From Elsewhere: Prophetic Visions and Dreams
Among the People of the Earth

Roland Littlewood
University College London

Anthropological ethnographies sometimes postulate that new religious ideas may originate in individual dreams, visions, or madness. An illustration is given of the foundation of the Earth People of Trinidad, for whom dreams may still contain prophetic insight or knowledge. Their oneric understandings have to be placed against their cultural baseline of village dream theory and the dreamlike visions of the Shouter Baptists. It is argued that the physical conditions of the community’s daily life are perhaps conducive to visionary perceptions in a half-waking, half-sleeping state.

KEY WORDS: pathomimesis; psychosis; creativity; dreams; Trinidad

ANTHROPOLOGICAL DREAMS

Dreaming entered academic anthropology in the later 19th century when Edward Tylor (1871) and Herbert Spencer (1893) separately developed a theory of primitive religion in which, “so far from being a rubbish heap of miscellaneous folly” (Tylor, 1871, p. 22), religious ideas were built on principles that were “essentially rational” (p. 23). Religion, they argued, developed in a solution to two problems: the difference between the living and the dead, and the nature of the human forms that appeared in dreams and visions (Stocking, 1987, p. 192). The solution was that the person was twofold, comprising a physical body and also a “ghost soul,” which animated the body and left it temporarily during sleep and permanently at death, death being only a prolonged form of insensibility (Evans-Pritchard, 1965, p. 23), with the dead appearing in the dreams of the living.

In Tylor’s original words:

The idea of the soul which is held by uncultured races, and is the foundation of their religion, is not difficult for us to understand, if we can fancy ourselves in their place, ignorant of the very rudiments of science, and trying to get at the meaning of life by what the senses seem to tell. The great question that forces itself on their minds is one that we with all our knowledge cannot half answer, what the life is which is sometimes in us, but not always. A person who a few minutes ago was walking and talking, with all his senses active, goes off motionless and unconscious in a deep sleep, to wake after a while with renewed vigour. In other conditions the life ceases more entirely, when one is stunned or...
falls into a swoon or trance, where the beating of the heart and breathing seem to stop, and the body, lying deadly pale and insensible, cannot be awakened; this may last for minutes or hours, or even days, and yet after all the patient revives. Barbarians are apt to say that such a one died for a while, but his soul came back again. They have great difficulty in distinguishing real death from such trances. They will talk to a corpse, try to rouse it and even feed it, and only when it becomes noisome and must be got rid of from among the living, they are at last certain that the life has gone never to return.

What, then, is this soul or life which thus goes and comes in sleep, trance, and death? To the rude philosopher, the question seems to be answered by the very evidence of his senses. When the sleeper awakens from a dream, he believes he has really somehow been away, or that other people have come to him. As it is well known by experience that men’s bodies do not go on these excursions, the natural explanation is that every man’s living self or soul is his phantom or image, which can go out of his body and see and be seen itself in dreams. Even waking men in broad daylight sometimes see these human phantoms, in what are called visions or hallucinations. They are further led to believe that the soul does not die with the body, but lives on after quitting it, for although a man may be dead and buried, his phantom-figure continues to appear to the survivors in dreams and visions. That men have such unsubstantial images belonging to them is familiar in other ways to the savage philosopher, who has watched their reflections in still water, or their shadows following them about, fading out of sight to reappear presently somewhere else, while sometimes for a moment he has seen their living breath as a faint cloud, vanishing though one can feel that it is still there. Here then in few words is the savage and barbaric theory of souls, where life, mind, breath, shadow, reflection, dream, vision, come together and account for one another in some such vague confused way as satisfies the untaught reasoner. (Tylor, 1904, pp. 242–244; my paragraphing)

Tylor’s theory, which was called animism, is now regarded as conjectural human history, as simply implausible without more detailed knowledge of the daily life of our ancestors. Yet it is recalled in numerous contemporary ethnographies, particularly of shamanism, which presume that some special type of knowledge is obtained in dreams, visions and deliria, and when taking psychoactive substances.

George DeVos (1976) uses the term pathomimesis1 to describe how beliefs generated in an abnormal individual state (what may be called an altered state of consciousness) may be taken up normatively by the wider society. DeVos restricts himself to the mimesis of individual oneric states such as epilepsy, whose social imitation Eliade (1964) describes in shamanism, whereas Radin (1953, p. 68) wonders whether the origins of all religions might not lie in the mimesis of the manifestations of biological brain disease. Field (1960) suggests that delirious hallucinations perpetuate witchcraft beliefs in rural Ghana (pp. 38–40, pp. 43–46) and indeed may actually have initiated them (p. 318). La Barre (1970) cites F. E. Williams on Evara, a local prophet of the Vailala Madness, spreading “a stylised epilepsy in his group apparently genuine in him originally” (p. 316).2 Similarly, the manifestation of “madness,” of certain dreams or paradoxical acts, may be a sign of religious experience—what Obeyesekere (1981) terms a “mythic model.” The local community then must attempt to distinguish “mundane madness” from “divine madness” (McDaniel, 1989; Morris, 1985), a division that can be problematic where, as in Bengal, divine inspiration is often marked by

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1DeVos derives the term from Theodore Schwartz (1976). Herschmann and Lieb argue that the two phases of manic–depressive psychosis are especially conducive to communication of inspiration. Mania inspires, whereas depression allows the slow working up of the innovation into a conventional form.

