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Title

Pathology and Identity: The Work of Mother Earth in Trinidad by Roland Littlewood

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/31q7d79m>

Journal

NWIG: New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids, 68(3/4)

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Publication Date

1994-09-01

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Peer reviewed

REFERENCE

YELVINGTON, KEVIN A. (ed.), 1993. *Trinidad Ethnicity*. London: Macmillan Caribbean.

Pathology and Identity: The Work of Mother Earth in Trinidad. ROLAND LITTLEWOOD. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. xxii + 322 pp. (Cloth £ 40.00, US\$ 69.95)

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In 1975, Jeanette Baptist burned all of her belongings in front of her family, had a prophetic vision that the End was near, and went naked into what she called Hell Valley, on Trinidad's remote northeast coast. Throughout 1981, anthropologist and psychiatrist Roland Littlewood paid her visits. This sensitive and unusual ethnography is the product of Littlewood's dialogues with Baptist, who re-named herself Mother Earth. It is, first, a powerful statement of Mother Earth's cosmology, and that of the young, underclass, urban men who came to join her in the bush intermittently from the founding of her settlement until her death in 1983. Second, it is a richly textured story about the dynamic interweaving of diverse cultural practices in the contemporary Caribbean. Third, it is an exercise in reconciling bio-psychological explanation with ethnography. Here is where it founders, as Littlewood freely admits, but not without posing unsettling questions.

The book has ten chapters. The first introduces the Earth People, Mother Earth's followers, chronicling their communal way of life and relationships with nearby villagers. The second chapter takes on psychological and medical models of religiosity, creativity, and madness, since Baptist had been institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital. Littlewood persuasively argues that bio-psychological explanations of cultural innovation imply that change is aberrant, and therefore "more psychological" or "more emotional" than stasis. He illustrates the complicity of this thinking with normalizing discourses of modernity, which created "irrational others" contrasted to "rational" Western selves, and he argues that instead we should ask whether events deemed pathological "provide new variants of everyday values ... which ... 'gel' with a given - or potential - set of social concerns" (p. xiii).

Littlewood contrasts psychiatric wisdom with local theories of illness and mental disease. He uses Wilson's "reputation/respectability" dichotomy to argue that *tabanka*, depression affecting cuckolded men and a complaint of some of the Earth People, provides an "ironic commentar[y] on selfish and pretentious attempts to imitate White and middle-class life," since it over-values "respectability." The various *vices* "warn of the opposite danger," beyond a concern for "reputation" towards utterly "worthless behavior" (p. 58). Local theories, Littlewood shows, are linked to overarching race and class inequalities.

Appropriately at the center of the book are an account of Mother Earth's encounter with the medical establishment and a statement of her cosmology in her own words. We also learn something of Littlewood's own character, his desire to understand the "beginnings" of politico-religious movements, "where the banal becomes the significant" (p. 64), and his thoughts on his book's relationship to Mother Earth's project. "'My' book ... is less 'about' Mother Earth than it is somehow a part of Mother Earth, not in some modish deconstruction but as an explicit element in her cosmogony, predicted, demanded by her: an intersubjectivity. As is your reading of it" (pp. 64-65). Indeed, Mother Earth did predict the arrival of an emissary of Science to study her. Her beliefs comment on scientific knowledge production and encompass Littlewood's writings.

It is impossible to do justice here to Mother Earth's cosmology. Inverting Christian metaphysics, and aligning God-the-Father with Science, she calls for a return to Nature and the Mother-Earth, to that which is currently denied or devalued. Science and God teach that nakedness is evil, that Nature is something to be feared, controlled, cleaned up, washed off. Mother Earth, of whom the universe was really born, represents Nature's return. Her (pro)creative powers were usurped at the Beginning in an incestuous act by the Son, whom she banished to the Sun and encircled with fire. Their union spawned a race of cold, calculating whites, Scientists who oppress Earth People of "Africa and India," themselves now seduced by White ways and "material" (Mother Earth's pun on clothing and capitalism). As Science comes ever closer to dominating women's reproductive capabilities, the Son will re-enter the Mother and she will reassert the order of Nature and bring about the End.

Littlewood takes us on a fascinating tour through the various traditions Mother Earth draws on and resonates with, from derivative and invented African ones (especially Shouter Baptist and Rastafarian), through European Radical Puritan and millennial movements, and finally to a synthesis in which Littlewood draws on *shango* and something close to Lévi-Straussian structuralism. He then provides a moving account of his time in Hell Valley.

There were virtually no women there, a fact Mother Earth explained by the closeness of Black women to White “respectability.” Littlewood guesses (p. 199) that excluding women from the group was a handy way to ensure solidarity: with no sexual unions, no allegiances would form which might fragment community. But compulsory heterosexuality is more basic here, and seems to be at the unspoken center of Mother Earth’s Nature and Littlewood’s analysis. The ascription of status based on race and sex is not, as Littlewood maintains, “pre-modern” (p. 233), but follows from modern constructions of sexuality as “natural” difference.

The book opens with Yeats: “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” The dialectic runs throughout. Littlewood questions the relevance of “natural” brain states – and explanatory systems like psychiatry which construct them – for the generation of new socio-cultural orders. He oscillates, however, between a “bio-social” dialectic, and a more subtle one, which brings into play the Nature people construct to determine their own natures. Mother Earth’s project begs the questions: *which* Nature? *why* Nature? For Littlewood, in his ambivalence towards bio-psychological explanation, and Mother Earth, in her call for Nature’s return, illustrate a peculiarly Western curiosity: why, when we look for our origins, do we so persistently search them out in Nature?

Haiti: The Failure of Politics. BRIAN WEINSTEIN & AARON SEGAL. New York: Praeger, 1992. ix + 203 pp. (Cloth US\$ 45.00)

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Weinstein and Segal’s well-written book provides a concise and intelligent introduction to Haiti’s political history from the revolutionary period through independence in 1804 to the contemporary post-Duvalier era. The authors contend that this history is marked by the “failure of politics” which reflects the predatory nature of successive elites that have refused to ground their rule in a meaningful system of accountability. These elites have controlled the state for their exclusive benefit, using it as a means of extracting resources from the poor majority.

Weinstein and Segal do not, however, provide a cogent theoretical framework explaining what causes the elites to behave as they do. While the au-