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—Maria La Yacona

**COVER:** Edna Manley's dramatic but little-  
known early work *The Forerunner* (1941)  
heralds our feature on the noted artist's  
oeuvre on the occasion of her 85th birthday.

# JAMAICA JOURNAL

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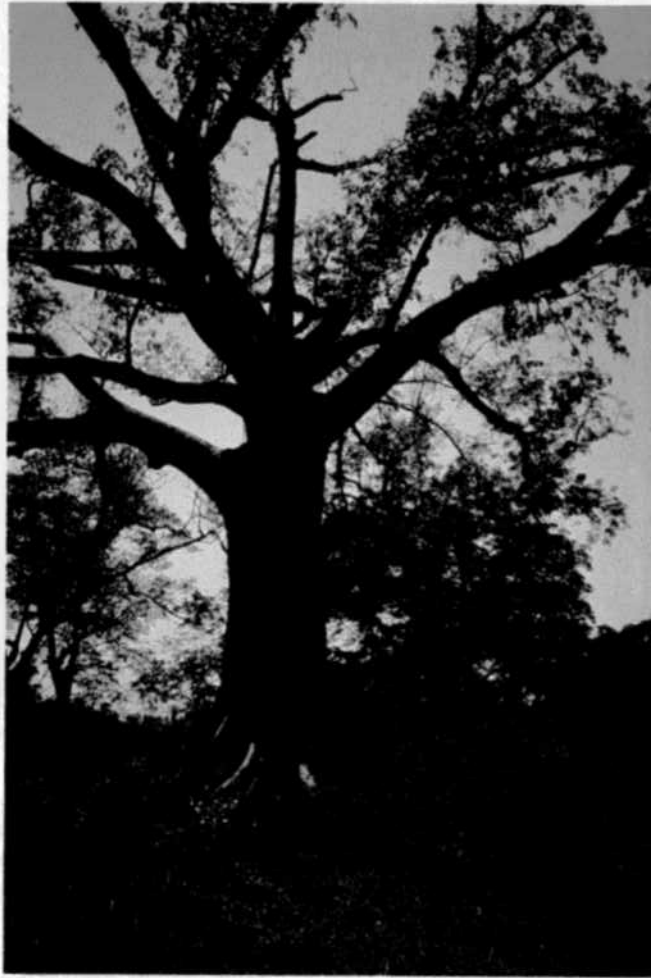
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# The Cotton Tree



John Rashford

## and the Spiritual Realm in Jamaica

By John Rashford

The cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) which is now to be found throughout the warm regions of the world, is a native of tropical America that grows to heights of 70 feet or more with a crown diameter that can be as much as 140 feet. This immense tree with its great outspreading branches is supported by a massive bulging steel-grey trunk that is studded with thorns when the tree is young and braced by huge buttresses up to 10 feet high when the tree is fully mature. The striking appearance of this extraordinary tree makes it a prominent feature of the Jamaican landscape, as it is of the tropical landscape wherever it grows. This article explores the association between the cotton tree and the spiritual realm in Jamaica and in other parts of tropical America, and it suggests that the tree should properly be considered a natural shrine.

### The Cotton Tree and the Spiritual Realm

The association between the cotton tree and the spiritual realm has long been recognized although there has been little effort to explain it in a systematic way. In Jamaican folklore the cotton tree is chief among some 50 plants that are for

various reasons linked to the spiritual realm and many authors report that African Jamaicans like other New World Africans regard the tree with awe, reverence and fear [Senior 1978; Wilkinson 1984: 2]. Barrett [1956: 98] says it is 'a sacred tree in the West Indies' where, according to Sturtevant [1972: 97], it is called 'God tree,' a name that appears in several dictionaries. Metraux [1972:108] tells us that in Haitian religion:

The worship of Loco [spirit of vegetation and guardian of sanctuaries] overlaps with the worship of trees — in particular of the *Ceiba*, the Antillean silk-cotton tree and the tallest species in Haiti. Offerings for a sacred tree are placed in straw bags which are then hung in its branches.

There are nine ways in which we can try to explain the link between the cotton tree and the spiritual realm:

1. One frequently offered explanation is the tree's tremendous size. Perkins [1969:17] for instance, expressed this point of view when she wrote:

Being a giant among its fellows and easily the most imposing and awe-inspiring tree in the island, one can well understand [the cotton tree] having become an object of dread. The great



The striking appearance of the cotton tree makes it a prominent feature of the landscape. Shown here is Tom Cringle's cotton tree which stood as a landmark at Ferry for hundreds of years.

limbs, often smothered with epiphytes and tangled together with a network of creepers and snake-like cacti, do indeed appear as if something sinister might be lurking in their gloomy shadows.

Many plants that are unusual in appearance or in some other respect have duppy, jumbie, zombie, monkey or devil as the generic term in their compound common name. The cotton tree is unusual because of its great size. The Reverend Scoles [1885: 57-60] reports that in Guyana the cotton tree was 'sometimes' known as jumbie tree and that it was 'often' called 'the devil's tree'.

