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The coming of the Earth People

The earthly paradise

Few people in the West Indian island of Trinidad have not heard of the Earth People. Their community lies between the forested mountains of the Northern Range and the rock-strewn coast, above the rough seas where the Atlantic meets the Caribbean, and a few miles from where Columbus is locally said to have obtained a landing in 1498 and whose native Caribs he identified as living in 'the Earthly Paradise'. It is situated not far from the headland where in the sixteenth century the last remnants of one Carib group leapt to their deaths rather than face Spanish slavery, and where, some three hundred years later, the American anthropologists Melville and Frances Herskovits were to describe their African successors in the first ethnography of the English-speaking Caribbean.¹

For a country long familiar with the religious charisma of the Spiritual Baptists – the Shouters – frequently gathered by the roadside in their brightly coloured robes, intoning lugubrious 'Sankey and Moody' hymns and enthusiastically ringing their handbells, and also with the newer Rastafari movement introduced from Jamaica in the 1970s, the Earth People remain an enigma. Their appearance in the villages or in the capital Port-of-Spain causes public outrage, for they go about naked. Local opinion favours the view that these taciturn young men, carrying staves and cutlasses, and with the long matted dreadlocks of the Rastas, are probably crazy: if not the whole group then certainly their leader Mother Earth, for it is she whose visions gave birth to the movement and who leads their annual marches to town. Alternatively, argue some, they are just a new and particularly dangerous variant of Rastafari.

Every year the group comes from the coast to Port-of-Spain to Put Out The Life: to gather new recruits from the poorer shanty towns around the capital, decaying areas which the country's new-found oil wealth seems to have passed

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by. Communication is hampered by the Earth People's provocative language, their deliberate and studied use of obscenities, and Mother Earth's striking teachings. Trinidadians, a largely devout if not exactly church-going population, are outraged to hear that while God does not exist, she is the biblical Devil, the Mother of Africa and India, Nature herself.

Her island is the most southerly of the Lesser Antilles. Some thirty-seven miles across by fifty long, it lies in the Orinoco delta, eight miles away from the South American Main. A Spanish possession until its capture by the British in 1797, it was ignored by the Spaniards after they had exterminated most of the native Caribs and Arawaks. For a time it served simply as the base for expeditions into the continental hinterland in search of the fabled El Dorado. Spain did eventually encourage colonisation by French Catholic planters from other islands, together with their slaves who grew sugar in the lower areas to the west along the Caroni River.

Apart from a French cultural identity (which necessitated extended Crown Colony status) and the influence of the once powerful local Catholic Church, Trinidad's later history is typical of the British Caribbean: the development of sugar plantations and the emancipation of the slaves in 1838, followed by the introduction of indentured labourers from India together with some free African immigrants from the middle of the nineteenth century; conflict between colonial officials and the local plantocracy; the collapse of the price of cane sugar after the loss of colonial preference and competition with European beet sugar; economic stagnation and imperial neglect; the collapse of the other main exports, cocoa and coffee; the development of Creole nationalism; universal adult suffrage in 1946; increasing local participation in the Legislative Council progressing to internal self-government in the nineteen-fifties, and independence in 1962 as a single parliamentary state with the neighbouring island of Tobago. The governing party since 1956, the People's National Movement (PNM), has been committed to a mixed economy and a welfare state.² It derived its support predominantly from the African³ population and comfortably maintained power until 1986 through direct and indirect patronage and regular parliamentary elections, apart from racial tensions preceding independence and a brief hiccup in 1970 when an army mutiny sparked a short-lived Black Power rebellion.⁴

Trinidad differs from other West Indian islands in its relative wealth from oil and its low population density (with continued immigration during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from the smaller islands), and also the presence of substantial numbers of free Black Creoles in the period of slavery. The White *French Creoles* only stopped speaking French at the beginning of this century, while the last Spanish courts were abolished as late as 1879.

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Compared with the rest of the Caribbean, relations between African and European may be said to be relaxed if not altogether harmonious, although discriminatory legislation continued until the Second World War, and practical social segregation based on colour lasted well after independence. Colour, class and wealth still run together.

