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Female religious responses to male prosperity in turn-of-the-century Bush Negro societies

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FEMALE RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TO MALE PROSPERITY IN TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY BUSH NEGRO SOCIETIES¹

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At the end of the nineteenth century, a drastic change occurred in gender relations in Suriname's Bush Negro societies. Men massively left the tribal areas for more lucrative pursuits in the expanding national economy, and often failed to perform their share in the traditional subsistence economy. Women were left to fend for themselves, in part-control of yesterday's means of production. In matrilineal and predominantly uxorilocal societies, Bush Negro women had been used to think highly of themselves as producers and reproducers. And, what is more, to a large extent, they had seen their claims acknowledged. Around the turn of the century, women had to come to terms with these new and disadvantageous conditions. In this contribution, we will explore the types of reactions which evolved in this perplexing situation.

During the 1880s, relations of production in Suriname's Bush Negro societies were altered. While women continued to work their horticultural plots as swidden cultivators, men left the lumbering trade and offered their services to gold companies and individual gold diggers in search of El Dorado. A new High God (*Gaan Gadu*) cult swept through the interior, responding chiefly to the needs and preoccupations of Bush Negro boatmen (THODEN VAN VELZEN 1977: 94-100). Material conditions for women de-

teriorated.² Let us begin by summarizing the main political and economic conditions prevailing in Suriname's interior at this time.

As a result of Bush Negro participation in the gold industry, as freight carriers, a period of affluence began around 1885. The new riches were unevenly distributed: the boatmen earned the money and usually were reluctant to part with it. Those who stayed behind in the villages, the dependants (women, older men, the disabled and sick), saw the gap between themselves and the boatmen widen. Even in absolute terms, the position of dependants deteriorated. Men were no longer around to help women clear gardens: hence a decline in agricultural production. These inequalities were most marked among the Saramaka, Matawai and Kwinti of the western zone (see map), farthest removed from the gold industry's main placers. The Bush Negroes of the eastern zone, the Djuka and two smaller groups, experienced a less radical separation between active wage-labourers and dependants. Their villages were situated on islands in the river Marowijne (or its tributaries), an artery for the gold industry.

Gaan Gadu's priests had launched a strong assault on the hub of traditional Bush Negro religion, the spirit medium cults. Of the four major spirit cults only one, an almost exclusively male one, had escaped the ravages of the iconoclastic purges of the early 1890s (THODEN VAN VELZEN 1978: 108–109). Three spirit cults had seen their shrines burnt, sacred objects and amulets destroyed, and possessing spirits exorcized. With females accounting for 80% of the mediums³ in these cults (cf. Table), an important channel for the exertion of influence by dependants had been closed, at great financial loss (fees, emoluments) for these mediums. Thus, women were deprived of opportunities for financial gain and enhanced social prestige; they suffered also from the blocking of important outlets for psychic expression. This last point will be clarified in the following sections.

1. PANTHEONS OF MINOR DEITIES

In Djuka cosmology numerous deities (*gadu*) appear. These deities are believed to be powerful and immortal beings, but very few of

Location of Bush Negroes in Suriname (c. 1900).

PARTICIPATION IN CULTS ACCORDING TO AGE AND SEX, OF THE POPULATION OVER 20 YEARS OLD IN THREE UPSTREAM TAPANAHONI VILLAGES WITH A TOTAL POPULATION OF 600 (1962).

	Age groups divided into m(ales) and f(emales)												
type of spirit	20-30		30-40		40-50		50-60		>60		Total for all age groups		
	m	f	m	f	m	f	m	f	m	f	m	f	total
YOOKA	1	2	1	6	3	8	2	13	—	1	7	30	37
PAPA	—	1	—	6	—	3	1	7	—	4	1	21	22
AMPUKU	1	2	1	3	—	1	3	2	3	1	8	9	17
KUMANTI	—	—	2	—	3	—	8	—	4	—	17	—	17
OTHER	—	1	—	1	—	—	2	—	—	—	2	2	4
Total of spirits	2	6	4	16	6	12	16	22	7	6	35	62	97

them are considered omniscient or omnipresent. Following VAN LIER (1940: *passim*), we distinguish between higher and lower gods; in other words, the well-known two-tiered structure of many traditional West African religions is manifest here. The High Gods, or Great Deities as we prefer to call them (*Gaan Gadu* belongs to this category), are more powerful than lower gods. They generally adopt a positive and protective attitude towards human beings as long as the latter do not violate or disregard divine laws. The majority of the lower deities are less reliable; they are generally indifferent to human fate, but readily inclined to do man harm if he trespasses on their territory or arouses their displeasure in any other way.

