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[Introduction to] Folklore from Contemporary Jamaicans

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Folklore from Contemporary JAMAICANS

by Daryl C. Dance

Drawings by Murry N. DePillars

The University of Tennessee Press / Knoxville

Introduction

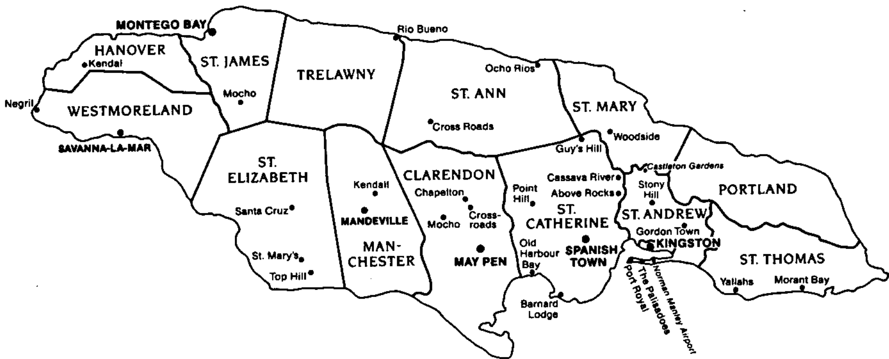
There is not now available, nor has there ever been, a general and comprehensive introductory collection of the rich folklore of Jamaica. This is a somewhat paradoxical situation in that it appears almost everyone who has ever had an opportunity to be introduced to aspects of the Jamaican folk tradition has been fascinated by it. American folklorists from Martha Beckwith through Zora Neale Hurston to Roger Abrahams have written ebulliently about what they have observed and recorded; historians have marveled at the many African survivals to be observed among the Maroons; music lovers from around the world have intoned the lyrics of the popular mento or calypso, and rocked to the beat of the ska or the rock steady or the reggae; race men and faddists alike have ardently embraced and adopted the Rastafarian philosophy, rituals, and speech patterns as well as the dreadlocks. Tourists to the island work at mimicking the Jamaican patois and copying the dance steps, and they would never dream of returning home without at least one piece of folk art or some of the handmade items to be purchased from higglers throughout the country. Those travelers who have ventured beyond the regular tourists paths have been fascinated by the drama of a Pocomania service or the witchcraft of the Obeah man. Yet, despite this widespread enthrallment with these better-known aspects of Jamaican folk life and culture, the fact remains that no extensive general collection of the vast range of Jamaican folklore has been assembled.

The closest approaches remain Walter Jekyll's collection of stories (almost all Anancy stories) and songs, *Jamaican Song and Story,* originally published in 1907; the early volume of stories (mainly animal stories), riddles, and songs collected by Martha Beckwith between 1919 and 1921, *Jamaica Anansi Stories;* and her collection of games, rituals and proverbs gathered between 1919 and 1924, *Jamaica Folk-Lore* (New York: G. E. Strecherd, published for the American Folk-Lore Society, 1925; rpt. New York: Kraus Reprint, 1969). Also deserving mention here are George E. Lawrence's unpublished "West Indian Folklore: Proverbs, Riddles, Stories and Songs," collected between 1929 and 1946 and available in the Special Collections of the University of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston; two boxes of unpublished Anancy, duppy, and Big Boy stories, dream and psychic experiences, beliefs and legends, games, rhymes, riddles, and songs from a folklore research project in Jamaica, directed by Jeanette Grant during 1967–69, which are reposited in the Institute of Jamaica in Kingston; Ivy Baxter's treatment of the songs, dances, and religious and social customs of Jamaica in *The Arts of an Island* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1970); and Leonard E. Barrett's fine study *The Sun and the Drum:*

African Roots in Jamaican Folk Tradition (Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores, 1976).

