we like we can throw that term “Creole” over board like Gutzmore And replace with “Caribbeaness” “ocean expereincers” “Pan Africanist”, the truth remains that the ‘gold” robbed from us by “pirates” in the transatlantic journey must be returned to our memory and possession. The world must be challenged by our presence, whether or not the Caribbean is regarded as a “bastard child” or “scum” of the World’s “society”. Therefore whatever “isms” we need to ascribe understanding to Caribbean phenomena, we are sure to find that from “corner to corner, coast to coast”^{xxix} “pre to pre” , (pre-

Columbus, pre- emancipation, pre-independence etc.) “post to post” (post-modern, post-colonial, post independence etc.) even if they are “rotten”^{xxx}, that there is a space for celebration. There is a void that still unexplained but the landscape “full pa de holy ghost”. In spite of the “ocean” there is still, life, Caribbean humanity in godlike fashion if full of life, and where there is life supposedly hope.... So Go shopping with God.... Gee-Am!

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- ⁱ This is a reference to Robert Nesta Marley's "Redemption Song"
- ⁱⁱ I am personally intrigued by the song "Many Rivers to Cross" in particular after being a performer in the 1976 CARIFESTA in Jamaica. I was costumed as sugar cane in an artistic display of the passages of History.. I will never forget swaying in the breeze at the National Stadium to the sounds of "Many Rivers to Cross". Cliff's anthem was also performed at the funeral of Kennedy in 1999.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Conversation with Dr. Clinton Hutton, Tuesday, October 24, Undercroft, University of the West Indies, Mona Campus
- ^{iv} An inference can be made here to Walcott's well-known concern for the "deep amnesiac blow" as a statement about the traumatic experiences which have caused memory loss, a direct result of the ravages of slavery and colonialism.
- ^v The Apostle Paul makes the comment in 1Corinthians 13 that the revelations are only partial. We know now only in part.
- ^{vi} "Approaches"... Poetics of Relation (pg 7)
- ^{vii} Ibid (pg 5-6)
- ^{viii} Ibid (pg 7)
- ^{ix} There is the obvious overtones to Marley's "No Woman Nuh Cry"... "so dry your tears I say....No woman nuh cry"
- ^x Glissant in "Approaches"
- ^{xi} Noises in the Blood pg `118
- ^{xii} Ibid
- ^{xiii} Marley's "Redemption Song"
- ^{xiv} "In Praise of Creoleness", Callaloo pg. 895
- ^{xv} Conversation with Professor Hubert Devonish, Head, Department of Language, Linguistics and Philosophy, October 23, 2000
- ^{xvi} This word "shelf" occurs in "Stitchie's song "Shopping" and by extension shows a protagonist who is able stretch out and "help" himself to whatever goods he likes on Supermarket shelves.
- ^{xvii} Alleyne, Mervyn Roots of Jamaican Culture
- ^{xviii} Warner-Lewis, Maureen , Trinidad Yoruba: From Mother Tongue to Memory
- ^{xix} Alleyne, Mervyn, Roots of Jamaican Culture
- ^{xx} "down pressing" is the Rastafarian word for oppressing
- ^{xxi} "hand to mouth" This is a Jamaican expression which expresses the limited resources which are easily depleted . As soon as one has any wealth it is easily devoured.
- ^{xxii} Rojo, Antonio -Benitez, Repeating Islands
- ^{xxiii} Robinson, Glaica, "To be Lost in the Middle of an Ocean"
- ^{xxiv} Wilkinson, Rowena "Laughing on the Outside, Crying on the Inside" , Gleaner
- ^{xxv} Cooper, Carolyn, Noises in the Blood
- ^{xxvi} s e h , spaces are left between these words as Microsoft word changes the spelling to she