Most of the minor deities are potential invading spirits. All but a few of these belong to one of four main pantheons: that of the ancestors (*Yooka*); that of the reptile spirits (*Papa Gadu* or *Vodu*); that of the bush spirits (*Ampuku*); or the pantheon which includes the spirits associated with celestial phenomena such as thunder and lightning, and with carrion birds or other animals of prey (*Kumanti*). The independence of these pantheons is actively maintained at the social level. All villages have ancestor shrines and most have separate shrines for *Ampuku*, *Papa Gadu* and *Kumanti* spirits. For each of the last three pantheons, specialized priests or instructors (*basi*) teach neophytes its distinctive sacred language. The *Yooka* pantheon, that which consists of the ghosts of the ancestors, occupies a special position in the ritual life of the village. There is no separate group of priests for this pantheon, and no sacred language to teach.

The most fundamental distinction within the world of minor spirits is that between *Kumanti* (the male spirit cult) and all others.⁴ Possession by *Kumanti* is welcomed and sought, at least by those who feel affinity with its world view. In contrast, seizure by *Yooka*, *Ampuku* or *Papa Gadu* deities, it appears, is almost always unwelcome; in its first stages it is even considered dangerous to the host, a threat to his health and well-being. Victims of this type of spirit visitation utter wild, inarticulate screams. These outcries are interpreted as emergency calls to which the community must respond. The Djuka hold that all such intruding spirits deserve immediate attention.

All invading spirits causing involuntary possession spell danger. If handled quickly and appropriately, however, the threat can be contained. The message which such a spirit is likely to deliver will be valuable for the human community: although it will tell of evil and misfortune, those who pay attention will learn from it what must be done in order to avert part or all of the danger. These messages emphasize human imperfection; they draw the medium and her relatives into a painful awareness of their sins and shortcomings. Long nursed grievances may surface, filling the air with feelings of resentment and bitterness. The fate of those who disregard the spirit's warnings may be disastrous: havoc will usually be wreaked on such a medium and her relatives. Even later generations may suffer from unrelenting retribution. Behind these beliefs lies the notion that spirits of all these pantheons (with the exception of *Kumanti*) can be manipulated by unscrupulous humans to serve their ends.

It was this world, filled with such experiences and temptations, that *Gaan Gadu*'s priests wished to bring to an end. For a number of years — probably as many as fifteen (1890–1905) — their endeavours were crowned with success. In order to give an understanding of the psychic losses felt by mediums (overwhelmingly female in the *Ampuku*, *Papa Gadu* and *Yooka* pantheons) at this time, we will first have to lay bare the inner dynamics of this kind of spirit visitation. Why one of the most pronounced female rebellions against male dominance in turn-of-the-century Djuka society should have rallied behind the mediums of a particular pantheon (*Papa Gadu*) will then become apparent.

2. THE REBELLION OF THE REPTILE MEDIUMS

The causes behind the visitation of *Papa Gadu* or *Vodu* deities vary greatly. Such visitations are often tied to the agricultural sphere. Subsistence agriculture is mainly the responsibility of women; it is based on slash-and-burn techniques. Branches and leaves are left to dry in the sun, and eventually the resulting heaps of dry vegetation are set afire. When the blaze has died down, the charred carcass of a snake is sometimes discovered. It may come to

light that this snake had been the vessel of a *Papa Gadu* spirit. In such a case, the women working the plot (and the men assisting them) will then realize that vengeance is likely to be brought upon them. Some time later — it may be a matter of weeks, months or even years — a woman working on the plot, or one of her matrilineal relatives, may fall into a trance. The snake spirit, speaking through her mouth, then announces that it intends to revenge itself for the burned vessel: not only the new medium, but her whole lineage will suffer without reprieve. Such is the way of the avenging spirits of the *Papa Gadu* pantheon (*Papa Gadu kunu*).