2In fact, Williams (1934) merely said Evara had “ecstatic seizures” (pp. 371–372) for some time before the movement began; for a more critical account of the western Pacific imitation of epilepsy, see Hoskins (1967). The Native American Shakers institutionalized a form of shaking that was originally spontaneous (Barrett, 1953, p. 7).
antinomian acts: Consideration of the local psychology is necessary before we can consider whether terms analogous to “madness” are being used in a weak extended sense (“you must be crazy to . . .”) or else prosaically (in a strong, “medical” sense). A similar antinomian attempt to “provoke salvation” among Tibetan smyo monks is known as “insane” (smyo), but the individuals concerned are not necessarily “mad” in a strong sense (Ardossi & Epstein, 1975).

Harner and others have argued that individual psychoactive substances may generate very specific experiences and thence beliefs such as shamanic “flying,” but Eliade (1964) argues (incorrectly) that flight is common to all shamanic contexts and anyway it has a universal supramundane significance. Reichel-Dolmatoff has proposed the psychopharmacological origin (Banisteriopsis caapi) of social representations among the Tukano, such as those for exogamy, and a similar argument has been used by Redgrove and Shuttle to characterize pregnancy visions as the consequences of hormonal changes, by Wasson to look at mythological themes as derived from the experience of Amanita muscaria, by Kennedy through qat, and by De Martino through the symptoms of tarantula bites (for sources, see Littlewood, 1993).

Anthony Storr (1972) argues in The Dynamics of Creation that valid “creativity” involves the innovator in retreating from a highly personal experience to offer a communication of it in the shared, accessible idiom. Like much psychoanalytical argument, this recalls a romantic and individualistic idiom, denying the possibility of innovation as the meaning others may ascribe to abnormal experience. Thus, whereas Freud’s artist “can attain because other men feel the same dissatisfaction as he with the renunciation demanded by reality,” he can only truly create when he “finds a way of return from the world of phantasy back to reality; with his special gifts he moulds his phantasies into a new kind of reality, and men concede them a justification as valuable reflections of actual life” (Freud, 1911/1949).

Similarly, Gregory Bateson (1973) recommends that imaginative solutions are produced by allowing our mind to generate a series of vague and inchoate fantasies, which we then coldly evaluate in the light of day—a procedure reminiscent of those recommended by Plato and Nietzsche. Smith and Apter (Apter, 1982), in their “reversal theory,” derive these two styles of cognition from a tentative psychophysiological base: At different times the individual may be either in a logical and goal-directed (telic) state of mind or alternatively in an analogical, playful, and dreamlike (paratelic) state, reminiscent of Victor Turner’s (1974) “antistructure” (“liminality” or “right hemisphere thought”). In this approach, delirium is to be understood as just one of a number of paratelic modes, including play, chance, dreams, fantasy, and art, which may generate solutions to problems to which there is no immediate pragmatic solution but whose paratelic solutions may then, like the divinatory procedures of Trinidadian bibliomancy or the Surrealists’ cadavres exquis, be taken up and elaborated in the telic mode. We might note a large number of variants of such a two-stage model—linguistic, semiotic, psychological, and sociological (Littlewood, 1993, 1995). Reversal theory still assumes a unitary psychological theory of “creativity” derived from the imaginative artist of Western romanticism, in which communication as well as creation are characteristics of the individual innovator, which then have to be reattached somehow to society. It is our recent criticism of this tradition that lies behind current discomfort in regarding “genius” as a psychological faculty rather than a social process. We can, however, take the telic mode as the deliberate social response. Extraordinary acts and ideas may be taken up and used in a multitude of ways, from a fully formed “crazy” proposition (“Quakers

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3Plato: Timaeus; Nietzsche: The Will to Power.
should not own slaves”; Littlewood, 1993) to the situation in which the dreamer or psychotic serves, as did Antonin Artaud, as an emblem through others’ reading of his life experiences—an extended instance of the biographical fallacy. The notion of “communication” is rather broader than that of “creativity” or “imagination,” and we should bear in mind Harding’s (1974) strictures on assuming that generation and reception are either markedly similar experiences—coding and decoding—or radically different. It is in the gap between our desire to share another’s extraordinary experience and the actual limits of our empathy that the experience may become objectified as a principle in itself rather than in a series of personal mimeses. Or else the refiguring has long since floated free of its nominal originator.