2. While some regard the cotton tree's immense size as the reason for its association with the spiritual realm, others point to a possible connection between the cotton tree and the baobab (*Adansonia digitata*) which is a tree of great importance to the people of Africa. From this perspective Wilkinson [1984: 64] has recently argued that West Africans 'imported with them . . . the reverence for the sacred baobab tree, and this reverence was transferred to the ceiba'.

3. If we are willing to consider that ideas associated with the baobab were transferred to the cotton tree we must also consider the possibility that they could also have been transferred from cotton trees growing in Africa. There the tree is also associated with the spiritual realm. Parrinder [1970: 61], for example, points out in his discussion of African shrines and temples, that 'if it is a temple of Loko there is a tall iroko tree (cotton tree) to one side, several small thatched huts near the tree, and earthenware unglazed pots at its base.'

4. Beckwith [1929: 122] suggests that the link between the cotton tree and the spiritual realm results from the tree's relationship to animals, particularly snakes. She writes:

The fact that the yellow snake in Jamaica eats eggs and sleeps in hollows of fig and cotton trees is perhaps one reason for the fear of eggs and of the duppy-haunted precincts of the cotton tree.

Beckwith's view might lead us to believe that it is only in Jamaica that the cotton tree is associated with the spiritual because of its links to snakes. This would not be true. Jamaican belief has to be set in the wider context of the continuity of African tradition in the New World. In her book *To Windward of the Land: The Occult World of Alexander Charles*, Jane Beck [1979: xxxii] emphasizes the importance of snakes in African religious tradition and she tells us that this fact is 'well documented'. She points out that Charles's view was remarkably similar to Baganda practice as described by Roscoe [1911: 44] who wrote 'pythons were held to be sacred, and in some places offerings were made regularly to them to preserve the people. A few men kept pythons in their houses, taming them and feeding them on milk with an occasional fowl or goat'. Beck [1979: xxxii] argues that:

With such heritage it is understandable that the snake is frequently associated with [O]beah and is often thought to be the familiar of the [O]beah Man. In Trinidad, 'All [O]beahmen keep snakes, Snake is the spirit of a dead person, a dead person who was cast out. That's why it knows everything.' Thomas Banbury, writing of Jamaica, says that 'snakes used to be "set" by the Obeah Man,' and I myself have recorded tales in Tobago and Grenada of snakes 'planted' under the silk cotton tree, as Charles also recounted.

In the same way in which one makes contact with a spirit or 'raises' a spirit, one must also be able to break contact, which is to 'lay down' the spirit or 'plant' it when the spirit becomes troublesome or dangerous. It is often said, as Beck [1979: xxxii] points out, that spirits, whether identified as

snakes, jumbies or duppies, are 'planted' under the cotton tree.

5. Some say the cotton tree is linked to the spiritual realm because of the tree's association with graveyards. This is an interesting idea which we will explore further on.

6. Another line of approach to explaining the association between the cotton tree and the spiritual realm is the belief that it is capable of acting like a person manifesting will, mobility, desire and so on. In the 19th century, Banbury [cited in Beckwith 1929: 145] reported that African Jamaicans 'believe that at night the cotton trees move about and assemble together' and Scoles [1885: 157] made a similar report for Guyana.

7. The cotton tree is also said to be linked to the spiritual realm because, like humans it is regarded as having an inner soul or an intrinsic spirit. Beckwith [1929:145] reports an Irish woman who 'assured' her that Myal, an early African Jamaican religion, was 'the spirit' or 'soul' of the cotton tree. Beckwith was sceptical of this and there is little evidence to show that this interpretation is correct.

8. Another reason for the association between the cotton tree and the spiritual realm is the notion that it embodies not its own soul but that of an indwelling spiritual being in the form of a god or some other spirit. Frazer [1976:14-5] indicates that the cotton tree is 'regarded with reverence throughout West Africa from Senegal to Niger' and is believed to be the abode of a god or spirit. One cannot but wonder if this is not in some way related to the common name 'god tree'. Rather than a spiritual being in the form of a god, Beckwith [1929: 145] reports that some 'West Coast Africans make offerings to an evil spirit inhabiting the cottonwood tree called Sasabonsum'. Millspaugh [1902:510] noted the popular belief in the Virgin Islands that the tree is 'inhabited by devils' and we have already seen that in Guyana the tree is sometimes called 'the devil's tree'. Hogg [1964: 64] suggests that the idea of the cotton tree embodying an indwelling spirit was part of an earlier African belief. He writes:

Lacking close integration and communication, . . . [the African Jamaican] communities [during slavery] did not foster the association of particular spirits with specific trees, pools, and other physiographic features. Only the water spirits survived, and even they lost their individual identities to become generalized mermaids. Other African spirits, such as those who dwelt in the sacred Ceiba, or giant silk-cotton trees, were displaced by wandering duppies in search of homes. Thus the Jamaican Ceiba has from the early periods to the present been feared as a residence of ghosts.

