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NOTES ON THE STAR LORE OF THE CARIBBEES*

By DOUGLAS TAYLOR

IT is now thirty years since Walter Roth,¹ in the preface to his *Animism and Folklore of the Guiana Indians*, wrote: "I realized that for the proper study of the Arawaks and Caribs, I had to include that of the now almost extinct Antilleans." Nevertheless, it does not appear that he ever visited the latter, or even made himself familiar with the one writer (Raymond Breton²) who had spent years among them and spoke their language fluently. "The Island Caribs," he says elsewhere in the same work, "regarded all the heavenly bodies as Carib. Father de la Borde³ mentions some five or six stars in their cosmogony, but unfortunately has apparently not identified them." This omission Roth could doubtless himself have made good had he come to Dominica; for even at that late day there were still a few old Caribs who spoke the language and knew the lore of their ancestors, while today only vestiges of both may be gleaned.

SUN AND MOON

No particular native beliefs now attach to the apparent motions of the sun and moon, nor have any been recorded for this area so far as I know. That they were called *h^wéyu* and *núny* respectively, and were both said to have been men before ascending to the sky and assuming their present appearance, is known to most of the present-day Dominica Caribs. Breton tells us that those of his day knew well when the sun passed and repassed their zenith on its way to and from the tropic (about May 20 and July 20), and says that *h^wéyu-ago* or *h^wéyubuke* (which might be translated "sunian" or "sun-dweller") was "the name by which the so-called Gods of the Savages flatter them."

Of the moon, it is told how formerly a girl became pregnant by a young man who used to visit her secretly at night without disclosing his identity. Her mother set a watch, and, when he arrived, "*šílu¹-l²íe³-ta⁴-e⁵ tábulubu⁶ i⁷ukabo⁸-rokú⁹-kua¹⁰, šábuy¹¹-l²íá³-ta⁴-e⁵ l²išíbu¹³; hébe-í¹⁴ túbali¹⁵ tábulubu⁶ l²išíbu¹³-wago¹⁶*—She² did,³ be⁴ it⁵ said,⁴ pick-up¹ genipa⁶ in⁹ her⁷ own¹⁰ hand,⁸ she² did,³ be⁴ it⁵ said,⁴ daub¹¹ his¹² face¹³; whence¹⁴ it¹⁵ (comes) to¹⁵ be¹⁵ that¹⁵ (there is) genipa⁶ upon¹⁶ his¹² face¹³" (i.e., upon the moon's face). And thus it was discovered in the morning (from the indelible marks of the genipa-apple juice) that the girl's own brother was the sly lover. He was so ridiculed that for very shame he withdrew to the sky, where you see him today. The child was named *Híali*, "bright, clear, serene." It is he who was the founder of the Carib nation. He was taken as a baby to be presented to his father (the moon) by *yerétti* (sp. of humming-bird) who received as recompense for this service

* Due to unfortunate circumstances this article has not been proof read by the author.

¹ Roth, 1915.

² Breton, 1665, 1666.

³ de la Borde, 1886.

the beautiful little feather crest he still wears on top of his head.

Three years ago in St. Vincent an old woman of Carib descent told me that she could remember, when the moon was in eclipse, people saying that *mápwíya* (bush-spirit) was trying to eat it. On such occasions, she said, they used to stay up all night and refrain from eating, while women would "pound water in a mortar" and sing: *nì-bá're; kaykaciwa ar'yabudu dunə*. "I am scouring; we do eat tonight water."

It is still a firmly held belief in these islands—and not only among the Caribs—that certain phases of the moon are the only suitable times for the performance of many activities, such as planting, hunting, or fishing particular species; felling trees to make dugouts or for lumber; and for the ritual bathing (in water containing divers and sundry leaves and herbs)⁴ of one's canoe, hunting-dogs, or self, as a protection or remedy against ill-luck or *piay*.