Black family life in Trinidad and Tobago resembles that of other parts of the English-speaking West Indies: relatively flexible cognatic kin relations, with shallow 'lineages' of *utle* (surname) through the father if parents are married. Personal economic ties are developed through acquired dyadic relationships rather than through kinship or even residence. Although scholarly debate continues as to the legitimacy of the African heritage, the consensus is that contemporary working-class patterns of life owe more to the continuing relationship between Black and White, between island and metropolitan country, than to any African 'survivals': one element of the Western working class, a 'rural proletariat' as Sidney Mintz has termed them.

Trinidad's oil resources (off-shore wells and a refining industry) have been intensively exploited since independence. Together with natural gas deposits in the south-east and the world's largest pitch lake near the western town of San Fernando, they are the basis for the national economy through taxation on the international corporations and partial nationalisation. Tourism has not developed, perhaps because of the scarcity of beaches, but also because it is regarded as politically demeaning. The local standard of living is high, reputedly the third highest in the Americas after the United States and Canada; there is one motor vehicle for every 10 of the island's 1.2 million population and, a few rural areas excepted, concrete houses, electricity, television, health clinics, piped water and metalled roads are taken for granted. Secondary education is compulsory and the oil revenues have allowed the building of a steel works, construction and other industries. These are grouped together with the major conurbations of Port-of-Spain and San Fernando in the west and centre of the country. The labour intensive agricultural cultivation of sugar, coffee, cocoa and ground provisions has been effectively abandoned and in 1981 Trinidad became a net importer of sugar.⁵ Meat, dairy products and flour have always been imported but now the foreign exchange surplus allows the bulk of 'local' food to be brought in from abroad, rice from Guyana and ground provisions from the smaller and poorer islands of the Lesser Antilles.

In the north-east of Trinidad, the mountains of the northern range, the geological continuation of the South American Cordillera, rise from the sea to over 3,000 feet. The terrain, shallow soils and heavy rainfall prevented the establishment of cane plantations and the area was only to be settled in the late nineteenth century by isolated families who established small estates of coffee

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and cocoa in the lower reaches of the mountains, growing coconuts and provision along the narrow littoral. These families were predominantly Creole or Spanish speakers from Tobago and the Spanish Main. The occasional White or Chinese established a store and acquired land, often through the failure of the smallholders to pay their store bills, but the general pattern of landholding was a peasantry of small local family groups working their own land. Cocoa and coffee were harvested, dried and picked up by the steamer which passed along the coast to land domestic goods every few weeks. With the collapse of the price of cocoa after the First World War, the rural north-east became relatively depopulated (now less than fifty people per square kilometre) as young adults moved to the cities and oil-fields or emigrated to the United States and Canada. No Whites remain. The distinctive Creole peasant culture is becoming urbanised and its language, Patois, is now seldom spoken outside a few villages and only by the *older heads*.⁶

The commune of the Earth People straddles a faint coastal track, known by the name of a long projected but never completed road, the Turnpike. The nearest village, Pinnacle, 9 miles away, is probably the remotest in Trinidad from Port-of-Spain and only reached by a winding coastal road, the Turnpike proper.⁷ The smallholdings of coffee and cocoa have returned to forest; their owners either left the area for good or retreated back to the village. The mountains, never settled and seldom crossed, remain part of the island's extensive forest reserves, exploited for wood only on their southern side where they meet the Caroni plateau.

The Turnpike track follows the coast, occasionally passing over headlands and allowing a glimpse of the sea but usually winding through the dense bush of secondary forest, hidden from the sun, occasionally dipping down to ford small rivers and mangrove swamps. Through the tangled foliage of overgrown coffee and cocoa and the tall spreading immortal trees planted eighty years ago to give them shade, the occasional traveller can glimpse the remains of abandoned cocoa houses and rotten wooden huts. The track ends after 20 miles at Petite Rivière, another fishing village usually reached by the road from the other side which passes through a gap in the Northern Range. The Turnpike is cleared once a year by the Pinnacle villagers as a *ten days* – temporary work allocated by the government public works department; for the rest of the year few pass along it – some forestry workers conducting a survey or occasional groups of hiking schoolchildren. The villagers who still gather copra from the palms along the coast prefer to visit their coconut groves by *canot*, the small high-prowed boat they use for fishing.

This coast is regarded by urban Trinidadians as the most desolate part of the island, 'behind God's back', a fitting retreat for the handful of Black Power

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mutineers who briefly established themselves there in 1972 after blowing up the Pinnacle Village police station. They were tracked down and shot by the Regiment, Trinidad's modest army.