9. All things considered, however, the most important way in which the cotton tree is associated with the spiritual realm in Jamaica (as Hogg and many others have made clear) is the belief that spirits of the dead live in its roots and branches. Beckwith [1929:45] was quite definite on this point when she wrote in her concluding remarks on the cotton tree that 'the cult of the dead is strongly imposed upon the worship of the cottonwood, and the animistic idea of a tree spirit is less defined than that of a ghost of the dead harbouring in its branches'. This is the same idea put forward by Storer [1958: 28] who writes that 'in Jamaica, superstitious people believe that cotton trees are inhabited by "duppies" or "ghosts" ' and Senior who identifies the cotton tree as the 'home' of 'duppies'. Bennett's [1980:16] discussion of Myal combines the idea of spirits or duppies living at the cotton

tree with several other ideas that suggest that the tree behaves like a person, has its own intrinsic soul or is the visible manifestation of an indwelling spirit. The cotton tree is associated with spirits in general as well as with particular spirits. Perkins [1969:17] reports the idea that the female supernatural being in Jamaica called 'old hige' hangs her skin on the branches of the cotton tree when she travels about at night. This idea that spirits are to be found at cotton trees is common not only in Jamaica but is widespread among peoples of African descent throughout tropical America. A Barbadian informant said she was told as a child that the cotton tree was 'a gathering place for spirits' and she said she would never go under the tree alone.

We get some impression of how important this idea is in African Jamaican belief when we look at the view of Imogene Elizabeth Kennedy ('Miss Queenie'), a 'queen' or 'priestess' of the Kumina religion, the most African of the African Jamaican religious traditions. The information presented here stems from a tape recorded interview of Miss Queenie conducted in June 1971 by Maureen Warner-Lewis, a Trinidadian literary critic, and Monica Schuler, a Guyanese historian. Maureen Lewis has analysed this recorded material [1977] and transcriptions from this tape were later made by Edward Brathwaite and presented with commentary in an article published in *Jamaica Journal* [1978].

Miss Queenie was born in the eastern parish of St. Thomas where she was first introduced to Kumina by her neighbour, a man named Parker who was born in Africa and who played the drums. In her early twenties she moved to Kingston where she became queen of the Kumina band. Drumming and dancing were important to Miss Queenie's conversion but so too was the cotton tree. The following are her exact words concerning her conversion:

/So/ I do my twenty-one days at dat . . . cotton tree root . . . and' den . . . a' come 'ere a African Queen . . .

It is clear from Miss Queenie's comments that her passage en route to becoming a 'queen' was fundamentally related to the idea that spirits are to be found at the cotton tree.

The idea that the cotton tree is the dwelling place of spirits takes us back to the time of the Spanish occupation of Jamaica and the folk belief that riches are to be found near or under the tree. Perkins [1969:17] writes:

Many of the giant Cotton Trees scattered throughout the island are said to mark the sites of buried Spanish treasure, but to dig would be futile for, so the legend goes, the Spaniards, having made a slave dig the hole for the treasure, slew him on the spot when the task was completed. This murder achieved a double object since the place was silenced for ever and his ghost would, henceforth, remain on guard. If any treasure-hunter ventured to dig at the spot without having the correct password the ghostly sentinel would cause the treasure to keep on sinking deeper and deeper into the earth. Nor was that all for, sooner or later, some dire misfortune would surely overtake the rash trespasser. So, though one hears tales of vast hoards which are supposed to exist beneath some of these giant trees, no one ventures to delve for them. Not even rum can break this spell.

Miss Queenie gives us a slightly different version of the idea presented above by Perkins. One can get the buried treasure provided one is supported by the spirits at the cotton tree:

Because **right now** in Sn Thomas you 'ave a' whole heap a' cotton tree there wh' **con'tain** a' whole heap a' ting there, which is all dose slavely-time people, all dey likkle money an' all dem ting wh. dey **bury** dere . . . you 'ave **gole** chain, you 'ave **gole** tables, dat come up in de twelve a'clock a' days . . .



John Rashford

*Traditionally, an offering of rum would be made to appease the spirits before cutting the tree.*

**No you cahn touch dem, because dey heng-on pun chain . . . /**  
 laughs/ . . . dey is on chain . . .

an' sometime yuh see **gole** table, **gole** chair, an' all does tings  
 arrive from . . . from under dere an' come up an' **spin rounn**  
 an' all does tings until yu sih dey go dung back but yu' cahn  
 touch it . . . sih . . .

sometime you hear seh de' faen money . . .  
 is who . . .  
 jus . . .

dey want to give **you** . . . an' dey come an' dream yu' an' say  
 well . . . guh to dat place, carry rice . . . rum . . . goat . . . an'  
 yu get it . . . you unnerstan . . .

but udder else wa' ju' cannot get it . . .

### Uses of the Cotton Tree

So far I have presented the various ways in which the cotton tree has been associated with the spiritual realm, paying particular attention to the belief in Jamaica and elsewhere that spirits dwell at the cotton tree.

We will now examine the uses made of the tree. First, we will briefly consider the ways in which the cotton tree serves as a symbol in proverbial thought and its use as a source of food, medicine, fodder, fibre and timber; we will then look at the use of the cotton tree as a shade tree and the way in which this very important factor contributes to our efforts to understand the tree as the shrine of a sanctuary where communing with the spiritual takes place.