THE BORER, LEGLESS, AND WINDY

Of all the bright constellations and stars visible from these latitudes, that comparatively faint cluster we call the Pleiades is by far the best known, today as in the past, to the inhabitants of the Antilles. In Dominica it is now called *la Poussinière*," but was formerly familiar to the Island Carib men as *íromg-buléme*, "master of fine hot weather," and to their women folk as *strik*, "borer"—a name now applied in Creole to a species of land-crab plentiful in the rains. By it they counted the passing of the years, and its name also signified "year." Roth⁵ states: "The reappearance of the Pleiades on the eastern horizon soon after sunset (December) constitutes the passing of a year." Breton does not confirm this and, however it may be, it is evident (see conclusion below) that the word *atupíkali* (which Breton translates "resurrection, renovation") was employed by the Island Carib to designate the heliacal rising of a star. In his Carib-French dictionary, Breton gives *širik*—"Pleiades," and in the French-Carib section: "Hyades"—*sirik*. This latter may be a mistake.

An old Carib matriarch and friend of mine tells me that *la Poussinière* was the elder brother of *Trois Rois* (the Carib constellation includes Rigel and some minor stars, as well as the three Belt stars of Orion. Carib M.S., *ebetí?umq*; W.S. *mábwikaye*, both words meaning "thigh-withdrawn," or "thighless") in the days when both were Caribs before becoming stars. Of the latter she told me the following story.

Well now, *Trois Rois* loved the daughter of an old woman called *Bíhi* or *Bí'umq* (this word could mean either "windy" or "stabbing"). *Bíhi* hated the boy so much that she would wait till he was asleep in his hammock, then lift her skirt and break wind in

⁴ Taylor, 1938.

⁵ Roth, 1924, Section 936.

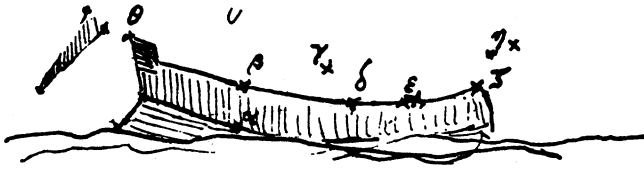
his nose. Trois Rois fell ill (as a result of this treatment, and *Wànqhi* (fabulist) warned him: "You are grown so pale that unless you take good care and do as I say, you will die. Go sharpen your knife! Then lie down in your hammock and pretend to sleep! When your mother-in-law comes to open up her buttocks above you, slash her with your knife!" Trois Rois did as *Wànqhi* told him. Then he and the girl took to flight. *B̄hi* sharpened her cutlass and came after them. They ran and they ran, but gradually she gained on them. They took the road to the sky, but just as they were leaving the earth, *B̄hi* managed to cut off one of Trois Rois' legs. They all reached the sky, and that is where you will see them to this day: the girl (Aldebaran) in front, Trois Rois [δ , ϵ , ζ Orionis] and his severed leg [Rigel] next, and *B̄hi* [Sirius] still after them with the cutlass.

I suspect that this story was once much longer, involving "Trois Rois' elder brother" and perhaps other characters, and considerably more stars to form their pictures (*B̄hi* may have been constituted by a large portion of Argo and Canis Major). Breton says that Sirius and Procyon were called respectively *malirúbana* ("Don't catch me!") and *malirúbana ápurku* (the other m.), and that "they cause hurricanes in the islands. The Savages take good care not to put to sea when they see them rise. They call them *lubúrri síh^otíya*, "the Spaniards' strength," because, being a windy star, it makes their galleons, which require much wind to advance them, sail well. They also say *tašinnati lih^oebékali malirúbana* "the return of the dog-star is un^ohealthy."

