

Myths, Legends, Folktales and Fables of Guyana

By Dmitri Allicock for the Guyaneseonline blog

The practices of Myths, legends, folktales and fables is said to provide continuity and stability to a culture. They foster a shared set of perspectives, values, history and literature, in the stories themselves. Through these communal tales, we are connected to one another, to our ancestors, to the natural world surrounding us, and to society; and, in the myths which have universal themes; we are connected to other cultures. Through their authoritativeness and the respected characters within them, myths establish a culture's customs, rituals, religious tenets, laws, social structures, power hierarchies, territorial claims, arts and crafts, holidays and other recurring events, and technical tips for hunting, warfare, and other endeavors.

We transcend our common life into a world in which deities interact with humans, and we can believe that our daily actions are part of the deities' grand schemes. In our difficulties, the pain is more bearable because we believe that the trials have meaning; we are suffering for a bigger cause rather than being battered randomly. And when we read that a particular deity experienced something which we are now enduring -- perhaps a struggle against "evil forces" -- we can feel that our own struggle might have a similar cosmic or archetypal significance, though on a smaller scale. Some of Guyana's myths and legends are unique to her and not found elsewhere while some practices have similar characteristics to other cultures of the Caribbean and around the world.



The Old Higue (Hag) was and still remains part of Guyana's folklore. This old soul or witch lives on the edge of the villages in the day and becomes a ball of fire at night, flying through the air and seeking out tender juicy babies to suck but will settle on feeding on any prey. Many homes have the ominous manicole broom that is made from the manicole palm over the doorway.

This special broom along with bowl of uncooked rice and bottles of various goodies are kept waiting on the old higue. It supposedly served as a deterrent or the broom to be used in beating the old higue when she is drawn to counting the rice grains. Many unfortunate elderly, sick and uncared for, were victimized as this practice is still alive in some of the villages and minds of Guyanese. I know some would challenge me and are convinced there are still old higue flying around at night.

Here is some Old Higue food for thought that has a flavor

of **Creole taste**.

Like I been saying, we got 'old higue' here too! But unlike them foreign vampires, them vampires here got a li'l more powers. Them vampires here can walk in sunlight. [Heh! From the way

people describe them, I can think o' some who fit the description o' old higue, man and woman who does drain you 'til you dry. I sure you know some too...]

Old higue is usually a old woman...sometimes a man. But for some reason, you only hear 'bout woman old higue.

She does live in the community just like me an' you. But unlike me an' you, she does slip out o' she skin on the night when she going on she li' jaunt.

Then she does hide the skin in a calabash gourd, and hang it in a tree in a dark, dark shade.

And hear the best part!

She does spin she self into a ball o' fire and flyyyy, fly and land on the top o' the house where the brand new baby live. She does go in the house and suck the blood from the baby. The poor, sweet li'l thing does turn blue and die. Always, when folks see a baby turn blue and die, they does say is old higue suck it.

[I know somebody who insists that this is why he baby die. I ask he, "You see the old higue?" Nooo," he say, "Me no see no old higue. But me baby been blue when he dead .. So is old higue kill he." Now, if you think them lil, li'l mosquitoes does vex me...imagine how a old higue can enrage villagers!

So, naturally, they does set traps to ketch the wretch. To ketch she you got to throw raw rice, that is, grains o' uncooked rice, on the floor. When old higue enters the house she does turn into a person again...but without she skin, remember? As soon as she walks in the house, she does step on the raw rice. And as soon as she feel that rice she does have to count. If old higue only drop one grain o' rice she got to start counting all over again.

So there she is, counting, counting, and counting 'til morning come. And that is how the people does ketch she. Well!

Lawd help you if you is a old higue and you get ketch this way.

Them people does take they coconut broom...and BROOM! the old higue, beat and beat! And remember, she ain't got no skin on, so you can imagine how it does burn.

Heh! In all them years that me hearing 'bout old higue I never meet one single soul who ketch a old higue in they house, never ketch she counting rice, never ketch she to broom she.

[But this midday, when I cook rice for lunch, about five, six cooked grains fall down...and I ketch mehself picking them up from the floor. Help, help, what that mean?]

Every now and then, people does 'suspect' that some old lady [or man] is a old higue...and that is what the conversation was all about at Sunday night dinner.

The belief in the "Ole Higue" is very serious business for many. A mentally challenged woman on the East Coast at Bachelor's Adventure was tragically beaten to death in April 2007 ago for being an "Ole Higue." Some cultural beliefs and practices have serious ramifications.