#### *The Cotton Tree as a Symbol*

There is a sense in which we can say that the cotton tree

is used as a symbol in proverbial thought. Anderson and Cundall [1927] present three Jamaican proverbs based on the cotton tree:

1. *Cotton-tree ebber so big lilly axe cut him.*
2. *When cotton-tree tumble down, nanny goat jump ober him.*
3. *Cotton-tree no know how him botton 'tan', him no call breeze.*

In the first proverb, the tree is a symbol of the 'big' and proud but it is overcome or humbled by the patience and persistence of the 'little'. In the second proverb, the cotton tree is not only a symbol of the 'big' but of the 'great' and we see how under changed circumstances the 'small' and the 'ignoble' are able to take advantage of the 'great'. In the third proverb, the cotton tree is a symbol of wisdom for it does not send a challenge to the wind without knowing the strength of its buttressed trunk.

#### *Food*

A number of sources identify the cotton tree as a source of food. Standley and Steyermark [1949 : 392- 3] indicate that the leaves 'are said to be edible when cooked' and Barrett [1956:98] says both the 'leaves and young fruit [are] eaten when cooked'. Sturtevant [1972:99] reports that the 'fleshy petals of the flower are sometimes prepared as food by the Chinese'. As for other uses related to food, Everett [1981: 667] reports that the cotton tree 'is rated a good honey plant'.

#### *Medicine*

The medicinal uses of the leaves, root, flowers and fruits of the cotton tree have been reported for many parts of the tropical world where the tree is to be found growing [Barrett 1956: 98; Watt 1962:148; Ford 1975: 147]. Referring to Trinidad, Dominica, Guyana and Martinique, Ayensu [1981:58] tells us that the leaves of the cotton tree have been used in baths to relieve fatigue and to deal with poison; they have been used to make poultices for erysipelas; swollen feet and sprained feet; and they have been prepared as a tea or infusion for colic and inflammation. In his study of Jamaica which encompassed the island's plant life, Long [1774: 737] mentions the medicinal benefits of the cotton tree. He wrote: 'The bark of the root has been sometimes used with success as a vulnerary and sub-astringent; and the seeds are administered in emulsions, and pectoral infusions.'

#### *Fodder*

Although this use is not commonly mentioned, Barrett [1956: 98] identifies the cotton tree as a source of fodder.

#### *Fibre*

We should rightly consider the cotton tree a fibre tree if we are to judge by its most important commercial value. The tree derives the common name 'cotton tree' or 'silk cotton tree' from the silk or cotton-like fibres obtained from the fruit and is called kapok (a common name by which the tree is known in many parts of the world). Hill [1952:48] says the fibres 'are five times more bouyant than cork and are impervious to water' and he identifies it as 'the most



For African Jamaicans, as for other peoples of African descent, the tree serves as the 'shrine of a sanctuary' – a place where communing with spirits takes place.

valuable of all stuffing materials', noting in the early 1950s that its use was steadily increasing.

#### Oil

Usher [1974:134] reports that other commercial uses of the cotton tree include an oil pressed from the seeds which is used for making soap and as fuel for illumination. Barrett [1956:97] says the oil is also used to make margarine.

#### Timber

One of the cotton tree's most valuable uses in Jamaica is for timber, although the wood is considered to be of poor quality, being light, soft, weak, porous and easily destroyed by insects and decay. Despite its lack of durability, however, the cotton tree has been a source of commercial timber in Brazil, Guatemala and elsewhere and the wood has been used in various places to make toys, boxes, drums, packing cases and other articles. For African Jamaicans, one of the most important traditional uses of the cotton tree is in the making of dugout canoes, a practice which still continues. The tree was used in a similar way by the native populations of tropical America (including the Arawaks of Jamaica) and it is often said that the word 'Ceiba' – one of the Spanish common names for the tree as well as the generic term in its scientific name – comes from the Caribbean name for canoe.

African Jamaicans have put the cotton tree to many other uses, though these have still not been properly documented. Storer [1958: 28] reports, for example, that the trunks of

cotton trees have been used to make 'cheap coffins' and a Jamaican informant said when he was a child in the district of Siloah in the parish of St. Elizabeth, branches of the cotton tree (and the fig tree as well) were used to make cricket bats. These branches were obtained from trees felled by hurricane or they were cut from trees where they could be reached. Branches were cut from cotton trees even though he and his friends recognized that one should not 'fool around' the tree because 'they harbour ghosts or duppies'.

#### Shade

One important benefit of the cotton tree that is not often considered is its shade. This is a significant factor in our efforts to understand the tree as the shrine of a sanctuary. With its huge crown organized into tiers of stout, wide-spreading horizontal branches that extend up to 140 feet, the cotton tree is an ideal shade tree especially in the hot, dry, dusty places where it is often to be found growing and it seems that the tree survives in many places today for this reason [Seymour 1936: 1092; Britton and Millspaugh 1962: 275; Little and Wadsworth 1964: 322].