THE HERON AND HIS CANOE

This constellation, *yábura*, "crabier, gauldin bird" (the men's name for it was *šawáku*, but this is now forgotten) and *lukúní yábura* "the crabier's canoe" is now known only to a few Caribs who are unable to recall the story once connected with it (cf. however, the story of the wife who turned crabier).⁶ Breton identifies the "canoe" with Ursa Major, and says that the "crabier" itself is a constellation composed of little stars forming a triangle beside it. When this constellation sinks below the horizon, the Caribs believe, he says, that it (*šawáku*, "the heron") dives into the sea, to reappear on the other side, and speak of this as the "heron's leap." According to la Borde it was thought to bring thunder-storms and heavy rain. Even nowadays, after a storm, I have heard the remark (in Créole) "*k^oábie pase pli lwe; lapli ale*, "the heron has moved on; the rain is gone"; although it is the bird itself rather than the constellation which is believed to cause the phenomenon. This is because, it was explained, his favorite food, crabs and frogs, come out at such times to disport themselves, and are an easy prey. I have heard of, but not seen, another constellation said to be situated near the "heron" and called *túlulu* (sp. of small garden crab). My own informants point to θ Ursa Major as

the "nose" (prow-piece) of "the canoe", and to three small stars forming an acute angle before it as the bird's beak



LUKÚNĪ YÁBURA

BAKÁMꞤ

There are still several Caribs who can point out and tell the story of the constellation which here goes by the name of *BakámꞤ* "spread out." Breton identifies it with Scorpio (although, according to him, it follows Procyon—a difference of $8\frac{1}{2}$ hours!) when it rises in the morning (January), *wanásaí*, the *tête-chien* boa, turns, he says, towards this constellation, which is the cause of big winds in these parts.

I have recorded several versions of the story connected with this constellation; the following being the most complete:

A girl went to a 'manioc-land' (plantation) in the heights, and there she met a *béké* (white-man), only he did not have any clothes, nor a fine nose like that of a *béké*. Also he was not altogether a man but somehow, at times, a *tête-chien* (boa). The child this girl bore for him (sic! I give the story as it was told) had a snake's body with a human head. It grew apace, and would go off into the bushes after its own kind of food; yet, when it returned to the house, it used to re-enter its mother's womb. Fearing that such demands on her physique would end in her own destruction, the girl went to an old magnetist (diviner) called *wànqhi* (fabulist) for advice. This old man (in some versions it is an old woman called Soliman) told her to find and clean a big burgau shell (sp. of sea-snail), and to locate a fruiting balata tree, and to send the snake child up it after the fruit. Then (when it was descending) she must stuff its head (some versions say its tail) into the shell, spit all around the tree, and run away. The spittle would answer in her voice until it dried, but after that the snake child would follow her scent. When she heard him coming, she must stop and urinate on a little heap of sand in her tracks. The girl did just as she had been told, and when the snake child came to sniff the sand heap, the urine became a great river and carried him out to sea. He is now *BakámꞤ*, and on a fine night you may see him stretching upward from the sea over there (S.E.) to above the mountains yonder (S.W.).

In other versions, the incidents of the balata tree and of the sand heap are omitted. The burgau shell is spat into, and placed in the mother's bed for the snake child to get his own head into, and the girl is told to go on until she reaches and crosses a big river. As her foot touches the far bank, the river "comes down" (i.e., in spate) and carries off her unwanted offspring.

My own informants point out Antares as *Bakâm?*'s eye; and say that the remainder of Scorpio (with the three leading stars excluded), Sagittarius, and Capricornus, together constitute his (human) head, (snakes) body and tail. I have been told, though I have not seen it, that the burgau shell is also in place.

HÁNNAO

Hánnao is still known as the Carib name (W.S.; the men had *ašinnao*) of a kind of fish called, in Créole, "bourse," and of a constellation formed by Altaïr together with the two small stars accompanying it, one on either side. It was said to bring strong winds and light rain (especially had *Bakâm?* not already done so).