MOTHER EARTH AND THE EARTH PEOPLE

It is certainly often conjectured, by scholars and critics alike, that new religious inspirations can develop out of dreams or the delusions of mental illness. The classic suggestions, however, never give adequate descriptions of the psychopathology involved, either because of a historical lapse, which means the study of the movement comes long after the initial inspiration, or because the description of “illness” is very loose, often no more than a lay assumption of “abnormality.” An exception is the Trinidadian sect of the Earth People, which was visited at its formation by myself (an anthropologist and psychiatrist), who provided a descriptive psychiatric diagnosis of the founder and of its members, using the World Health Organization’s international diagnostic instrument, the Present State Examination (Littlewood, 1993). The founder had had an initial episode of thyrotoxicosis (basically an overactive thyroid gland), resulting in a clinical pattern of hypomania (psychological overactivity, grandiose delusions, verbal associations, impulsivity, flight of ideas); however, with one exception—a man with schizophrenia—both founder and members of the group when visited were then psychologically normal. In Littlewood (1993) I argue that the two phases of bipolar (manic–depressive) illness provide a basis for the initiation of novel ideas followed by their “working up” in conventional idiom.

The Earth People are an antinomian “Africanist” community on the north coast of the Caribbean island of Trinidad that originated in the visions of their leader Mother Earth, Jeanette MacDonald (1934–1984). From 1975 until 1976, she experienced a series of revelations: She came to understand that the Christian teaching of God the Father as creator was false and that the world was the work of a primordial Mother, whom she identified with Nature and with the Earth. Nature gave birth to a race of Black people, but her rebellious Son (God) reentered his Mother’s womb to gain Her power of generation and succeeded by producing (or forcing Her to create) White people. The Whites, the Race of the Son, then enslaved the Blacks and have continued to exploit them. The Way of the Son is that of Science—of cities, clothes, schools, factories, and wage labor. The Way of The Mother is the Way of Nature—a return to the simplicity of the Beginning, a simplicity of nakedness, cultivation of the land by hand and with respect, and of gentle and nonexploiting human relationships.

4On Quaker “strangeness,” see Godlee (1985). For the not so dissimilar Doukhobors:

A deranged old man, after a week spent fasting at a hill-top graveyard, delivered to an attentive gathering of people irrational, obscene, but mysterious messages, which were submissively accepted as oracular, and which caused many Sons of Freedom families to leave homes and belongings to embark on a brief and futile pilgrimage. (Hawthorne, 1955, p. 72)
The Son, in a continued quest for the power of generation, has recently entered into a new phase. He has now succeeded in establishing himself in Trinidad’s Africans and Indians and is also on the point of replacing humankind altogether with hybrid computers and robots. Nature, who has borne all of this out of love for the whole of Her creation, has finally lost patience. The current order of the Son will end in a catastrophic drought and famine, or a nuclear war, a destruction of the Son’s work through his own agency, after which the original state of Nature will once again prevail.

Jeanette herself is a partial manifestation of The Mother who will fully enter into her only at the End. Her task at the time of my initial fieldwork (1980–1982) was to facilitate the return to Nature by organizing the community known as Hell Valley, the Valley of Decision, to prepare for the return to the Beginning and to teach her people, the Black Nation, The Mother’s Children. She has to combat the false doctrines of existing religions that place the Son over The Mother and to correct the distorted teaching of the Bible, where she is represented as the Devil (hence “Hell Valley”). She stands for Life and Nature, in opposition to the Christian God who is really the Son, the principle of Science and Death. As the Devil she is opposed to churches and prisons, education and money, contemporary morals, and fashionable opinions. Because God is “right,” Mother Earth teaches the Left, and the Earth People interchange various conventional oppositions: “left” for “right”; “evil” or “bad” for “good.” Seeming obscenities are only Natural words, for She Herself is the Cunt, the origin of all life.

The exact timing of the End was uncertain but expected in Jeanette’s physical lifetime. Then Time will end, Sickness be healed, and the Nation speak one language. The Son will be exiled to his planet—the Sun, really the Planet of Ice, which is currently hidden by Fire placed there by The Mother, Fire that will eventually return to where it belongs, back to the heart of the nurturant earth.

Mother Earth’s revelations ceased in 1975–1976 after an episode called The Miracle in which she brought the sun closer to the earth. At this time her family were still living with her in a deserted village some 15 miles from the nearest settlement, and they were joined by an assortment of young men, mostly old friends and neighbors of hers from Port-of-Spain, together with Rastafarians attracted by a newspaper article written about this family going naked in the bush. Her ideas were now consolidated in reflection and debate. By 1978 her title of “Mother Earth” was adopted, possibly after a recent Port-of-Spain Carnival masquerade that had portrayed a large fecund Earth Mother.