In Jamaica the cotton tree has served and continues to serve as a shade tree. One such tree gave its name to the part of the city of Kingston now known as Half-Way-Tree. The tree is believed to have existed from before the British conquest of the island in 1655 and survived until the late 19th century.

One called Tom Cringle's cotton tree which stood along the main road between Spanish Town and Kingston is probably the most famous and is celebrated for being recorded in the early 19th century novel of West Indian life, Michael Scott's *Tom Cringle's Log*. Watkins [1952: 89-90] who saw the tree in the early nineteen-fifties wrote: 'If records are authentic, this tree is in its third century of life. Certainly it is the largest ceiba tree that I have ever seen.'

In examining the many uses of the cotton tree, the point I want to emphasize most is this: people are drawn to the cotton tree to enjoy the cool and dimness of the shade produced by its great outspreading branches which offer protection from the sun's glare and heat and shelter from rain; the trunk of the tree also offers a shield from the wind and its enormous buttresses provide a natural enclosure or what has been described as an 'amphitheatre' or 'great chamber' [Beckwith 1929:89] where people can congregate.

### The Cotton Tree as the Shrine of a Sanctuary

The idea that the cotton tree is the shrine of a sanctuary where communing with spirits takes place consistently explains much of the bits and pieces of information we have concerning the significance of this tree to people of African descent throughout tropical America. One of the clearest expressions we have of this fact comes from Suriname and was presented by Captain Steadman [cited in Counter and Evans 1981: 204] who wrote:

Perceiving that it was their custom to bring their offerings to the wild cotton tree, I enquired of an old [African Surinamese] why they paid such particular reverence and veneration to this growing piece of timber.

'This proceeds (said he) . . . from the following cause:



*The cotton tree's enormous buttresses provide a natural enclosure or what has been described as an 'amphitheatre' or 'great chamber' where people can congregate.*

having no churches nor places built for public worship (as you have) on the Coast of Guinea, and this tree being the largest and most beautiful growing there, our people, assembling under its branches when they are going to be instructed, are defended by it from the heavy rains and scorching sun. Under this tree our *gadoman*, or priest, delivers his lectures, and for this reason our common people have so much veneration for it, that they will not cut it down upon any account whatever . . .'

The above suggests that in addition to its imposing size and beauty, the enclosure its buttresses produce and the shade and shelter it affords, the cotton tree is held in reverence because a spirit man — *gadoman*, priest, sorcerer, *obeah*-man or *jumbie* man — 'delivers his lectures' under its spreading branches. Not only is the tree a place for delivering lectures. Scoles [1885: 59-65] tells us that in Guyana 'it is at the foot of this strange tree that the *Obeah*-man often makes up his detestable *Obeah*-bags'. All the things mentioned above are clearly part of the reason for considering the cotton tree as the shrine of a sanctuary. The most important factor that we must bear in mind, however, is that for African Surinamese and other people of African descent throughout tropical America, the cotton tree 'is the dwelling place of certain spirits' and it is at the foot of the cotton tree (as well as other places) that communing with these spirits occurs.

The transformation of *Kumina* leader Miss Queenie from an ordinary person to a spiritual person occurred at the root of a cotton tree and it occurred in relation to graves and spirits. This is how she described her experience which Brathwaite [1978: 4-9] calls her 'passage':

One day . . . a' remember one day a' faen some lilies . . . an' a' plant de lilies dem in row, an' one Sunday mornin' when a' wake . . . all de lilies blow . . . seven lilies an' de seven a' dem blow . . . an', a' leave an' guh dung in de gully bottom . . . to go an' pick up some coconut, when a' go a' see a' cotton tree an' a' juss fell right down . . . at the cotton tree root . . .

an' is dere a' take now . . .

when a' don't h'eat anything . . .

twenty-one days . . . ha don't h'eat . . .

in de night, in de cotton tree comin' like it hollow, an' Hi' hinside there; an' you have some grave arounn dat cotton tree, right rounn it, some tombs . . .

but dose is some hol'-time h'African . . . yu unnerstann . . . ?

well dose tombs arounn de cotton tree . . . an' Hi' inside de cotton tree lay down, an' a' night-time a' sih de cotton tree light up wit cyandles an' . . . a' restin' now, put me 'an' dis way an' sleepin . . .

an' a' honly hear a' likkle vice come to me an' dem talkin' to me, but dose tings is spirit talkin' to mih . . . an' dem speakin' to me now, an' seh now . . .

'Is a likkle nice likkle chile, an' oo gwine get im right up now . . . in de h'African worl . . . because you brains, you will take someting . . . so derefore . . . we gwine to teach you someting . . .'

In the study of religious traditions around the world, it has long been recognized by anthropologists and other scholars that a people's conception of the spiritual realm often parallels or mirrors their natural environment and the existing organization of their material life.

Like the Surinamese, the Jamaican folk believe that the cotton tree is an important dwelling place for spirits of the living and of the dead and the tree serves, therefore, as the shrine of a sanctuary — a place where communing with spirits takes place or where lost or stolen spirits can be recovered.