Obeah

In addition to the other major religions found in Guyana, there are other traditional beliefs being practiced such as **Obeah**. Obeah is a folk religion of African origin that was passed down from the days of slavery. This is where members or persons would consult with the elders for help with a problem they may have that concerns health, work, domestic life, money, romance, etc. for this to work some villagers or persons may wear charms or use other forms of devices to protect themselves from any harm. These beliefs and practices exist in the shadows of the established churches and are quite secretive since it is not condoned. African, Amerindian, and Indian traditional cultures have sustained folk practices that have penetrated Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. Obeah has its roots in African folk religion but influences Indians as well, and Indian spirit possession has affected rural African religious sensibilities. I was at a wedding at one of my neighbors at Silvertown in the 1970's. This Christian wedding reception was held in a house much too small for the large crowd that attended. The wedding traditional speeches were prolonged as liquor took control of the proceedings as it went into the night. The over clad groom in his button and tie closed fitting suit, who stood standing in the very hot home suddenly collapsed and started to convulsed.

The screams of the bride and the wedding party was lost in the mad panic as the crowd scattered. Some jumped through the windows. They pushed and shoved to run as fast as they could to escape. One of the seven brother's of the groom got hold of his vehicle and accelerated through the large crowd on the street causing many to fall into the open gutter. Luckily no one was killed. My parents hurriedly gathered and restricted us to the house.

Later that night, around midnight we saw about a dozen souls dressed in all white gowns with their hair wrapped up in white sheeting, holding candles walking around in the yard, singing and chanting.

They were exorcising evil spirits I was later told. Rumors later went around that when the wedding cake was cut, a green Bacoo jumped out!!!

The feuding neighbor of this family had supposedly placed a curse on the wedding. My only regrets were I was waiting to get a piece of black cake before the mishap. The holy ones had a feast of all the wedding foods well into the early morning hours.

A frequent contributor to Kaieteur news of Guyana who write under the pen name “talk half- lef half” said this in fluent Creolese in the October 18th 2011 edition. Many practitioners of obeah are referred to by the more accepted” herbalist.”

People don’t even believe in doctors these days. Imagine people guh to doctor and when dem can’t get cure dem does go to dem herbalist. Only heavens know wheh dem herbalist get dem training fuh cure people.

Wha dem boys know is that all of dem got big fancy house and is strange that de people always believe that dem get cure. Dem boys seh that if dem been stay home and let nature tek its course dem woulda cure same way.

One of dem guh to Plaisance and de herbalist wuk till de person collapse. That is when de herbalist tell de people fuh carry de man to a doctor. Why de herbalist didn’t seh suh in de first place is a mystery.

Then dem had another set who use to beat spirit out of people. One of dem beat a man till he jump through a window and he dead. Another woman beat one and kill she and bury she.

Now dem boys want know who gun pay people fuh beat dem? Dem woulda beat de beat man instead.

Suh dem have a woman wid TB. This woman and she family claim how doctors can’t cure she. She go to Sister Lyn and drink something and dead. Dem boys seh that if de woman did want something to drink all she had to do was tell dem boys.

What she drink mek she vomit from both ends. Then she complain how she feel bad. Dem boys seh that dem never see somebody give back people money suh fast. Sister Lyn do just that. She dealing wid de police right now and dem ain’t even paying.

Even Sister Lyn ain’t got fuh pay fuh de security she getting now.

Talk half Lef half.



Cumfa is a dance of West African origin characterizes by the possession of spirits summons by the beating of drums. The dancer performs ritualistic and trance like acrobatic feats over broken bottles while eating fire, in a tribute to King O’Congo which was passed down from the days of Slavery. The bewildered dancer is unharmed and has no memory of the event afterwards. The fascinating, mind boggling Cumfa dance and ritual is still practice in predominately African Guyanese populated communities like Linden, Buxton, Victoria and others.

Jumbee is the ultimate mythological spirit or demon in the folklores of Guyana. All races of Guyana tend to believe in some form or manner of this frightful spirit, despite their strong belief in Christianity or other religions. This belief is also held by the practitioners of Obeah. It is the beliefs that people who are evil in life are destined to become a Jumbee in death to haunt the nights and minds of the believers.

One favorite expression when Guyanese say goodbye at night is “don’t let Jumbee hold you” Jumbee is always on the minds of many Guyanese walking home at night. Walking Pass a Cemetery can be especially frightening. The ghost of three time’s great grandfather, Clout DeNieunkirk, was rumored to have existed at Watooka and Noitgedacht, Upper Demerara, over a hundred years after his death. Stories were told that at dusk, the “clip clop” sounds of the hooves of the white horse



which old Clout once owned could be heard as Clout made his way home from his plantation. The horse would snort and sometimes whinny as terrified relatives hurried indoors. Some even saw this Dutchman as he rode in the twilight of the evening. Some older relatives also felt “the haunt” of the many slaves that were buried there. Children were brought up on scary Jumbee Stories. Television did not make entry into Guyana until the 1980s and storytelling was a requirement. There was nothing more exciting than a good intriguing Jumbee Story at night. Listening to an older relative lead up to the story’s conclusion was the best part. The conclusion of the Jumbee choking or braking necks was enough scare you to hide under your blanket. Any family of the Riverain areas would understand how scary a Jumbee story can be at night.