Most of the *Papa Gadu* mediums are women beyond their prime. Quite a few of them react to the threat of imminent loss of position, prestige and security by trying to revive the feminine powers of seduction and the glamour of their lost youth. Significantly, the arena where the drama most often erupts is the horticultural plot, perhaps the most valuable of such women's remaining assets. These plots allow women to develop a fair degree of independence and are the source of considerable pride. A ritual metaphor of sorts comes into play here; when decoded into the language of emotions, it reads as follows: man, in order to live, often causes unintentional but irreparable damage. Below the smooth surface of day-to-day living tension has been building up, until pent-up grievances finally break out. A woman has aged by imperceptible degrees, and finds that she is no longer young. Glamour and prestige have vanished through the wear and tear of daily life. Now she hopes to recover part of this lost glamour by participating in *Papa Gadu* dances, seen as the most beautiful of all spirit dances. She eventually establishes herself as a respected medium, ready to counsel her relatives on the causes of illness or misfortune, and to suggest remedies.

A resurgence of *Papa Gadu* priests and mediums occurred in the first decade of this century, probably around 1905.⁵ This development represented not merely a reconquest of lost territory: it had revolutionary dimensions as well. In Godo Olo, a cluster of three villages upstream from Diitabiki (centre of the *Gaan Gadu* cult), the local *Papa Gadu* specialists acquired a tribal-wide reputation. Male dignitaries vied with one another for control of cult shrines. Around 1908, *Gaan Gadu*'s priests began to play an active role in

the reestablishment of the cult. A decade later, the popularity of *Papa Gadu* mediumship (and *Ampuku* too) had assumed such proportions as to cause alarm among *Gaan Gadu*'s priests. In the words of a grandson of one of the first of *Gaan Gadu*'s priests:⁶ 'The situation got out of hand: women in trance running around, doing things they shouldn't have done. They always seemed to be possessed by one deity or another. These mediums flouted *Gaan Gadu*'s sacred taboo (on menstrual seclusion). Women who should have been in the 'moon house' (*munu osu*: menstrual seclusion hut) were running through the middle of the village. It was really most shameful. It should not have been tolerated!'

The institution of menstrual sequestration, and attached taboos, confines women to the 'moon house' for the whole time of their period; they may go to their gardens, but are not allowed to participate in any part of village life, not in prayers, funerary feasts or any other social event. They have to remain in the 'moon house', at the fringe of the village, do their own cooking and washing near the 'moon house' and sleep there as well. For the days of their period women are impure, stigmatized and socially non-persons. This institution is a severe handicap for the more prominent of the female mediums; it may even cripple their career.

The menstrual taboos have always acted as formidable barriers to women's participation in social life. It would seem that these recurrent days of impurity have the potential to bring about severe psychological handicaps, and to affect negatively the development of mature self-consciousness. Impurity never wears off completely. Even during 'normal' days, the vagina is considered to be a source of impurity, and must be washed early every morning with hot water. In Djuka symbolism the hot ablution is a purificatory rite.⁷

The renaissance of the spirit cults and the revolt against the 'moon house' are intertwined in oral history, and for very good reasons: both reflected the strivings of women to better their lot. This series of episodes, so shocking to male sensitivity, has left deep traces in the minds of the Djuka. Measured in time, it probably did not last very long: months rather than years. Before long, the rule of menstrual sequestration was once again obeyed; but the memory of the days of rebellion against the 'moon house' was not so quickly erased.

3. FIIDA'S RISE TO PROMINENCE

Years earlier, in the 1890s, a young woman named Fiida, a singer of *prima donna* stature,⁸ had shown that it was possible — for talented women — to make a career within the predominantly male establishment of the *Gaan Gadu* priesthood. Fiida's motto seems to have been: 'If you cannot beat them, join them.' Fiida went so far as to claim to be possessed by a spirit directly originating from *Gaan Gadu* Himself. She was allowed to appear before the tabernacle of *Gaan Gadu*, where she fell into trance. Speaking through her mouth, the spirit disclosed that its name was *Da Amooitee* (Father who is so beautiful!) and that it was a male spirit; it was sent by its divine master to bolster belief in Him. Prophecies were to be expected; patients were to be cured. To the priests of *Gaan Gadu* this sounded promising and reassuring. *Amooitee* was accepted as a legitimate emissary from *Gaan Gadu* and Fiida was invited to cooperate with the priests in their daily work.

Cooperation between her and the priests grew closer as the years went by. The *Amooitee* spirit took a stronger hold of its medium, steeping her in divine power. Fiida demonstrated this by acting as a healer: she cured people by the laying on of hands and other forms of physical contact. Her embrace was said to have especially great curative value. When news about miraculous recoveries began to spread, people flocked to her from all over the Tapanahoni for treatment. They came in such great numbers that the whole of the Upper Tapanahoni was soon said to be hers. A house was set aside for her medical practice. In the back of it was a store room, crammed to the top with gifts from patients. On some days, people recall, she would receive as many as fifty pieces of cloth (*pangi*) and more than twenty bottles of beer.