There are of course numerous collections of specific areas of Jamaican folklore, particularly the songs and the stories. In addition to those volumes of songs to be found in the "Works Cited" section, other notable songbooks include "The Music and Song-Words of Jamaica: A Programme from Ormsby's Memorial Hall" (Kingston, March 4, 1931), an unpublished manuscript available in the Special Collections of the University of the West Indies in Mona; Thomas Murray's *Folk Songs of Jamaica* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, n.d. [the introduction is dated 1951]); Thomas Murray and John Gavall's *Twelve Folk Songs from Jamaica* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960), which draws from Murray's earlier collection; and Olive Lewin's *Brown Gal in de Ring* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974). In addition to the numerous collections of stories listed in "Works Cited," other important anthologies of Jamaican folktales include Philip Sherlock's *West Indian Folk-Tales* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966); Louise Bennett's *Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse* (Kingston: Pioneer Press, 1957); Clinton Black's *Tales of Old Jamaica* (London: St. James's Place, 1966); and Philip M. Sherlock's *Anansi the Spider Man* (London: Macmillan, 1966). Other interesting studies of Jamaican folklore are Izett Anderson and Frank Cundall's *Jamaica Proverbs and Sayings* (1910, 1927; rpt. Shannon, Ireland: Irish Univ. Press, 1972); and Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1938), which treats Haitian as well as Jamaican lore. Various collections of materials from the West Indies include Jamaican items as well.

Although all of the earlier folklore collections noted above and in the "Works Cited" section of this book represent significant contributions to the collection, interpretation, and preservation of Jamaican folk materials, even a cursory review of the list indicates some of the glaring omissions and problems that *Folklore from Contemporary Jamaicans* seeks to address and rectify. Aside from the apparent need for a more general and comprehensive collection of folklore, a glance at the list will also indicate that much of the work was done many years ago. Although a few important collections have been reissued, most of them are no longer in print; indeed, some of them were never published and have been accessible only to the most persistent of scholars who tracked them down in dusty boxes on remote shelves of various Jamaican libraries. Many of the collections have imposed certain limitations upon themselves. Some of them are very brief, such as Lewin's *Brown Gal in de Ring,* which contains only twelve songs; Burke's *Water in the Gourd,* which contains only seven selections; Black's *Tales of Old Jamaica,* which contains only ten tales; and Murray and Gavall's *Twelve Folk Songs from Jamaica.* In some instances the books are obviously limited because they were prepared for use in elementary schools, and at other times they were apparently kept brief in order to facilitate inexpensive publication as pamphlets. Furthermore, many of the available collections of tales and songs

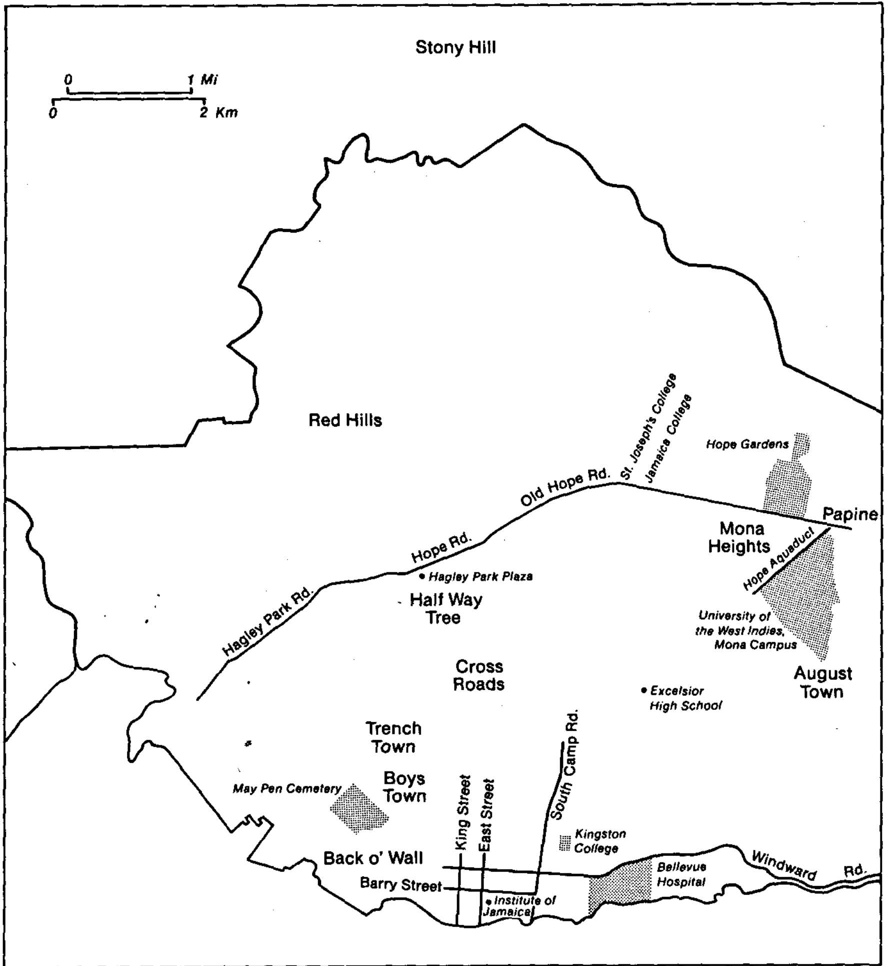


Map 1. Jamaica.