In considering the relationship between cotton trees and spirits and the reason why people seek contact with these spirits and the way in which they seek to do it, we must consider graveyards. Graveyards, like the 'bushy banks of streams', bamboo groves, fig trees and woodlands, are the places where spirits frequent and cotton trees growing in graveyards are especially significant. In this context we can well understand why Beckwith's informant, a *Myalist* named James told her that 'not all cottonwood trees are "dealt with" in (M)yalism, but only those particular trees which have been planted over a grave'. Beckwith [1929: 145] tells us that cotton trees in graveyards are especially feared and that 'Such trees are called "worship cotton trees" and may well be regarded as tombs of the dead'.

The comments of Beckwith's informant suggest that only cotton trees planted over a grave (or simply growing in a graveyard) were associated with the spiritual. Miss Queenie's description of her 'passage' seems to corroborate this line of thinking. She tells us she spent 21 days in the cotton tree and that she heard little voices talking to her and that they were spirits. She tells us also that there were 'some grave arounn dat cotton tree, right rounn it, some tombs . . .'. While there is some truth in viewing the relationship between the cotton tree and the spiritual as resulting from the tree's association with graveyards, this line of explaining does not and cannot account for all the significance attributed to the tree by people of African descent throughout the New World. Moreover, we must recognize the possibility that some plants are identified with spirits not simply because they grow in graveyards but because of animals in graveyards with which the trees are associated. There is the belief that animals in graveyards are really spirits of the dead or *duppies* and should not be harmed. Beckwith writes that 'cotton trees in graveyards are particularly feared, and mice or lizards [and we should add snakes and birds] that live in their branches are regarded as *duppies* of the dead'. While it is clear that there is some link between cotton trees and graveyards that might especially involve the special significance of animals in graveyards, this is not a sufficient basis on which to understand the importance of the cotton tree to New World Africans.

### Obeah, Myal and Cotton Trees

Through Miss Queenie we get some idea of the importance of the cotton tree in *Kumina*. The tree is also significant in other African Jamaican religious traditions. Two of the most important of these traditions are *Obeah* and *Myal*.

Spirit people in Jamaica are individuals who seek to make contact with spirits in order to influence the course of natural events and they have traditionally been identified by a variety of names of which obeah-man or -woman and myalist are two of the most important.

Obeah is by far the oldest African religious tradition in Jamaica and obeah-man or -woman is by far the most important of over 35 names for spirit people in Jamaica [Cassidy and LePage 1967: 326]. Abrahams and Szwed [1983: 138-9] are correct when they observe that the word 'Obeah . . . was [and remains today] the catchall term for all forms of magic and sorcery. Under this heading fall dream interpreters, grave-dirt collectors, makers of love potions, specialists in herbal medicine, and poisoners. Or it is used simply to refer to belief in spirits – *duppies*, *shadows*, and the like – or the supernatural.'

Myalism is an African Jamaican religion that Jamaica's ruling elite first became aware of towards the end of the 18th century because of the prominent role it played in African Jamaican resistance; its history can be roughly divided into three main periods. The first takes us from the 17th century to the beginning of the 19th century when Myalism was clearly a religion whose purpose was to bring the spiritual to bear on the efforts to resist exploitation and racial oppression. The second period from the beginning of the 19th century to 1849 reflects the impact of missionaries on African beliefs and practices including that of Myal.

When Jamaica's ruling elite first became aware of Myal at the end of the 18th century, the heart of Myal religion was the use of medicinal plants along with intense music based on drumming and 'violent' dancing. Plants play a very important part in the Myal world view as they do in Obeah and in the Jamaican folk tradition in general. Bennett [1980:14] describes Myal as the 'practice of bush-medicine' and reminds us that the word 'comes from the African word "maye" meaning sorcerer or wizard'. [Cassidy and LePage 1967]. She also describes myalists as 'healers' who 'master the knowledge of the curative powers of plants' which they use to do good. It is by means of plant infusions, music and dancing that contact is made with spirits and through this contact individuals acquire spiritual or supernatural power which allows them to accomplish extraordinary feats. Long [1774] described Myal in the 18th century as a clandestine society of individuals who claimed invulnerability to the attacks of whites and the ability to restore the dead to life.

The 18th century historian Bryan Edwards attributed the 1760 rebellion to myalists, 'who sold medicine to make men invulnerable' [Beckwith 1929: 143]. Bennett [1980: 14] tells us that 'Champong Nanny, Jamaica's best known Maroon Warrior-Woman, was said to be a great Myalist.'

#### *Obeah and Cotton Trees*

The cotton tree is often linked to Obeah in Jamaica although the precise nature of this association remains unclear. Several authors have identified Obeah as dealing with evil while Myal is viewed as being concerned with good [DeLisser 1913; Beckwith 1929; Hogg 1964; Baxter 1970]. Beckwith tells us, for example that 'an Obeah Man would cast an evil spell on a person by driving a nail into a cotton tree, calling upon an evil spirit to order a person's shadow to leave their body and dwell in the cotton tree'. From this perspective, Obeah is reduced to 'soul-catching' and individuals who lose

their soul suffer from what is described as 'spirit sickness'. Beckwith [1929:145] presents this perspective on Obeah and notes in contrast that Myal is the freeing of the 'soul', 'spirit' or 'shadows' of individuals that have been stolen by an obeah-man or -woman and nailed to the cotton tree.