Fiida seems to have possessed the gift of clairvoyance. She was able to inform people about events happening elsewhere and to read people's thoughts. Even more significant for her position with *Gaan Gadu*'s priests was the fact that she was believed to know the deity's opinion about significant events in Djuka society. Before Fiida had entered the picture, *Gaan Gadu*'s judgement about current affairs had usually been obtained by consulting an

oracle. We need not here go into the specifics of this form of divination; let it suffice to say that for each communication, the services of a number of priests were traditionally required. Fiida convinced the priests that this procedure was unnecessarily laborious. Her possessing spirit, being *Gaan Gadu*'s representative on earth, could pronounce on all such matters with sufficient clarity and authority. Astoundingly enough, this was accepted. For a number of years, the utterances of Fiida's spirit were held to amount to God's word. During her prime, Fiida and the old high priest of *Gaan Gadu* together reigned as the spiritual leaders of Djuka society.

Fiida's reputation as healer and singer attracted many young women who solicited the honour of serving her as supporting singers — she never gave up her singing career — and as maid-servants. If they could sing well, and were good-looking, the girls received an invitation to join Fiida's retinue. The maid-servants took care of domestic chores. Fiida was not expected to do any work on her horticultural plots; that too was the responsibility of the maids, assisted by other 'volunteers'. This last category consisted mainly of patients who had been given to understand that such work was considered part of their fee. The maid-servants drew water for Fiida, emptied chamberpots, swept her houses, and did all the cooking. During ceremonies they would place pieces of cloth in front of their mistress so that she need not dirty her feet.

In return for food and other material compensation, but above all for the privilege of being in the limelight, the girls performed these and a number of other requested services with dedication. One of these became the object of controversy much later: namely, the demand by Fiida's spirit that two girls sleep with his medium each night. Fiida explained that her tutelary spirit was male, and that he insisted on sharing the pleasures of life with her. Today, some cynics say that it was Fiida herself who had such lustful cravings. Her detractors claim that she penetrated the girls with a little stick in the shape of a maize cob. But during those years, when Fiida's star shone bright, the girls were enthralled. They publicly boasted about the prowess of *Amooitee*.

Fiida's main contribution was the creation of a new pantheon of

spirits called *Gaan Gadu winti* or, in proper *Ndjuka tongo* ('language of the Djuka'), *Gaan Gadu gadu* ('spirits sent by Gaan Gadu'). They were considered to be of lesser stature than *Amooitee*, but to have originated from the same divine source. Scores of females were seized by these emissaries of *Gaan Gadu*. This form of spirit possession posed no threat to the *Gaan Gadu* priesthood, for the priests could either give recognition to persons claiming to be mediums of such deities or withhold it. In any case, the utterances of these minor mediums could (by theological definition) not contradict either the results of *Gaan Gadu* divination or the pronouncements of Ma Fiida. The latter two were viewed as direct mouthpieces of the Godhead; the other emissaries were subsidiary to them.

It appears that for many years Fiida was in command of day-to-day operations at *Gaan Gadu*'s shrines. Regularly, about once each year, Fiida accompanied by the high priest, would journey to other villages on a 'state visit'. During these solemn occasions Fiida would present the honoured villages with dictates, often of an arbitrary sort, presumably to display her power. According to several accounts, on a number of occasions, she ordered all cooking fires in a village to be extinguished. No one dared to stand up to her during those years. Early in this century (before 1905), Fiida fell from grace, for reasons that are not fully known.

4. ANAKE'S 'PRIMITIVE COMMUNISM'

In 1892, only months after *Gaan Gadu*'s message had been brought to Bush Negroes throughout the interior, a quite different movement transformed the lives of a few hundred Saramaka on the Suriname river. It started when hundreds of Saramaka were assembling in Sofibuka (see map) for funerary rites. Word came from the custodians of the local *Gaan Gadu* shrine that proceedings should be stopped forthwith. The shrine holders revealed that the deity demanded an immediate end to the rites; henceforth they were only to worship Him. The 'false deities' were to be driven out of the village and their shrines demolished. This caused alarm and sorrow among Sofibuka's inhabitants. However, a medicine man of repute, Anake, urged them not to follow this tyrant so slavishly.

