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The first new religion in the Caribbean since Rastafari, the Earth People draw on local strategies of resistance and on West African sources to assert a renascent African identity and celebrate female creativity. They argue that Black people are the guardians of a natural environment, which is constantly under threat from European science. Roland Littlewood, who is both a psychiatrist and a social anthropologist, criticises received ideas about pathology and creativity, and on the development of religions. While the founder's ideas emerged in her experience of cerebral disease, Dr Littlewood shows how the Earth People appropriate such radical personal experiences to build a community. Naturalistic and personalistic interpretations of human life are both valid and necessary. Neither can be reduced to the other.

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PATHOLOGY AND IDENTITY

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PATHOLOGY AND IDENTITY

The work of Mother Earth in Trinidad

ROLAND LITTLEWOOD

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‘How can we know the dancer from the dance?’

W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, Macmillan, New York, 1950

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Preface

The Pinnacle villagers had warned me about the Earth People. Dangerous and unpredictable strangers to the coast, they were certainly no friends to a White. When I arrived in the fishing village to study local knowledge of health and sickness I had been told about the community established some nine miles away in Hell Valley. A week afterwards I saw three of them bartering ground provision for cutlasses in one of the village stores; they looked at me with surprise (I was the only White along the coast except for the two Irish Dominicans at Toco) and then ignored me. A few months later I took the opportunity of joining the villagers on a government forestry expedition into the bush near the Earth People, both to obtain medicinal plants, but also, it was evident, to visit the Valley.

One of the foresters had met Mother Earth on her march to town in the previous year and offered to take me. Leading away from the abandoned *ajoupa* (bush hut) which had served as our base camp for two days, the now disused track followed the headland, covered in fallen vegetation, coconut fronds, leaf mulch, forest debris. We forded a stream, overhung by a decayed footbridge, occasionally glimpsing through the overgrown scrub the remains of the wooden houses which twenty years before had comprised small hamlets along the shore, and climbed to a small plateau facing the sea, backed by the mountains which descended to behind the settlement and then on either side dropped down to a rocky bay some thirty feet below. Out at sea pelicans floated on the tide, occasionally taking ungainly flight to dive for fish, only to have them contested by the wheeling frigate birds.

The most outstanding characteristic of the valley was surely its neatness and precision. The lower slopes of the mountains were cleanly cut into well-tended terraces, planted with banana, plantain, and ground provisions – yam, tannia, dasheen and cassava. Along the cliff edge the forest was cut back. Between

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piles of slowly burning scrub remained breadfruit, orange and avocado trees, coffee and cocoa. Nearer the house, pumpkins and coconut palms framed the first lawn I had seen since leaving Port-of-Spain, the grass cropped short by two goats.

The lawn stretches between the house and the track at the edge of the cliff, down which a slippery path twists along the rock face, down to a carved canoe and two rafts pulled up on the shingle. A shallow ravine passes along the side of the house and then across the lawn which nearer the house is paved with rocky stones. The house itself is the only remaining building of a once thriving village: a small wooden house with an attic, boards unpainted apart from the words 'HELL VALLEY, THE DEVIL LIVE HERE' facing the sea; window and door spaces open, fronted on one side by a silk cotton sapling and joined on the other to a large open-sided and simply carved extension, the bottom of which comprises open baskets woven into support posts and piled with harvested fruit and provision, scented with woodsmoke and the damp earth. Unlike other isolated country huts, there was no rubbish, no rusting tins or discarded tools lying about, no fragments of clothing, old calendars or fading copies of the farmer's almanac. The work here was wooden, roughly carved and polished through use, giving a precise sense of permanence, of place. The house seemed to exist for itself, no longer an echo of a society located somewhere else – in town, in Britain or in the United States.

The sound of timber being cut with axes came from behind the house. Chickens picked underneath; like all those in rural Trinidad, it is raised up on short stilts. In the space where a door had once hung stood a middle-aged woman of African ancestry, of medium stature, naked, her hair in short dreadlocks. Two small children played around her on the threshold. She greeted us with friendly reserve and discreetly avoided shaking hands, but briskly admonished my companion who had stuck our cutlasses into the ground as we neared the hut: 'The Earth is The Mother, all of we is She.' He was ill at ease, refused her invitation to stay and wandered off, saying he would return to collect me later. I entered the house, sat on the ground and accepted some coconut water in a calabash with a local cigar, to be told that my visit had been anticipated in a dream the previous night. I stayed on and off for over a year.