Mother Earth continued to have visions in her dreams, but these were similar to those of other members: premonitions and answers to the immediate organizational problems on which her attention was now focused. Although around 60 people have been active Earth People at different times, in October 1981, 22 were resident in the Valley, with perhaps 20 sympathizers and occasional members in town. There were annual naked marches into Port-of-Spain, which sometimes ended in arrests with brief stays in the state psychiatric hospital for Mother Earth (with a variety of diagnoses), together with raids on the settlement by social workers, which resulted in confinement of the younger children to an orphanage: Mother Earth’s youngest son escaped and trekked back to the community across the mountains. There were, however, supportive articles in two local periodicals, Ras Tafari Speaks and The Bomb. Trinidad’s first prime minister had recently died, and the government was preoccupied with an election: The Hell Valley group were left to themselves.

\[5\text{This term is to be understood in the ethnographic present tense.}\]
Besides Mother Earth and her immediate family, only one other member of the group was female, with 16 young male followers between 18 and 33, most previously associated with the cults of Rastafari or Shouter (Spiritual) Baptism (Chevannes, 1995). The reason they gave for joining to the visiting anthropologist in 1981 was the corruption and spiritual decay associated with the postindependence government and a wish to return to a simpler, natural lifestyle. In Littlewood (1993), I argue an affinity with other anticolonial and post-colonial religio-political movements of resistance. In opposition to the material world, the group went naked, slept on the bare ground, and maintained themselves through fishing and cultivation of the land, using only cutlasses.

The center of the community was the old wooden house of a deserted village into which Mother Earth had moved in 1972, together with some added “African” huts. For about half a mile in each direction, the secondary bush and scrub of the seasonal rain forest had been cleaned, and a variety of trees and perennial cultigens were grown: medicine bushes; trees and plants for cordage and wrapping and for basketry, and calabashes; timber for building; plantain and banana; roots such as cassava, sweet potatoes, dasheen, yam, and tannia; aubergine, pineapple, tomato, pigeon peas, callaloo, and okra; Indian corn, pumpkin, ginger, sugar cane, and christophene; trees bearing oranges, grapefruit, guava, nuts, mango, avocado, pawpaw, pomerac, tamarind, and breadfruit; garlic and bushes with pepper, shadobenny, and other herbs. Above the settlement, reaching into the lower reaches of the mountains of the northern range, were cocoa and coffee, cannabis and tobacco. In the nearby bush were cress and watermelon, mauby bark, mammy apple, passion fruit, star apple, nutmeg, and sourisap; along the coast grew coconut and almond. The variety of crops, virtually every Trinidad food plant, perhaps justified the boast of the Earth People that they were living in the original Eden.

Although all members accepted Mother Earth’s role as some sort of primordial Mother, the group were “this worldly” in their emphasis on present cultivation of the land and on the preparation and consumption of food. Daily agricultural labor ended with a swim in the sea and Mother Earth ritually dealing out the cooked vegetable food to the group. The central “rite of synthesis” (as anthropologists would put it) was this daily meal. The evening was passed with the smoking of cigars and ganja spliffs and communal drumming and dancing, with singing of their favorite anthems: “Beat Them Drums of Africa,” “The Nation It Have No Food,” and “We Going Down Town to Free Up the Nation.”

Each new member took a “fruit name”—like Breadfruit, Coconut, Cassava, or Pumpkin. Relations between members were fairly egalitarian and not especially “religious,” generally recalling those of the average Trinidad working-class family. Supposedly the group were living in the Beginning of the End—a run-up to the eventual, very physical end of the world—but little time was spent on millennial speculation. Painted words on the main house proclaimed “Fock [sic] God”—a sentiment in accord with the group’s opposition to Christianity and Islam (although there was a more sympathetic attitude to the local cults of Rastafari and the Baptists as being “halfway there”).

In 1982, with disputes in the group relating to differences in practical authority, and Mother Earth’s continued thyroid disease, relations deteriorated, splits occurred, and the settlement was eventually burned by some members. Mother Earth died of her illness in 1984, and by the late 1990s, the Earth People were split into four groups. Beyond the particular doctrines of the group, they are of interest for suggesting that religions can certainly on occasion originate in an abnormal state of cognition when the illness is short lived and the founder is already influential in a local milieu that is already open to unusual communications in a period of spiritual uncertainty,
and the “delusions” can to some extent be separated out from everyday life (Littlewood 1993).