Anake disclosed that *he* himself had become the medium of 'The Holy Spirit Jesus the Son' (*Santa Yeye Jezus Pikin*), and that his spirit would topple this 'God of the Djuka' by treating him exactly as he had done with other supernatural beings. Anake followed this up by tearing down *Gaan Gadu's* shrines and carrying the deity's tabernacle into the 'moon house', a place of utter defilement (ALBITROUW 1978).

A brief digression is in order here. It should be stressed first of all that the whole of Bush Negro territory must be seen, for the purposes of this type of analysis, as a single social field: economically significant events in the past have generally not been confined to one tribe, but have most often had a wider impact; political and religious changes usually had repercussions in Bush Negro settlements far removed from their place of origin. The course of development taken by the *Gaan Gadu* movement provides one striking example of the unity of this social field. Another matter which must be addressed here is the question why, in a paper dealing with female responses, we should look at a movement with male leadership. The main reason for including Anake's cult in our discussion is that its membership was predominantly female. Sofibuka, Anake's village, is located in the western area; while Anake's movement was taking shape, the majority of male residents were away in French Guiana, where they were working for wages. The ideology of this movement should not be attributed only to Anake. The latter operated within a social setting; he knew the needs of his constituency, and many of the grievances he gave voice to must have sprung from the concerns of this wider group. His movement must be depicted, then, not as a one-man-show or monologue, but rather as a dialogue between Anake and his following. Women took part in this from the beginning; indeed, it can be said that they carried the brunt of the work, as they supported Anake through the years. These remarks about ideology being a dialogue rather than a monologue apply to all movements, *Gaan Gadu* not excluded. The highly original ideas of this latter movement were certainly not the thoughts of one boat owner or one priest. This cult, like Anake's, grew out of the interactions of many people.

But to return to Sofibuka: once Anake had succeeded in getting

the *Gaan Gadu* cult out of the way, he pronounced revelations of things to come. Sofibuka would develop into a capital city (ALBITROUW 1978: 41). Ships would steam up river, unloading their rich cargoes in the village. In the future, Saramaka would live as Europeans did, free from worry and deprivation. Anake promised children to the childless, good health to the sick, prosperity to all villagers, and eternal life to the faithful.

When the cargo failed to be delivered, and disappointment set in, Anake began to follow a tack different from the one usually taken when prophecy fails. It was at this point that the ideology of the movement became truly interesting, and revealed itself as a sustained attempt to unravel the secrets of the new world it was helping to usher in. The messiah, in an effort reminiscent of the eighteenth-century western scientists, transformed a church building into a pharmacy *cum* laboratory. His adepts were instructed to collect a great variety of leaves, roots, fibres and pieces of bark. After classification, these were stored in hundreds of bottles. With the help of his brother, Anake began to concoct medicines from these materials. His reputation as a herbalist grew. Even Saramaka who did not belong to his close-knit community considered him a trustworthy medicine man.

Anake's communal experiment was not only original, but daring. At the core of his social teachings was the assertion that private property is the root of all evil, and should therefore be abolished (JUNKER 1940: 282). In line with this notion, Anake's people were instructed to stop working their individual plots, and to contribute their labour instead to the communal fields. Lumbering, canoe building, woodcarving for commercial purposes — all of these were to be done collectively. From the money so earned, kerosine, salt, ammunition, clothes and other necessities were procured. These goods were deposited in the village's storehouse for future use. Manioc bread baked by women of the village was stored there too. JUNKER (Ibid.) observed women going into the storehouse and taking from it what they needed, no questions asked. But he adds a qualification to his description: tools, clothes, and presumably other valuables as well, could not be taken from it at will. It remained Anake's prerogative to distribute goods bought with money. Other examples of com-

munal ownership are given: tortoises were kept within a fenced place; a small plantation of oil palms added to the possessions of the village community; and hunters and fishermen brought their catches to the village to be shared by all (MBB 1904: 257; BECHLER 1906: 71). In addition, communal meals were periodically prepared (ALBITROUW 1978: 41).

To get his commune off the ground, Anake founded a sort of new Jerusalem, a village the messiah called Futunaakaba. Only his most devoted followers were allowed to take up residence in the new village. In its outward appearance, the village intimated to visitors a sense of ambition and drive. It was a 'model village'. From the shore, a wide, sandy road — according to visitors, the widest of any of the roads entering Bush Negro villages — led into the new settlement. The road was lined with carefully cultivated fields, where a great variety of food stuffs was grown. The village itself boasted a church, a native pharmacy, a store, and an assembly hall of modest size. Visitors, whether missionaries or government officials, were duly impressed by this utopian community: this example of 'primitive communism', as JUNKER (1940) labelled it, or 'communist community under patriarchal leadership', as STEINBERG (1927: 22) called it.