In the following pages I offer a story of this small community. Whilst attempting to evoke the Earth People's ideals and their way of life, and their relationship to the wider society, I am concerned also with their origin in the visionary experience of their founder. Mother Earth, as she is known by them, is regarded locally as insane and twice has been taken to the St Ann's psychiatric hospital in Port-of-Spain.

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Medical anthropologists often examine popular knowledge of those experiences we call ‘mental illness’; how these are experienced, shaped, received and amplified in different societies against the background of other local institutions. Understandings of madness, its origins and consequences, illuminate local psychological knowledge which may otherwise pass without explicit comment – a distinction between the moral and the physical, the limits of intentionality or empathy, or indeed the way in which people usually expect to identify external objects accurately. I am concerned here with another and different question, indeed the converse: can the extreme personal experiences of what medicine terms psychosis, when taken in part as some random, ‘natural’ event, give shape to society? May such arbitrary intrusions actually have a place in social innovation, sometimes serving as the charter for new departures?

The origins of severe ‘mental illness’ are not simply cultural and conventional; such illnesses do appear similar in different societies, often directly associated with those biological changes we term ‘diseases’, and independently of any necessary social awareness of such disease itself. This is not to deny that the eventual expression of ‘psychopathology’ can only occur through social institutions – which therefore may be said to have some determining role – but such expression may be comparatively invariant and may, like other representations of a world ‘out there’, provide the ground for local understanding of human life, of our motivations, causalities and values.

My account thus takes a rather different approach to the question of ‘madness and creativity’ from the well-known psychoanalytic argument. Psychoanalysis, I argue here, assumes a quantitative gradient between sanity and madness, ascribing an innovatory role to ‘psychosis’ only through employing it as a figuring for everyday and universal human dilemmas. Instead I suggest that there is perhaps nothing so very distinctive about the innovatory possibilities of mental illness and, although some psychological assumptions are inevitable, I have generally avoided psychodynamic interpretations. This is not an essay in psychobiography. I place comparatively little determining power on the actual processes of psychopathology themselves and merely suggest that, like any other cognitive innovation, they can serve to provide new variants of everyday values and conventional symbolisms which may or may not ‘gel’ with a given – or potential – set of social concerns at a particular time. I am not concerned with establishing psychopathology as a common mode of innovation, let alone the major one, but with arguing its very possibility, together with examining some of its characteristics and limitations. Nor do I engage in any detail with the social psychology of why particular individuals join the new movement, but more with interpreting the how of innovation and

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congruence: Mother Earth's experiences and their translation into a set of shared beliefs make a good deal of sense to many people, myself included.

I have often been asked, in Britain as well as in Trinidad – do I too believe in Mother Earth's teaching? The notion of 'belief' is not perhaps appropriate – one fit rather for the drastic doctrines of Christian eschatology or for its successor, the rationalist theory of knowledge – and certainly not one appropriate to the workings of the Earth People themselves. Something like 'acceptance'? Then perhaps yes. 'Resonance' certainly. Yes, if I accept that humankind is part of the natural order of things; that we can never try to obtain any privileged knowledge or control over the non-human without thereby radically altering ourselves; that what we know as 'power' is often the attempt to do this through denying such knowledge and control to others; that such denials on the basis of gender and of race often have much in common; and that alternative voices to those of the dominant order may well be generated especially from the ranks of women, from Black people and those we call mentally ill. If sometimes we may wonder why international markets are taken as natural phenomena, why government pacification becomes arbitrary terror, why welfare agencies may perpetuate poverty, and technological development leads to famine, then indeed we may consider, along with the Earth People, whether our implicit order of knowledge has not indeed got some things *upside down*. Mother Earth's notion of scientific knowledge as an ultimately flawed attempt to mimic our origins seems to me no less reasonable than that of science as a privileged epistemology.

I start by introducing her community, and then examine the extent to which some recognised and now medically segregated domain of 'madness' may be taken up by societies as a source of contributions to shared and generally accepted notions within which it may offer new perspectives: a rather different idea from the social scientist's perception of rapid social change as itself 'dysfunctional' or 'pathological'. Later I turn to the preconditions for this sort of innovation, emphasising in particular the communal response rather than the personality and intentions of the innovator. Local Trinidadian understanding of madness is given some place, as the context within which Mother Earth's own experiences are to be understood, and I consider how these experiences can be represented in biomedicine with a conventional clinical assessment. I place particular emphasis on a locally recognised experience we may gloss for the moment as 'depression': *tabanka* articulates two linked sets of opposed but complementary sensibilities with which Mother Earth's teachings are particularly concerned, those associated with gender, and those associated with ethnicity and class in the West Indies. The following chapters deal at greater length with these understandings and how they are transformed through her

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personal experiences into a new and relatively structured set of ideas. Comparison here between her different images involves an interplay between different types of interpretation – textual but also historical, symbolic, biomedical, and (parenthetically) psychological.