often tend to reproduce the same or similar items and ignore other materials. Almost all of the folktale collections include the Anancy tales. A few collections include some of the more traditional legendary tales in Jamaica and the duppy tales. Many other tales that I found to be popular in Jamaica, such as the Big Boy tales, some of the etiological "myths," the Fader Forsythe cycle, and most of the obscene materials, have never been published, as far as I have been able to determine. Aside from this omission of complete cycles of stories, another shortcoming has resulted from the fact that most of the folklorists have tended to do their fieldwork only in remote, rural areas of Jamaica. While there is indeed an abundance of materials available from isolated groups in Jamaica, there is also a wealth of folklore to be found in the yards and prisons and living rooms of Kingston and other urban areas.

Though I was familiar with prior collections of Jamaican folk materials when I started my fieldwork for this volume, I attempted to begin with no preconceptions. Thus I did not aggressively solicit specific types of materials or particular tales that I already knew and had been led to expect to find. Rather I endeavored to create an environment in which Jamaicans of all ages (preschool children through octogenarians) and socioeconomic-educational backgrounds (peasant farmers to university professors) and areas (remote mountain villages to downtown Kingston streets)[1] would share with me the kinds of materials that they regularly enjoy and exchange. The contents of this volume may thus be viewed as representative of popular contemporary Jamaican folklore—the tales that present-day Jamaicans enjoy telling; the songs they sing; the rhymes they recite; the riddles they pose; the games they play, etc.

Brief biographies of many of my major informants are included in the back matter of this volume. In some instances, however, my methods of collecting made it impossible to gather biographical data. There were times, for



Map 2. Kingston.

example, when I stopped on a street corner and talked with and collected from a group gathered there. There were numerous instances when I set up in a Kingston yard and groups of ten, twenty, thirty, forty or more children and adults intermittently wandered in and out of the group. In almost every instance, I managed to get the name of the tale-teller and often the names of those playing games or singing group songs, but frequently when I attempted to secure additional information at the end of such a session, a particular informant had been called home by a parent or for some other reason was not still

there. When I went back, it was often impossible to find those individuals because I never knew where many of them lived—only that they shared this common yard. On the other hand, some individuals were interviewed several times over a period of weeks, and for such informants I have extensive biographical information. The entries in the "Biographies of Major Contributors" section are, therefore, disproportionate. It is also important to note that several of my informants were in prison; to avoid any possible embarrassment to them, I have chosen not to call attention to that fact in their biographies.

Some Jamaicans will undoubtedly be disturbed by the presentation of certain of the "rude" materials in this volume because Jamaicans have characteristically practiced the stratagems that Zora Neale Hurston observed among Black Americans:

> The theory behind our tactics: "The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song."[2]

Inevitably, when Jamaicans recognized that I was looking for folklore, they tended to offer me as a "play toy" the well-known Anancy tales and traditional folk songs that could "properly" be shared with outsiders, since the materials were appropriate (or at least the obscene allusions were not immediately apparent). As my informants got to know me better or as sessions livened up causing my presence to be less obtrusive, the performers/participants/tellers became more open and unrestrained and shared with me many items that are characteristically reserved for intimate groups. Interestingly enough, however, even the beggar woman who, to earn the daily dole that she required of me, became my guide and self-appointed bodyguard during my sallies into the rougher areas of Kingston, was appalled and vociferously protested whenever informants began to relate ribald materials—despite the fact that she herself obviously enjoyed them.

In selecting the contents of this volume, I have observed Jan Harold Brunvand's definition of folklore as "*those materials in culture that circulate traditionally among members of any group in different versions.*"[3] While the materials were collected in Jamaica and while they are often uniquely Jamaican in dialect, subject matter, characterization, concerns, and the like, they are also often traditional and universal in motif and type. Any reader from any part of the world will recognize many familiar items. Obviously several of these tales have traveled to Jamaica from all corners of the globe. The most obvious source, of course, is Africa, but many items can also be traced to Europe, Asia, and other parts of America. Annotations for each item indicate in abbreviated form other printed sources, which are listed in "Works Cited." Additional geographic areas in which

the item has been collected are noted as well. I have keyed references to Ernest W. Baughman's *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America* and Helen L. Flowers' *A Classification of the Folktales of the West Indies by Types and Motifs.* Because contemporary Jamaican materials have not been extensively collected and because they have not been fully indexed, there are numerous unannotated tales in this volume.