Mother Earth in the Valley of Decision

A year after the 'guerillas' were killed, Jeanette Baptiste, a 39-year-old woman from Port-of-Spain, came to live on the coast, together with six of her twelve children and her partner Cyprian. After spending two years on various estates near Petite Rivière, the family settled among the remains of one of the deserted hamlets midway along the Turnpike, where on one side the track overlooks a small rocky bay and on the other a long curving beach bisected by the Madamas River which, laden with mangroves, slowly enters the sea as a modest delta. The family were initially paid by an overseer to collect copra but after an argument they continued to squat on the land by tacit agreement. They grew ground provisions, selling the surplus to the villagers.

Both Jeanette and her husband had been Spiritual Baptists and they continued to 'pick along in the Bible', fasting in Lent and interpreting the visionary import of their dreams. From 1975, after the birth of twins in their wooden hut, until 1976, Jeanette experienced a series of revelations which became the foundation of the Earth People. 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 the rebellious Son (God) re-entered 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, 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 labour. 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 non-exploiting human relationships.

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 Africans and Indians and is also on the point of replacing humankind altogether with computers and robots. Nature, who has borne all 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

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into her only at the End. Her task now is to facilitate the return to Nature by organising the community known as Hell Valley, the Valley of Decision, to prepare for the return to the Beginning and to 'put out the life' to her people, the Black Nation, The Mother's Children. She has to combat the false doctrines of existing religions which place the Son over the Mother and to correct the distorted teaching of the Bible where she is represented as the Devil. 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 is uncertain but it will come in Jeanette's physical lifetime. Then Time will end, Sickness will be healed and the Nation will 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 which will eventually return to where it belongs, back to the heart of the nurturant Earth.

Since her revelations which initiated the Beginning of the End, Mother Earth's immediate family have been joined by numbers of Trinidadians, usually young men who bring their partners and children. The community has a high turnover and, while over fifty people have been associated with the Earth People, when I lived with them there were twenty-two staying in the valley with perhaps forty committed sympathisers in town. About once a year the group march into town, camp out in the Laventille area and present their message in the central streets and parks, particularly in Woodford Square, the popular site for political demonstrations, next to the parliament. After a few weeks of Putting Out The Life and visits to friends and relatives, they return to the valley to continue to Plant for the Nation.

The response

The nearby Pinnacle villagers were the first to become aware of the new community and their response was typical of subsequent Trinidadian reaction. A young married woman told me how she had seen them when they passed through in 1977 on their first trip to town: 'Man come up and he say people down there coming up naked. I think he joking but he ai'. I go and look and, man, I so ashame'. For months after I thinking "My God, what happen?" An old villager, Tante Marie, whose sister lives in town and who herself frequently complains about the benighted state of the village, had been 'walking down the

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street and I hear something behind me and I turn – O my Lord! – I see these savages. I start to run so they won't attack me and I run till I reach [home].'

Many women in Pinnacle expressed sympathy for the only girl in the group at that time, Mother Earth's own daughter, who seemed embarrassed by the watching villagers and had covered her breasts with one hand, the other across her hips. Mother Earth reproached the girl, stopped and parted her own legs, pointed between them and called out, to general outrage, 'Here is where you all come from!' The group consisted largely of young men, and the village girls, while publicly expressing disgust, hid to peep, for 'If I go talk with them now my mother she got to throw me out.'

Apart from these marches to town the Earth People occasionally stop in the village to exchange their crops for salt and agricultural cutlasses at the two stores. On these occasions they now wear a short kilt of sacking (*bag*) which is discarded when outside the village. Conversation stops as these solemn young dreadlocks stand silently over their staves outside the shop, cutlasses laid discreetly on the ground, whilst one of them makes the purchases. Their departure is the sign for an animated conversation to break out, indignation blended with derision; if they have bought sacks then 'bag people come to get a new suit there!' Few village women venture outside into the *cocoa* but the men occasionally meet the Earth People passing on the foot-trodden *traces* which criss-cross the nearby bush, and the fishermen can see the community's huts from their boats when they pull up their turtle nets in the early morning; slogans roughly painted on the hut overlook the Turnpike track and the sea below – 'Hell Valley', 'the Devil live here', 'Fock God'.