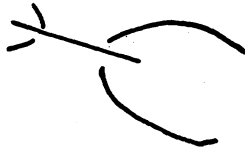
THE BABRACOTE

The Square of Pegasus is known by some Caribs as the "boucan" (barbecue or babracote; in Carib, *išúla*, or *iúla*).

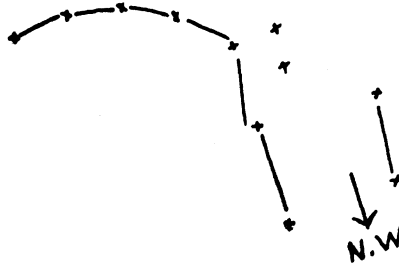
THE CRAYFISH

The Caribs know another constellation whose Carib name they unfortunately have forgotten, and which they now call *k^wibiš* < Fr. *écrevisse*, "crayfish." I saw it from 15°38' N., 61°30' W. on the night of October 14, 1944 at 21 hours 25 local time when it appeared to be some 40° to 45° above the S.S.E. horizon, and lying just north of a line extending from Formalhaut to Deneb-Kaitos, the "tail" being near this latter star, and the opened "pincers" pointing in a northwesterly direction. I managed to count six faint stars in the tail, and four somewhat brighter ones in the claws, though my informant claimed there are more. As a further indication which may help to identify this constellation (I had no instruments of any sort, so that my estimates are rough), Markab in Pegasus appeared to be directly overhead at the time. I should judge the "Crayfish" to have a R.A. of about 24 hours sidereal time, and to be situate about 22° to 15° S. declination.

Unfortunately I could get no stories about this, or the two preceding constellations, although I was assured that there had been tales about all three. It seems to me probable that the "Crayfish" is identical with Breton's unidentified *ulihao* (M.S.), *kulúm?* (W.S.) (la Borde's *kurúm?*), of which he says that when it is "un peu élevée" in the morning, the sea is rough inshore and calm outside. This condition may occur at any time of year but is particularly common in April, when the "Crayfish" is in the position indicated by Breton. The Caribs refer to this phenomenon as "rat d'marée" (sic! < Fr. *ras de marée* "bore" or "tidal-wave") and believe it to be caused by a small sea beast! La Borde adds that, "Couroumon upset canoes and was the cause of flood and ebb." Note that Breton gives *kulúany* (a plural form which should have *kulúali* in the singular), "kind of crayfish with big yellow feet." My informants claim to see the celestial Crayfish thus



but to my eyes it appears rather less realistically thus



THE PATH OF THE TURTLE

Throughout Dominica, the Milky Way is called *chemin la tortue*. Old Caribs tell me that those who know can tell by studying it when and where turtles will come ashore (to lay). Some say this is done by observing the position of "marks at the beginning and end" of the Way; others, by noting the direction of the head of a celestial turtle on the "Path," formed by two rows of stars.

MODERN ACQUISITIONS

Several constellations known to the present-day Caribs bear popular French names for our own star-groups, and were presumably learnt from sailors. Such are: *compas la marine*, *trois chemins*, *cercueil Yob* (Delphinus), *l'aigle* (Aquila), and *le crabe* (Cancer).

PLANETS

The Caribs do not appear to distinguish planets from stars. They use the Créole names *étoile bord la mer*, *étoile soleil couchant* to designate Venus (and possibly Mercury too, when visible), according to whether it appears as a morning or as an evening star. In the Reserve, and on the windward (eastern) side of the island generally *étoile bord montagne* is also used in the latter sense. The *étoile minuit*, which I have not identified, described as a red star always rising about midnight, is probably Mars.

Breton lists *limágani* ("his principal son"), and *tubáyúala*, "beside the dusk, from out the dusk" (both M.S.), *waynámala* (W.S.) as Venus, Lucifer, and *wálibuka* "mount away!", as Mars. The word for star (in general) is today given as *wárukúmq*, and by Breton as *wálukuma*.