**DREAMS AND VISIONS IN RURAL TRINIDAD AND AMONG THE EARTH PEOPLE**

Through what sort of local interpretations of dreams and dream communication do the understandings of Mother Earth and the Earth People emerge? In the neighboring villages and in the Port-of-Spain slums, “dreams” are sometimes differentiated from “visions” in that the latter may occur in a waking or half-asleep state, that they are immediately recognized as having an evident, and powerful, other-wordly message; but a vision may be manifest in a natural dream. The significance of a dream may be clear cut (a snake signifies an enemy) or, for certain relatively standardized themes, may be the opposite of the apparent context (thus, marriage in a dream signifies a death in the physical world, and falling down means wealth; Herskovits & Herskovits, 1964). It is often not clear which sort of procedure is to be used, and recourse is sometimes had to popular dream books and sorcery manuals published in the United States that offer standardized interpretations. At a more individual level, dreams may signal the identity of a thief, the winning numbers in a gambling game, or which plant will be medicinally efficacious, or they may announce the solution to a spiritual crisis, such as whether to join one or another church, particularly the Shouter Baptists (Littlewood 1993).

The human soul, the spirits of obeah (sorcery), the powers of the West African shango cult, the spirits of the ancestors and revenants, the fallen angels and guardian angels of the Roman Catholics, the summoned elementals of “European” sorcery (high science), the spirit guides of the Baptists, and those beings seen in dreams are hardly to be distinguished. They reflect a multiplicity of conceptualizations and interrelations of divine and human, between the moral and physical worlds. Popular Trinidadian theology now resembles the lay perspective found in Britain—a relatively large differentiation between God and man, with occasional communication between them, with man personally responsible for his deeds—rather than the more entwined view of divine and human found by Herskovits and Herskovits (1964) 40 years ago; the once morally neutral powers of the (African) ancestral shango cult now appear to have become somewhat dichotomized under Christian influence as either “good” or “evil.” For most people, however, the different types of spirits are much the same. There is a presumed association of the local Baptists with obeah (sorcery and witchcraft), and the spirits of obeah do closely resemble the possessing Baptist spirits: They too are African, Indian, or Chinese and speak their respective languages or the “seven tongues.” Although the Baptists themselves distinguish to an extent between good and bad spirits (bondiay and mauvay lespwis), to nonmembers all are bad or at best morally ambiguous. Spirits are rarely Whites, and those summoned up in high science, although biblical fallen angels, are usually conceptualized as elementals or antic sprites rather than as European mages.

Shouter Baptist initiates are expected to mourn, secluded in a side room, lying in the dust or on pallets of leaves, and bound about (including the face) with flat swaddling bands “sealed with signs”; the mourner remains on the ground for a period of 3 or 7 days, attended by the Mother of the group. She feeds her traveling children on vegetable broth and guides their travels, usually to India, China, or Africa, where they learn a new spiritual role (Captain, Head Nurse, Laborer), often by self-perception as a biblical figure (Joseph, Mary,
Joshua); this is communicated to the Baptist Mother and, if ratified, involves them in fresh ritual costume and paraphernalia during subsequent meetings. The style and authenticity of these visions—frequently supported by later nocturnal dreams—determine status in the Baptist group and are closely tied to internal disputes and challenges to the authority of the leaders; most Mothers prefer, therefore, to keep a close watch on the proceedings. Jeanette had overstepped the mark when as a young woman she reported a vision of herself as Christ (below): Not even the Baptist Mother identifies herself with any of the persons of the Trinity. Even in the vision, identification is only a temporary visit or gift of higher powers, not unlike the gift of tongues from the Holy Spirit in “charismatic” churches.

Mourning is not regarded as a bereavement but, as in the Hellenistic mystery religions, a temporary bodily death in close association with the earth, enabling the spirit to live more fully in the other world. Shouters admit that mourning can be dangerous, for the individual, when traveling, is vulnerable to mauvay lespwis (malign spirits), but correct “sealing” and guidance by the Mother can usually prevent mishaps.

Mother Earth was accustomed to visionary communication in her youth:

But in my growing up, I had a lot of visions and never really see what they speaking about within my visions. In my thirties, I went to mourn, and for the very first time because I never wanted to go and mourn but they keep nagging at me why I don’t come to mourn: “Why you don’t go and mourn?” They prepare the list [of necessary ritual objects] for me; I took the list, buy what they said to buy, and I went to mourn.