Popular interpretations of what is going on in Hell Valley follow the usual topics of Pinnacle conversation – religion, sex and sickness. Perhaps the group are just a collection of rather odd Rastas come up from town? No one believes Mother Earth is really the Devil but many feel there may be a close relation; she is at least some type of *lajabless*, the rather folkloric female power who entices men into the bush, there to entrance them and strip them naked, sometimes to rape them. Alternatively the whole thing is an excuse for everybody to have sex with Mother Earth – 'Why else they naked? You jus' tell me that now!' Many feel that Mother Earth is mad or indeed the whole group has gone crazy through smoking too much *ganja*.⁸ In private some villagers express a belief that Mother Earth is really 'very clever', that she has got the young men growing food for her and that she is selling vast quantities of ganja in town, stashing the money away ready to leave suddenly and then buy a large house somewhere in Port-of-Spain to enjoy the comforts of the urban life she affects to despise – 'How they work so?'

Part of the land used by the Earth People belongs to a Pinnacle family and

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some years ago arguments over the ownership of its produce led to an incident in which a villager set a pipegun⁹ in the bush near the settlement, but was found out and his dog killed in a scuffle. For the villagers, the contract to clear the Turnpike as a *ten days* is an important part of their cash income; many of them once lived near the track and still own the land on either side. Soon after the establishment of the Valley, the Earth People (at that time more inclined than later to solicit official support) applied for the contract, failed, but nevertheless cleared the track for some miles. When the villagers arrived to do the job along with the public works foreman, a violent confrontation was only just averted, but the villagers later made half-hearted plans to use their guns to drive the Earth People away. For the present they are content to grumble about the theft of their land and hint to the local police that the government should do something. Anxious lest rumours of these plots should reach the Valley they make a point of saying publicly that they will not trouble the Earth People: 'I ai' go there again. We ai' enemies but I don't like the way they move.'¹⁰

Many of the older Creole-speaking inhabitants of Pinnacle, particularly the men who used to live along the Turnpike, regret the depopulation of the coast and the passing of traditional rural life: 'Now little boy is drinking with big man, son drink with father, son beating father on wapi [gambling] table. What!' While valuing the benefits of piped water and pensions, they criticise the young men's expectations of an easy life: 'It come so all they want is fêting. They can' take hard work again.' They cite the recent collapse of the village agricultural and fishing co-operatives, and deplore the reliance of Pinnacle on the regular public works programmes rather than on mutual assistance. Villagers accord grudging respect to the return to agricultural life in the Valley, all the more so as the Earth People themselves come from the town. Their opinions about Trinidad's future often echo those of the Earth People: that the removal of the oil, the blood of the soil, is slowly turning the land into a *cripsy*,¹¹ an unproductive arid desert. They too are suspicious of the newer farming techniques advocated by the government agricultural officers and, refusing pesticides or fertilisers, continue to plant and harvest according to the phases of the moon. The oil wealth, they say, is temporary; it will disappear, leaving Trinidadians now unable to plant, starving in their once fertile but now 'unbalanced' land. But still, as Jobie, one of the fishermen, mused: 'If you can' buy rice, you just pick a plantain. The earth is the mother for true!'

Their disagreement is less with Mother Earth's novel ideas than with her nudity. No adult Trinidadian has gone naked since the African slaves came to the Caribbean. 'They must be evil, God tell all of we wear clothes.' Villagers quote the expulsion from Eden – 'Even the trees and beasts carry clothes, God make them with bark and hair and feathers.' Few take the 'devil worship'

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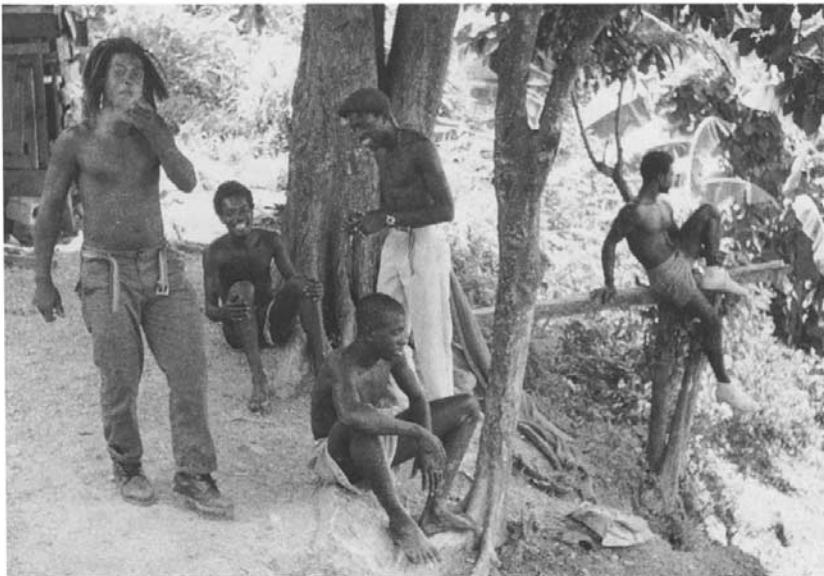
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seriously for ‘that is just to fright we away’ but to live without any modern technology at all is a mistake, and they cite the instance of one of the Earth People who died in childbirth.