CONCLUSION

To summarize: The star-group best known in these islands is and always has been the Pleiades. The Island Caribs' New Year is said to have begun when they rose first after sunset, about the end of November. This would coincide with Scorpio's heliacal rising (see *Bakámq*), and comes a good six weeks before the beginning of the dry season. On the other hand, the men's name for this cluster, *tromobuléme*, "master of fine hot weather," points rather to its heliacal rising at the end of May, usually a hot, dry period preceding the first rains a month later. These often coincide with the (heliacal) rising of Orion's Belt, Rigel, and, toward the end of July, of Sirius (see *mábwikayé*, "legless," and *malirúbana*, "don't catch me!" or *bíhi*, "windy," the latter having been considered a star of ill omen, as its names imply, and said to cause hurricanes. (Today, at least, the hurricane season proper extends from the middle of August to the middle of October.) The phrase, *taštinnati tih^oebékali malirúbana*, "the return of Sirius is unhealthy," quoted by Breton, refers presumably, to mischance rather than to ill health.

"The Heron" (Carib M.S., *šawáku*, W.S., *yábura*) corresponds roughly with our Ursa Major. The thunderstorms and heavy rain with which it is associated culminate in August, when this constellation re-emerges before dawn.

"*Bakámq* brings big winds," and Scorpio's heliacal rising at the end of November coincides with a renewal of the trade-winds and a diminution of the rains. By January, when Altair (Carib *ašinnao* or *hánnao*, "the bourse [fish]") rises before dawn, the winds are fresh and the showers light, and this, significantly enough, is the season when this fish is caught.

Heavy tides with big inshore waves and a fair sea outside are characteristic of the month of April on Dominica's windward coast. Such conditions were to be expected, says Breton, when *kulúm^o* (or *ulíhao*) had risen somewhat by dawn, and in this month the "Crayfish" is then to be found about 30° above the eastern horizon.

It is evident from the foregoing that the Island Caribs, although they evolved no calendar of their own, were not wholly ignorant nor unobservant of the apparent motions of the heavenly bodies. The similarity of their star legends with those of various South American tribes points to a very old tradition, but it seems highly probable that the tales were added to, amended, or forgotten after migrations to suit new local conditions. Most of my informants claim that the old time "savants" (*bóye*, "shamans") had a much more extensive knowledge of the stars than anything which can be gathered today would indicate, but that they always refused to communicate what they knew to the younger generation.

However, it would seem that many stars were associated, not only with weather conditions, but also with some fish or beast or bird. It is reasonable

to suppose that a sea-going tribe of fishermen, warriors (and, more recently, smugglers), such as the Island Carib long have been, were in the habit of scanning the eastern horizon before dawn in order to decide not only what weather was brewing, but also what fish or game might be expected to be found, and where. Even nowadays, when almanacks have become commonplace, and every Carib knows the month without having to refer to the stars, each season has its suitable fishing zone (inshore, offshore, deep-water, and "canal"—i.e., in mid-channel between the isles, or far out to sea) and its particular species of catch.

The moon, on the other hand, is far from having lost its importance, and it is not too much to say that no operation of any consequence is expected to meet with success unless it is undertaken at a *bon décours*, i.e., on the right day of the moon. I believe that individuals vary somewhat, and there certainly are different schools of thought, but on the whole, "cinq jours la lune" (the fifth day after New Moon) is considered a good time for planting corn and for fishing offshore. The greater importance attached, in horticulture, to the day of the moon than to the season is no doubt due to the fact that the Island Caribs' main crops can be planted at almost any time of year, and also because (apart from clearing and burning the land) this has always been considered by them to be women's work. However, November is undoubtedly the best month for planting sweet potatoes, March the best time for putting in manioc; and as these crops were once of relatively greater importance to the Caribs than they are today, it is not unlikely that they once had their corresponding star spirits, whose co-operation was conjured by the placing of "three point stones" in the gardens.

DOMINICA, WEST INDIES

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