It was terrible because I had a lot of trouble and yet myself was talking to me to help me out in my trouble. Until the day come that I there lying down and didn’t see nothing too much (I hearing the rest of the mourners talking and so forth but I wasn’t going nowhere) until the third day—rising day—the [Baptist] Mother come and tell me if I don’t see myself rising I’ll have to remain there! I started to cry and thing. When it turn the evening, one of the Mothers come and sit with me. A Teacher, they call her, She come and she sit with me. She say “I come to help you see yourself” and she started to trump.” I started to trump with her and I started to see myself—down in a grave, swaddled from head to foot like a mummy. I tell her. She say “What again?” And I take off the swaddling bands, throw them in the hole and seal it but in a darkness. I saw the coffin come up. I saw myself standing on it with a very large foot. And I say “Well, look I am a giant” because my foot was very long. She say, “Go ahead—what again?” And I tell her I saw myself as a Kong. . . . She turn round and said “What again?” an I said “Well I seeing something in front of me.” She said “What it is?” “It a serpent but I afraid of it—I can’t speak to it.” She said “Speak to it.” I said “No, I can’t.” I started to bawl because I was afraid of it although I know it in my sleep for many years: I was seeing it and always running from it. This [time] it was in front of me so I couldn’t run, but all I did was bawl and eventually I snatch it and I hold it. She turn around and she say “What that mean?” I said “Well look it straighten and it turn a staff.” She said “What is the meaning of that?” I said “The Christ is the Good Shepherd.” She said “Thank you.” She say I’m finished. So it then she left me and I was blank again. I didn’t see nothing again. Till then nobody didn’t really tell me what it mean. I live on. I didn’t really study it after the mourning and thing.

On another occasion Jeanette had a Baptist mourning vision of herself as a skeleton to which flesh was slowly added: the resurrected Christ. The other early visions she now recollects occurred in dreams. In one, 9 days after the birth of her first child, when she was 17, she saw herself walking down the road singing, “There’s a cross for everyone, there’s a cross for me,” when she saw a great light in the sky. In another she saw a house (later to be identified as the one at Hell Valley) and was carried inside and placed on a throne. Her

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*“Trumping” is a synchronized panting and heaving.*
partner Cyprian (called in the group Jakatan) had had a similar “call” in 1967 after he joined the Baptists:

The week after I baptise I lie down and have a vision. I standing on a hill and see [the] town destroyed by a flood. I go to a half-broken-down house and see a big black box. I open it. I hear a whole set of voices. I see a White man standing by it. The people crying help and I say “I am the True Shepherd and will lead you to true freedom.”

Cyprian became a Baptist Shepherd (a title he kept in the early days of the Earth People) and the following year had another vision while mourning: “I go into a school and it have a big map of Trinidad but no pupils. A short black man point to map and say, ‘Go down to the valley . . . Like shooting is about to start.’ ”

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EARTH PEOPLE

Jeanette’s early visions in Port-of-Spain had been relatively conventional, similar to those of her friends and neighbors except perhaps for the recurrent serpent, and for a closer identification with Christ than was acceptable among that Baptist group, which led to her leaving them. Her vague sense of mission was shared by many others, including Cyprian. She met him at the time of the failed Black Power uprising in Trinidad when, dissatisfied with both Black Power and the Baptists, he proposed that they adopt a simpler and more traditional rural life away from the pressures of the town. Jeanette reluctantly agreed to join him, together with her children, for she had been gathering materials to build a house of her own in town. The family settled on an abandoned estate at the most deserted part of the coast, reading the Bible and discussing religious questions together, accepting omens in dreams and continuing with occasional fasts. It was a physically demanding life, but the calm and peace of the coast more than compensated for arguments with overseers and estate owners, recalling to Jeanette the best times of her childhood, when she had accompanied her godfather as he worked on his little patch of four acres. In a dream after she is settled on the coast, she finds herself running away from Jesus toward a snake in the river.

Two years after they arrived, when Jeanette was 41 years old and 8 months pregnant, she had another dream, in which the moon tells her she is Mary and she should have her child on top of a hill. Not understanding why, she follows the dream and gives birth to twins under the roof of the house. When the twins are 5 months old, Jeanette, in a burst of energy, sings a song to the shango mother deity and starts burning all of the household articles; neither she nor her family understand what is happening, but her partner Cyprian presumes some deeper meaning in it and does not interfere. The last articles to be burned are the Bibles, powerful protectors of the family. When questioned by Cyprian, Jeanette gives answers that flash into her head, principally that her actions are due to a “natural spirit” in her. The burned objects she refers back to personal concerns: to her religion (Bible), medical science (spectacles), or her domestic tasks (bedding, kitchen utensils, and eventually the sewing machine she uses to make the children’s shirts). Together with the burning of all their clothes, this results in the family going naked until she makes up some temporary garments out of sacking, later abandoning these again as unnecessary. Bible, glasses, and bedding are not reintroduced, but the large iron cooking pots, which survive the fire, are back in use after a few days.

Random events become endowed with significance: A wheel of the sewing machine and one of her spectacle lenses, which appeared lost in the fire, are interpreted as parts of the
unnatural and constraining social (bourgeois) world of town. Cyprian and the children told me that they had been completely amazed at Jeanette’s behavior at this time, not understanding what was going on; but they were not worried until she started poking a finger into her daughter’s mouth and (as she thought) broke the wrist of the girl, whom she said had become possessed by a spirit, one she later identified as the Son. Jeanette now realizes that she is Nature Herself, the Mother of All, the very source and process of creation itself, and with a sudden gesture of her hands down between her legs, she brings the sun closer to the earth, initiating what becomes known as the Beginning of the End. In this moment an inexorable series of events are initiated, although Jeanette herself, now Mother Earth, has no further major revelations.