Following each item is an indication of where the tale was collected. If the informant was a child, his age is indicated. Initially I had considered identifying the contributor of every piece, but for varied reasons I decided against that: in a few instances the tellers themselves requested that they not be identified with specific tales; in other instances it occurred to me that it might be better not to identify a young child who gave me an obscene tale; finally, there would rarely be any significance to providing the names in an extensive collection such as this, where there are hundreds of contributors.

Each of the eleven chapters in *Folklore from Contemporary Jamaicans* is preceded by a brief introduction in which I attempt to provide a succinct exploration of the nature of the materials and occasionally to comment upon other relevant matters, such as what motivated them, how they developed, and how they relate to other similar folk items. These introductions are not intended as definitive statements about the materials presented, nor even as intensive interpretations of them. My goal has been to collect, present, and preserve the primary materials that will provide the groundwork for scholars in a variety of fields (folklore, anthropology, literature, sociology, history, etc.) to pursue more extensive analytical and interpretive studies.

One of the greatest thrills in observing or hearing the performance of a Jamaican folk tale, song, or rhyme is the distinctive Jamaican speech, which is most often rhythmic and musical; it is also marked by a variety of fascinating tonal variations, as well as characterized by unique language patterns from both Jamaican Creole and Rastafarian, or dread, talk. Though the reader of this volume who is not familiar with Jamaican patois may experience some initial difficulties in attempting to read the transcriptions of some of the tales because of these variations in speech, I have refused to make any efforts to standardize the dialect or to replace Jamaican expressions with more familiar ones, since to do so would be to seriously bastardize and destroy one unique character of the materials. To assist the foreign reader, I have explained any nonstandard word or expression upon its first appearance. The glossary at the end of this book includes a list of such words that appear several times throughout the volume, including variant spellings of words to suggest the dialectical pronunciations. I have attempted to reproduce each piece exactly as the informant delivered it. Just as I have avoided standardizing any slang or dialect, I have also avoided *imposing* any dialect. Thus, inconsistencies in pronunciations and speech patterns will be obvious throughout the tales. The same teller may sometimes,

for example, form the plural of a word by adding an *s*; again he may use the word without an *s* as a plural; on another occasion he may form the plural by adding *them* or *dem*. Thus, in Tale 12A the plural of *egg* is at one time "egg," at another "eggs," and finally "the egg them."

Traditionally the Jamaican folktale has closed with the line, "Jack Mandora, me nuh chose none," which has been interpreted as "Jack, man of the door [or 'Jack, heaven's doorkeeper,' or 'Jack, Dora's man'], I am not responsible for this story, it is not of my choosing."[4] When Chaucer prepared his collection of folktales, he had to issue a lengthy apologia:

> But, first, I beg you in your kindness not to consider me vulgar because I speak plainly in this account and give you the statements and the actions of these pilgrims, or if I repeat their exact words. For you know just as well as I that whosoever repeats a tale must include every word as nearly as he possibly can, if it is in the story, no matter how crude and low; otherwise, he tells an untrue tale, or makes up things, or finds new words.[5]

Though Chaucer expressed my sentiments exactly, how much simpler it is for me to utter the same disclaimer to all of those who may be shocked or disturbed or ashamed or embarrassed or offended by the tales here! For all of you who turn this page and proceed further in this book, let me here and now declare, JACK MANDORA, *ME* NUH CHOSE NONE!

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1. The map of Jamaica will provide the reader who is unfamiliar with that island a guide to those cities and towns in which I collected materials, where my informants lived, or to which they referred in their tales.

2. Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 18–19.

3. Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction* (New York: Norton, 1968), p. 5.

4. Louise Bennett, *Anancy and Miss Lou*, p. xi; see also Barrett, *The Sun and the Drum*, p. 35. The meaning of this closing line was also discussed in my interviews with Louise Bennett (Gordon Town, Jamaica, November 4, 1978) and Eddie Burke (Santa Cruz, Jamaica, November 4, 1978).

5. *The Canterbury Tales of Geoffrey Chaucer*, trans. R.M. Lumiansky (New York: Washington Square Press, 1960), pp. 14–15.