A number of the younger village men demonstrate an allegiance to Rastafari through wearing dreadlocks and have some knowledge of Jamaican Rasta ideas (Plate 1). They have remained behind in the village to pursue a *natural* life and they express considerable sympathy for the Earth People.¹² Two of them told me they would actually join if it were not for the nudity and Mother Earth’s reputation for making everyone work so hard. Some of them meet the Earth People in the bush, smoke a little ganja with them and offer the fish they have caught in exchange for provision. Through them and other friends in the village who knew Mother Earth before she went naked, the Earth People are kept well informed of any village gossip against them.

Trinidadians who have never met Mother Earth immediately volunteer two facts about her: she used to be a school teacher and she has had incestuous relations with her son. The incest clearly refers to her teaching about the return of the Son into Nature’s womb. The suggestion that she was once a teacher is a tribute to Jeanette’s startling eloquence. Her mother was a domestic servant and until 1973 she had an impoverished life in town; with only a rudimentary



1 Rastas in Pinnacle: two of them had just cut off their dreadlocks following a rumour that the police were arresting locksmen for selling ganja.

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primary education she continues to read with difficulty. As she is frequently unwell another persistent tale is that she has just died, a rumour of much annoyance to the Earth People when they return to town to visit their families and friends. Many local people predict that the commune will end in murder, and cite the Peoples Temple in Guyana, or Trinidad's own Michael X in Arima, a town not so distant from the coast.¹³

In 1976, on hearing the first stories of a family going naked, the *Trinidad Express*, the more popular of the two national newspapers, sent a reporter to visit Hell Valley. This account was typical of later reports in its emphasis on the dangers of snakes and the unhygienic conditions for young children whose education was being neglected. Since then the community has been raided frequently by the police who on one occasion, assisted by social workers, removed the children to an orphanage and a convent boarding school. Members have been arrested for possession of ganja both in the Valley and outside, and the local police regard the group simply as a variant of 'Rastafarianism'; when the Earth People were arrested on marching through Arima, they had their dreadlocks cut off in a waiting police van.

The presence of a community apparently proclaiming adherence to pan-African ideals in this remote area is a matter of some concern to the authorities with their memories of the Black Power guerrillas who hid in the nearby forests. Even before Jeanette's revelations, the Regiment had raided the estate, apparently with orders to kill the gunmen hiding there. (According to Jeanette only the sound of her baby crying prevented the hut being riddled with bullets.) Now, as Mother Earth, she causes particular embarrassment to the government through her use of the balisier plant as a standard when 'going down town to free up the nation'. The balisier (plate 3, p. 185) was chosen by Eric Williams, prime minister from 1956 until he died in 1981, as the emblem for the party he founded, the People's National Movement. Superficially resembling a plantain tree it does not bear edible fruit although its presence in the bush signifies a fertile area suitable for clearing and planting. Opponents of the PNM like to point out that rural tradition also implicates the balisier in harbouring a venomous snake, the mapapi. To Mother Earth these are identical traditions, for the mapapi, the Serpent of Africa, is the source of life, and the Earth People regard snakes as dangerous only to those who persist in wearing clothes.

Jeanette has twice been taken by the police to St Ann's, the mental hospital in Port-of-Spain: in 1977 she was arrested in Arima and in 1980 the police raided the Valley and removed her. Among the Trinidadians who have met her when 'putting out' in town, there is much sympathy for her call to return to rural life and she is regarded less as insane than eccentric: 'She come half-way