Although the little girl’s hand soon heals, her family now seriously wonders if Jeanette has become mad, except “she seem to know what she do.” Though they are able to accept the idea that she is possessed by some natural power, her idea that she is Nature is still difficult for them. The family, including Mother Earth, adjust to the new life; a subsequent pregnancy the following year is delivered in the middle of the coconut husks in the hut, Mother Earth now regarding cleanliness as altogether too Social. Over the next few months, her son brings out to the coast his friends, young men who have previously known the family in town, adherents of Shouter Baptism or the newly introduced (from Jamaica) Rastafari. Some discard their clothes and stay. The ideas of the Earth People are consolidated through practical activity and group discussion: Mother Earth uses some new Rasta idiom, but the kernel of the new teaching remains those thoughts that have come to her while trying to explain to her family her actions of the previous year. Within a year, the group’s marches to town begin, resulting in Mother Earth’s arrest and her first stay in the hospital.

Although Mother Earth’s ideas find their sources in her previous beliefs and experiences, neither they nor the actions that gave rise to them are in any way simply conventional. The whole complex does not conform to local institutions such as possession in the shango cult, for it is idiosyncratic, occurs in a spontaneous and nonritual setting, and is meaningless initially to both participant and spectators; further, Mother Earth had not previously experienced any “possession.” Actions and cognitions such as hers, with their dislocations of conventional meaning and their arbitrary slippage between the literal and the metaphoric, may occur in dreams and manic–depressive psychosis, or less commonly they may be found in association with more obvious biological changes. Although my biomedical diagnosis of hypomania and thyrotoxicosis may provide one interpretation of Jeanette’s overactivity and her paradoxical actions, it does not of course demand her particular choice of actions, her family’s and her interpretations of them, or her subsequent translation into Mother Earth. For the present, we are concerned merely with a particular episode of extraordinary experience and behavior that offers a radical break with everyday convention, a physical locus upon which certain personal and shared concerns are erected. For this, Mother Earth’s psychopathology offers us no more of explanatory value than do the celestial mechanics of an eclipse of the sun determine the meanings that societies may erect on that event.

DREAMS IN HELL VALLEY

Before they joined the group, many Earth People described something I would call boredom, perhaps even estrangement, together with a wish for the close interpersonal relationships they recalled with their mothers and siblings when they were younger. Dasheen
met Mother Earth when she was putting out (proselytizing) in Laventille, a working-class area of Port-of-Spain, and had joined the group because of

the understanding Mother put to me. We was looking for truth and Mother explain about Nature which is Truth. And me come to understand she was The Mother. I was living with a girl. She just had baby an’ she want to come but she family stop she. Me come to sacrifice messel... It come like you build a sell. You have to do something to build society. [In a dream] I see this long black wall an’ a map of Trinidad all red and confuse’ an’ this was the struggle. An’ I cross the wall, and now I see I cross over to my life here.

Breadfruit, who had grown up in Laventille near Mother Earth, had tried to reconcile Shouter Baptism with Rastafari:

I got gold watch-chain an’ I think Judas betray Jesus for silver an’ it all blood money! An’ I mash it up and throw it down latrine, an’ I baptise [into the Baptists]. When I go baptise I comb out natty [dreadlocked hair] an’ I go an’ mourn. An’ then I let natty grow again an’ one day minister take me in church and he say “Why you don’ go and comb it?” I say “Why?” He say “For society.” So I think I don’ want it; I for meself! So I didn’ go to church again. An’ I wear a jumbie bean an’ I go to a next church an’ a woman catch the spirit an’ take me round the church an’ wash me down with bush an’ thing, an’ say “You don’ come back with that again.” . . . An’ at night I go out naked an’ lie on the ground an’ say “Why not pray to a Mother for a few days?” So I do! [Soon he saw Mother Earth again, an old friend of his family, dressed in bag.8 On a visit to town.] Me mother always go by she. I see her a nex’ time in ’79 when she go up to Laventille. I use’ to talk about Selassie an’ thing but she show me me senses. The nex’ day I had a vision and see me self natural, run about with little children. Nex’ day I jus’ put on bag an’ start go about wi’ she. What made me see me self was that [in a dream] I see self an’ see this Black woman naked an’ walk about with school girls in uniform an’ I fly by her side. An’ I move and kiss earth, and I burn my Bible. An’ when Mother come up I free to talk it again.