#### *Myal and Cotton Trees*

In regard to the practice of Myal, the 18th century sources do not make it clear where communing with the spirits through music and dancing took place. According to Long [1774] the ceremony took place in houses. There is no mention of cotton trees at this time. M.G. Lewis [cited in Beckwith 1929:142-3] also gives the impression that the ceremony only occurred in homes and he described a Myal dance he had the opportunity to observe in 1818 in the following way:

He [the practitioner] sprinkles various powders over the devoted victim, blows upon him, and dances round him, obliges him to drink a liquor prepared for the occasion, and finally the sorcerer and his assistants seize him and whirl him rapidly round and round till the man loses his senses, and falls on the ground, to all appearances and the belief of the spectators, a perfect corpse. The chief Myal-man then utters loud shrieks, rushes out of the house with wild and frantic gestures and conceals himself in some neighbouring wood. At the end of two or three hours he returns with a large bundle of herbs, from some of which he squeezes the juice into the mouth of the dead person; with others he anoints his eyes and stains the tips of his fingers, accompanying the ceremony with a great variety of grotesque actions, and chanting all the while something between a song and a howl, while the assistants hand in hand dance slowly round them in a circle, stamping the ground loudly with their feet to keep time with his chant. A considerable time elapses before the desired effect is produced, but at length the corpse gradually recovers animation, rises from the ground perfectly recovered, and the Myal dance concludes.

For the 19th and 20th centuries, however, we do have several reports that definitely identify the cotton tree as one of the specific places (in addition to open fields, the home of the sick and in graveyards) where communing with spirits took place. At or around the cotton tree individuals would commune with spirits by sprinkling rum, playing drums and shakers and dancing [Baxter 1979: 138]. We have already seen that Beckwith [1929] and Bennett [1980] identify Obeah as an effort to do harm by stealing someone's spirit and nailing it to the cotton tree and Myal as a form of healing where the spirit would be freed from the cotton tree and returned to the owner. Banbury [cited in Beckwith 1929:144-5] offers us a description of a Myal ceremony at the end of the 19th century:

The first thing to do therefore in case of a mysterious illness which does not respond at once to common remedies, is to consult the Myal Man in order to find the stolen shadow. This located, the doctor and patient assemble at the tree, the patient dressed in white with a large handkerchief wound about his head and the myal people also wearing white cloths over their shoulders. They parade about the tree with singing and drumming and pelt it with eggs, fowl, and other offerings in order to persuade the duppies to give up the shadow. Finally, a white basin of water is held up, and as soon as the released soul falls into it, a cover is clapped over, and some one runs home with the captured soul and restores it to its owner by binding about his head a cloth dipped in the water. [So valuable were the Myal Man's services in Banbury's day, that although a simple matter of obeah could be 'pulled' for four shillings, six dollars was the price to 'catch a shadow.']

In addition to the dance, individuals also go to the cotton tree. An anonymous writer in 1838 [Abrahams and Szwed 1983:203] tells of a troubled 16-year-old girl who was con-





*Cotton tree dugout canoes (contemporary examples at Boston Bay, Portland) represent a traditional use of the tree which dates back to the Arawaks and other indigenous inhabitants of the Americas.*

vinced her 'spirit' or 'shadow' had been stolen and that she would never recover until it was found. The author tells us that she searched for it by 'the bushy banks of streams' and around the gigantic cotton tree. Beckwith [1929:147] presents a story told to her by Elmira Barrows who was a member of a Myal group in the parish of Portland. She 'intimated' to Beckwith that 'a true Myal Man . . . [did] not work in a meeting. He dances, sings, and drums about a cotton tree'. Elmira told Beckwith the following story:

He carries a sheppon [i.e. 'shet pan' = big covered pail] and the ghosts fall down from the tree and he catches them and brings them. He sees clear away. If the police is coming he will sit down and wait for him, invite him in and give him food and rum; but on his way out [to the road] his horse will fall and bruise him. The Myal man can bring evil to pass. Them is a wonderful people!

Old Fifee Bogle was one. He lives in St. Mary, at Woodside. He wore wheels in his ears.

Bogle was the man that caught Bomshee. Bomshee was an evil spirit that was with a girl like a besetting something. She would cry out sometimes as if someone were striking her and she couldn't see something in front of her. If the rain was coming the evil spirit called Bomshee would pick up the clothes [spread outside to dry] and bring them in. He had another name as a man — call him Mr. Baker then he loved you! If you said, 'Where is Bomshee?' he would take up rock stone and smash everything you got, but if you said, Mr. Baker, 'oh, my! then he was well-pleased with you and would do you no harm in the yard. You might put a pot on the fire and if you lived near the pasture Bomshee would pick up dung and fill up the pot. If you cursed he would do worse. Bogle caught Bomshee twelve o'clock out of a cotton tree. He stood by the tree and did all kind of queer talk and beat the drum. Bomshee deh 'pon tree looking. Bogle sang —

De mon i ka sen she . . .  
Somet'ing deh a top 'tahn' deh a look down 'pon me

Then Bomshee came down from the tree. Bogle caught him. Bogle was a wonderful man!