There is no single reading of the Earth People, nor do I attempt it. The cool-headed reductionist will be disappointed; I neither attempt to reduce natural facts to social facts, nor the reverse. To attempt to know what happens, and to describe how we make sense of it whether as a place or as a procedure – each seem to me to be inescapable and to be equally valid, the one constituting the other in a continuing dialectic within Western thought: whether couched in the idiom of explanation versus meaning, arbitrary but causal necessity versus human agency, the contingent versus the necessary, the natural sciences versus the humanities, the empirical versus the structured, the technical versus the aesthetic, or whatever. Attempts to fuse them into a single system – whether it be through psychoanalysis or sociobiology – work by a sleight of hand whose illusive simplicity palls after a few passes as they collapse into either the one or the other. Madness is not merely a literary trope, nor can human society be predicated on neurophysiology alone. To paraphrase Engels (or indeed Mother Earth) we are made by nature and yet we make nature. Inclusion here of the biological perspective does not assume some causal sequence of brain states to psychological events and thence to social institutions; but rather that certain physiologies may be said to constrain and also make possible the meanings which societies as active agents then ascribe back to them. Going one way we have the biologist's determinism; going the other we follow the humanist's voluntarism. Neither is false, nor true.

I argue that Mother Earth's ideas appeal to other members of her group with an interpretation of the community's organisation as constituted through individuals, each of whom resonates as an individual with the personal meaning of her ideas, whilst these ideas simultaneously generate the whole community as a family developed around Mother Earth herself. I end by considering the limits and facilitations of psychopathology as a likely vehicle of social and cognitive change. While psychopathology reflects those events we may term biological more than recent historians of madness may wish to accept, the social meanings which constitute the outsider can at times transform the whole, centre and margin alike.

My own role as writer and participant has some place here, and how I myself became incorporated into her unfolding cosmogony. It will be evident that my involvement with the Earth People precluded (whether or not I had wished it so) any pretence at ethnographic neutrality. Fanon and Foucault have argued that the European's 'Other' is constituted through the dominant order. But only

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in part. For men, Whites, psychiatrists and anthropologists (and sons) are in turn constituted through our Other; my own gender, race, profession (and childhood) are hardly autonomous constructions. This account is not however one of personal self-discovery. Others have their authentic biographies, their struggles, their appropriations of our classification. Though these are entwined with the dominant order, and reflect it, their lives are hardly cyphers of the dominant code: lived through it indeed, but not by it. Works not texts. If I have attempted here some glosses on Mother Earth's work, glosses which for me are significant, it is not to render that work plausible and reasonable. Indeed it is powerfully unreasonable, both in its origins and in its critique of our conventional knowledge.

It is easy to talk of a 'dialectic' here but how do we actually proceed? Are our two procedures, and hence the domains which they generate, mutually constitutive? Let me take an example which I have used elsewhere:

- (a) Why do lesbians wear ear-rings?
- (b) Who is asking question (a), and why?

One of these questions is likely to prove more congenial to us than the other; indeed the other is likely to evoke strong personal feelings. And the juxtaposition of the two seems discordant, even distasteful, for each argues for a conventionalised way of proceeding which allows no validity to the other. Taking question (a), our likely path may follow something like this: a broad cultural materialism, reproductive fitness, mating behaviours, sexually arousing signals, the evolutionary biology of homosexuality and its contemporary interpersonal formations, perhaps to social rereading of the persistence of 'natural symbols' through symbolic inversion in new situations of dominance. Question (b) will lead us through the history and politics of contemporary scientific discourse, the hardly disinterested choice of its 'Other', and the pay-offs in a male and heterosexual discourse for practitioners, and hence their desires, perhaps physiologies, of power. Anthropology, like psychiatry, tends to veer from one starting point to the other depending on whether it sees itself as scientific or humanistic. Psychiatry has usually chosen the former approach, even managing to transform 'phenomenology' into an objectified discourse (as I myself do in Chapter 5).