No further major revelations occurred after the group settled in the Valley. The ideas of the Earth People were now consolidated in cool reflection and debate, but they still paid close attention to chance occurrences and random and uncanny events. Jeanette continued to have visions in dreams, but these were similar to those of the other members: premonitions and answers to the immediate organizational problems on which her attention was now focused. Difficult decisions made after much deliberation were frequently justified by dreams when the decision was recognized as coming spontaneously from the Spirit of Nature that guards the community. When I first met the group, I was told that they had been expecting me, after Mother Earth had a dream about Science coming to seek her out to test her.9 On another occasion the community debated with me whether it was Natural to dig up that guards the community. When I first met the group, I was told that they had been expecting me, after Mother Earth had a dream about Science coming to seek her out to test her.9 On another occasion the community debated with me whether it was Natural to dig up

visions usually deal with current problems, such as that of Mother Earth’s younger daughter, who remained in the Catholic orphanage where she had been placed by the

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7 A “jumbie bean” is an antisorcery talisman itself suggestive of unhallowed practices.
8 “Bag” refers to the sacking kilt worn by the group on their marches into Port-of-Spain—where they take it off in the public square.
9 Dissident members who left after my own departure later recalled their vision of a garbage truck depositing a White (in The Bomb, a Port-of-Spain newspaper, January 15, 1982). Dreams that explain arrivals and departures were common in North American hippie communes (Hall, 1978, chap. 4).
magistrates the previous year. During one of the marches to town her mother went to see her and was rebuffed. The community debated whether it would be a good idea for me to visit her to reestablish contact. We were undecided, but that night Mother Earth had a dream of a brown monster chopping people up. We decided that this represented the nuns (Carmelites in brown habits) and that I should keep away. Breadfruit, one of the Earth People whose joining the group had been associated with a Baptist vision (see earlier, p. 104), frequently related dreams to current events:

Before I get this Spirit, this natty, I dream an’ I in Africa, an’ this tree fall on my head. An’ last year it happen! Dream is when you spirit travel an’ the flesh sleep. An’ you’ spirit travel, travel, an’ later you flesh catch up. I often seen people a first time an’ I say I know them already. I see them in a dream.

Although this is close to popular explanations of dreams and mourning visions, Breadfruit admits that he “didn’ dream serious till I bounce up [meet] with Mother.” As with popular village interpretations of dreams, the meaning of dreams and visions among the Earth People may be as overtly presented, or they may be “inverted.” As with their doctrine whose inversions may indeed be derived from local dream interpretation,

Since this flesh is living in this life I learn a lot about “right” and never could see what I am looking for in what they call “right.” To me every life I turn and I see what is “right,” to me it is not “right” at all. Until now that I reach to this stage in 1975 as Mother Earth, burning everything I had. The last thing I burn were the Bibles showing where our education is upsided down. And putting out my senses is now that I am really seeing what I was looking for all the days of my life that I live. I now understand the meaning of “right” and “wrong.”

As our modern education is upside down, the real meanings of many words can be found only by a fresh inversion restoring the original state. As in the interpretation of dreams by psychoanalysts or by the local villagers, conventional knowledge is often taken as already disguised by inversion: “They say it have in the Seven Days [Adventists’] Bible the earth as a body and Trinidad is the foot [a drawing?]: If Trinidad is the last an’ the tail, then here is suppose to be the Beginning” (Mother Earth). “‘God’ is ‘dog’ backward an’ they say he is a man’s best friend and so he God” (Jakatan).

Perhaps I may be permitted some concluding remarks on actual sleep experience while in the Valley. Like the members of the group, I went naked the whole time, sleeping on the ground at night. Although it is located in the tropics, the community was very cold after sunset, the “Valley” being merely a small declivity at the top of a cliff by the sea open to the Windward currents of chilly air and rain from the western Atlantic. No covering of any sort is permitted at night by the Earth People (although there is a roof, but without walls), and most of us would try to get off to sleep next to the embers of the fading communal fire, worming our bodies ever closer into the still warm ash, rising at intervals to stretch cramped limbs, have a drink or ganja cigar, place another log on the fire, and then recompose ourselves once more on the ground. This made both for an interrupted sleep (probably waking up completely at hourly intervals) and also for a relatively long time trying to sleep or at least be recognized by others as in some sort of sleeping mode: perhaps about 10 hours per night, corresponding to the periods of total darkness during the year. But one was not in an either–or state of sleep or wakefulness: For possibly a third of my time on the ground, I was suspended between the two, in a state in which I could not easily distinguish my own plans and oneiric imaginings from the movement of others round the fire, from the dances
I had just witnessed, from the Mother shuffling by on her way to urinate outside, indeed from the deities in whose somnambulist life I was participating. This was a situation ripe for a coalescence of physical life and dream-time visionary quest, for a situation where, as Tylor (1904, p. 244) put it, "life, mind, breath, shadow, reflection, dream, vision, come together and account for one another."

REFERENCES