### The Taboo Against Cutting Cotton Trees

From what has been said so far, it is clear that the cotton tree could and should be considered the shrine of a sanctuary, the specific location where people come into their most intimate contact with the spiritual. It is at the cotton tree that people commune with the spirits of the living and of the dead.

Because it is a shrine intimately associated with the spiritual, the tree must not be harmed in any way and if it must be cut, as for example, in the making of dugout canoes, the correct ritual must be performed to prevent harm from coming

to the cutter. Scoles [1885: 59-65] points out that the same superstition about this tree exists in some of the West Indian islands, Jamaica and St. Vincent among others.

In Jamaica, Perkins [1969:17] indicates that when a cotton tree is to be felled 'a libation of rum must be poured at the root of the tree, and the tree-cutters must also imbibe deeply if the curse is to be averted'. The offering of rum (and in some cases corn and the sacrificing of chickens) serves to appease the spirits and to ensure the safety of those cutting the tree and those who will make and transport the boat.

Tales of 'misfortune' resulting from the felling of one of Jamaica's most historic cotton trees that stood in the Port Morant (St. Thomas) square were also presented in a newspaper article by Hemming [1976]:

Stubborn against the axeman, as were its companion trees — Tom Cringle's at Ferry Police Station in St. Catherine, and Alley's market cotton tree, which injured an axeman when being felled, and would not be chopped down in Clarendon until white rum was poured around its root — Pt. Morant's cotton tree destroyed the CITU's office with its mammoth trunk which crashed into the roof and brought to ground, the building which housed it.

Miss Queenie recognizes that there are a 'whole heap o' cotton tree' in St. Thomas where she was born and the tree Hemming describes above is the very tree to which Miss Queenie made reference when she spoke of her ancestors. She introduces one use of the tree to which I have not previously made reference — a hangman's tree for Africans — and gives us another version of what happened when the tree died in St. Thomas [Brathwaite 1978: 47]:

you 'ave a cotton tree out dere [in Morant Bay] . . . what dey buil' a gas station now . . . dat dey use to hang men . . . an' your usban' leave an' come . . . after you leave the yard now . . . you come out . . . dey katch you . . . an' dey heng you; you husban' come to look fuh you . . . dey d'wm de same . . . you children come out . . . dey d'wm de same ting . . . 'cau' dat is/ was you see, in de slavery time . . .

but dose time it was still de African-dem . . . you understand . . . ?

well dey hang dem out there, because at de las' time since I been here, an' when dey gwine to cut down dat cotton tree to buil' de gas station, it lick dung about four to five men . . . kill dem . . .

### Conclusion

In this paper I presented the general nature of shrines, sanctuaries and their relationship to trees as a context for arguing that the cotton tree should be considered the shrine of a sanctuary where communing with the spiritual takes place. In looking at the various ways in which the cotton tree has been associated with the spiritual realm, I have suggested that the most important is the belief that spirits are to be found at the cotton tree and it is at this natural shrine that people seek to commune with these spirits and to recover lost or stolen spirits. I have also presented the uses of the cotton tree and within this context, I have emphasized the possible link between the cotton tree as a shade tree — a resting place for humans — and the cotton tree as the dwelling place of spirits.

In concluding this article there are two things that need to be said. The first concerns the cotton tree as 'a sacred [my emphasis] tree in [the] West Indies' [Barrett 1956: 98] and the idea that New World Africans 'worship' [Metraux 1972: 108] the cotton tree.

Durkheim's emphasis [1912] on the polar distinction

between sacred and profane has had a checkered history in anthropology. Some anthropologists have accepted the terms, applying them in a wide range of circumstances including the definition of religion itself. I have not used the Durkheimian distinction in this article; while it is an important distinction, it has also obscured a more fundamental difference, that between the supernatural or the spiritual and the physical. The cotton tree is a *spiritual tree* that in some cases is regarded as 'sacred' and in other cases is associated with evil. Spiritual things are not necessarily positive and worthy of worship. The spiritual and the sacred are not synonymous.

The second point concerns the often repeated idea that the cotton tree is worshipped by New World Africans. Like Beckwith for Jamaica, Millspaugh tells us that in St. Croix the cotton tree is 'worshipped by Obi followers, who believe it to be inhabited by devils'. The idea that people who believe in traditional African beliefs expressed in Obeah 'worship' 'devils' that inhabit the cotton tree seems absurd to me. The notions of 'worship' and 'devil' reflect the impact of a European characterization of African traditional practices which became increasingly prevalent with the growth of missionary activities in Jamaica and elsewhere in the Caribbean. The cotton tree is not (or does not appear to be as far as I can tell) an object of worship, neither is it a place of worship. In the light of what little information we have concerning the significance of the cotton tree to Jamaicans and other New World Africans, I have argued that the cotton tree should properly be considered the shrine of a sanctuary where the spirits of the living and of the dead dwell and where communing with these spirits takes place.

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