If we recognise that neither question is without interest, it is by no means obvious what we do next. A hermeneutic elision, say reading science as narrative (Margolis 1989), or just asserting they are really the same (Bateson 1979), or emergent stages (Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, or indeed Mother

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Earth herself), all fail to do justice to the first perspective as practised knowledge. I am not concerned here with reviewing the various theoretical solutions which have been offered since the seventeenth century or with attempting a new privileged foundation but with trying to do justice to each in their own terms. And yet, a closer look at each schema suggests that they are perhaps not really so distinct after all, and that they are dealing with the 'same' question howbeit from different ends as it were. There is an essential unity in that each is dependent on the other. We can thus try to integrate them together in a discursive account which will end up as a pluralistic paste-book or else a muddy middle ground (a psychology), or we can offer some sort of dialogic ebb and flow in which each understanding overextends itself into the other and constrains it, or we can just place the two down together in an ironic simultaneity. Where we draw the line or halt our chain depends on our accepted sense of disciplinary boundaries and of the 'fitness' of the argument. In Chapters 2 and 3 I suggest how certain social understandings allow certain biological understandings: in Chapters 4 and 10 the reverse. I make no apologies for what might seem at times a return to Kantian antinomy for this seems inevitable if we are to do justice to each knowledge as a conventional procedure. In approaching Mother Earth, I have used here both the 'ironic' and the 'ebb and flow' without claiming an eventual reconciliation; but informally not programmatically, for here the object of a naturalistic discourse like (a) is the active agent who asks me something like question (b) – and answers it. As I argue later, my text then is not just an external interpretation (and it is that) but simultaneously an action elaborated by Mother Earth herself in which she and I may come to constitute each other. It is common for the writer to end a preface by claiming full responsibility. Not here.

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Mother Earth died two years after my initial stay in the Valley. Since her death the Earth People have divided into four separate groups. Although I spent time with three of these in 1988 and 1991, this account is generally composed in the present tense, here referring to the period 1980–2. While the Earth People and I engaged in various joint projects (and still do), the text remains the personal account of an outsider, one at times intensively involved but nonetheless hardly to be considered as a committed adherent.

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More (and less) than a dedication

This is an interpretation of my experiences of one particular person, Mother Earth, and of her experiences of me. Her initial invitation, and that of the Earth People, to stay with them, to share the Beginning of the End, and to write about them in my own way, overcome my initial reluctance to intrude on a millennial community. That the practice of medicine and academic research of any type are fundamentally antithetical to their ideals says much for their tolerance. As Mother Earth put it:

I know Science has to search me out, to fight me, to check me out. You got to put it down as it come to your own senses.

A note on idiom

The ethnography of an essentially English speaking community whose local idiom does not have a recognised orthography presents problems when quoting direct speech. I have generally rendered speech in international English with the ubiquitous Trinidad *eh* ('ain't', 'isn't', 'doesn't') as *ai*. For simplicity my transcriptions omit pitch distinctions which can sometimes serve as different lexical items, affixes or even syntactical structures. This inevitably makes some misleading assumptions about the underlying grammar (thus *now now* may indicate both precision and pluralisation); and in reported conversation with me, informants often essayed the acrolect in what linguists term hypercorrection. Additionally, what may strike readers as deliberate metaphor (*cut eye*) may also be calquing from French Creole, Yoruba or other languages. Local Creole words are italicised here unless they are used frequently in the text or in direct speech. I have referred to both human personage and divinity as 'Mother Earth' but for the latter I have usually capitalised pronouns. Specific expressions used by the Earth People (glossed on page 244) are either capitalised when they have a novel ideological significance (Social = Son) or italicised when they are employed in a sense shared with other Trinidadians (*social* = snobbish). At times this will be clumsy but much of their ideas involves a subtle transformation of everyday English, and the difference needs to be borne in mind. A particular problem is posed by the homophone Son/Sun which is nearly a conceptual unity; I use either Son or Sun depending on immediate context. 'Caribbean' connotes here the whole Caribbean basin, and 'West Indies' the non-Hispanic, principally ex-British and French, islands together with Guyana and Belize. 'Afro-Caribbean' and 'African-Caribbean' refer to those West Indians who recognised themselves as partly or wholly descended from Africans and who in Trinidad refer to themselves as *Africans* or *Negroes*. The term 'Black' is used variously to

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refer to the local Afro-Caribbean population, or to all local non-Europeans (following recent changes in local usage); the context should make clear which I am following.