An oil lamp or torch light was not enough to illuminate the blackness of the night. The bloodcurdling sound of the tiny and faint voice of a Jumbee speaking, they said, would convince all non-believers to run like crazy!



Another spook that would see Guyanese children scrambling underneath the bed is **The Moongazer**. This moonlight phenomenon is so tall that his head is at the level of tall coconut trees. His concern is gazing unwaveringly at the moon. If disturbed, the Moongazer had the ability to suck your brains out. You are warned as a child to leave this spirit alone should you unfortunately encounter it, this which was not necessary as most might imagine.

The Bacoo is another feared spirit or being in all Guyana. This is a tiny little man that fits in a bottle covered by a cork. There is a long association with our early Dutch history with this Bacoo tale.

Some curious minded Guyanese have drawn a link to a Nigerian's belief. This little devil may be green or have a beard. He is kept by the evil dwellers to use when necessary to hurt or harm. A Bacoo is expensive to keep. They say he requires gallons of milk and bananas as his only dietary demands. It is reported that he speaks in various tongues and may be also helpful when he chooses.

Many old wine bottles and other relics of significant historical value are immediately discarded by hastily reburial or thrown into the river for the fear that a "Dutchman's Bacoo" might be attached. This Bacoo prefers to dwell at night and will stone your roof top if annoyed, it is believed. Priceless historical artifacts may lay buried or lost to the many river bottoms due to this frightful Bacoo belief.

The Massacurra Man is another devil of Upper Demerara and Guyana. This is a water monster that is generally active in the late evening as the sun sets. The only ambition of this devil is to drag you from the river bank, drowning and breaking your neck. I was told many times as I fished on the riverside at old England, that the Massacurra man would get me if I continued.

There is no inland and most coastal Guyanese who has not heard of the Massacura man. I am unsure of its origin but a very brave relative who dare to challenge this old belief said that the Massacura man actually originated out of Slavery. Apparently there were expert trackers of runaway slaves that were called the Curaban who came out of Africa also. When Slaves ran away from the plantations they used the vast water ways of Guyana to escape deeper into the interior. The plantation owner would let loose his slave trackers to hunt and capture them. Hence **MASSA-**



the plantation owner and **CURABAN**- the tracker, legend was born.

Somewhere along the line in the phonically Guyanese creoles mispronunciation of words, **BAN** from Curaban was switched for **MAN**.

The association of this devil to water must have been from the fact that the only access through Guyana's dense jungle was by the many rivers, creeks and waterways which the Curaban trackers would have used. The fears of the poor runaway slaves must have been so powerful that the belief of the Massacurra Man became legend and it still survives in the depth of Guyana's rivers and minds of so many hundreds of years after.



Kaniama is a bush devil that is very real to many Guyanese primarily in the interior location today. The belief and practice of the Kaniama is part of the contribution of the Amerindians to Guyana's culture. The families of Upper Demerara are very familiar with this folklore. When I was a child visiting the river, I was told not to venture too far from the home because a Kaniama would eat me. It was supposedly a cannibal-like bush devil that haunts the deep jungle, stalking prey.

This belief still survives mainly in the riverain areas and deep into Guyana's Highlands. Henry Kirke wrote, "The Indian Kaniama is like a Corsican Vendetta. The Executioner is selected by lot from the family of the slain.

He indefatigably follows his victim, like a stoat follows a hare until he meets and kills him. One Indian, against whom a Kaniama had been preached, was followed for

two years by his executioner, who at last met him and killed him in front of the Government Building in Georgetown," he concluded. Henry Kirke was a former Sheriff of Demerara in the 1870s, and saw many cases of the Kaniama contract killing. The fear of a Kaniama would become folklore throughout Guyana and took on various characteristics as most does. Rational thought becomes meaningless when the seeds of fear take root.

This goes to show how vital it is to understand your heritage. Generations have misunderstood this actual Amerindian practice and have been plagued by the evil spirit of the Kaniama who was very real to them.

Fear is a powerful and primitive human emotion. It alerts us to the presence of danger and was critical in keeping our ancestors alive accordingly to the Psychologists.

The many fearful Folktales, Myths, Legends and Fables of Guyana were then after all helpful in our life experiences. It is no wonder Guyanese has so many spooks or beliefs in their lives.

Combating an unforgiving world produced a resilient and robust people with so many stories of fear to tell.