Another noteworthy feature of Anake's theology was his rejection of conscience probing and restrictive rules, both central aspects of the *Gaan Gadu* cult (cf. THODEN VAN VELZEN 1977, 1978). Only one condition had to be fulfilled by the faithful in order to guarantee redemption: Anake's people were required to follow his instructions to the letter. At the same time, the burden of personal responsibility was lightened. People were no longer required to search their consciences: to review painfully, day by day, the record of their past dealings with supernatural agents or their fellow men. One no longer had to ask oneself: was this obligation fulfilled, or that deity sufficiently honoured? Anake's instructions were there to resolve all doubts. Anake endeavoured to free his followers from conscience altogether; his adepts were told not to concern themselves with feelings of shame (ALBITROUW 1978: 58). to show that he meant what he said, Anake lifted a number of prohibitions that had previously occupied a central place in Bush Negro culture.

Two examples will suffice here: the set of rules concerning menstrual seclusion was temporarily suspended — perhaps with the intention of permanently abolishing it; and previously forbidden sexual relations between close matrilineal kin now became acceptable. Certain passages in ALBITROUW (1978: 63) also contain suggestions of general promiscuity, but solid evidence of this is lacking. At any rate, Anake himself transgressed a traditionally important taboo in Bush Negro society by marrying two 'sisters', two women who were close matrilineal relatives. Whether this was meant to be exemplary behaviour, to be followed by his adepts, or merely a prerogative of the leader, is unknown to us.

Anake's brand of redemption — with its promise of a life of freedom, unencumbered by daily worries over how to strike a balance between the various claims and forces impinging upon the individual — came at a stiff price. His followers revered Anake as the messiah; even his worn clothes were kept as relics (JUNKER 1940: 281). Nothing could be undertaken without Anake's permission; his people were not permitted to go anywhere without informing him. The inner core of the following, in particular — the so-called disciples — lived in a state of almost total subjection. The messiah ordered the men to hunt for him or to do other chores; the female disciples were expected to cook for him, wash his clothes, and perform other menial tasks. Both during the day, and late into the night, they were called upon to bathe their leader, and to accomodate him sexually whenever he desired.

At this juncture two provisos must be raised. First, there is no evidence that each and every follower of Anake prostrated himself before his leader. The most blatant examples of submission occurred among a very small group of disciples. Secondly, we do not wish to suggest that the emerging ideology was always fully shared by leader and followers. Both Anake and his adepts were convinced that something had to change, and they worked out a 'deal'. But there is no basis for concluding from this that every single follower wished to be humiliated. Many ran away from Anake's commune. Some of these returned. For most, the shelter offered by Anake's commune was the major factor binding them to the utopian community.

For the time when all this occurred, around the turn of the

century — when Bush Negroes were acutely aware of opportunities to get rich quick — going against the tide and succeeding in curbing the acquisitive drives of individuals was an impressive achievement. Although the ideas came from Anake, a fair amount of credit must also be given to his predominantly female following.

5. ATJAIMIKULE AND THE FORCES OF THE WILD

Twenty years after *Gaan Gadu*'s priests had begun travelling through the interior to proselytize, the novelty of the new creed had worn off, and doubts began to be voiced in public and with great frequency. In 1908, HELSTONE (1908–1914) recorded how elders returning to the Cottica after a visit to *Gaan Gadu*'s central shrines on the Tapanahoni had been deeply disappointed by what they had experienced in the Djuka heartland. While they were staying at Godo Olo village, the constant playing of the concertina — the latest fad — had attracted a tiger-cat. The beast had crept up to the dancers, and suddenly jointed them, swinging with the rhythm, in full view of a terrified crowd. Before leaving, the tiger-cat had killed all the chickens and dogs in the village. Tidings of similar occurrences, involving appearances by strange creatures, came from other Tapanahoni villages. The shocked Cottica visitors returned with grave doubts about their deity: how could such outlandish things happen in *Gaan Gadu*'s own bulwark?

Whether tiger-cats or other creatures ever really made such appearances in the Tapanahoni villages is a question which need not detain us here. It is the symbolic meaning of these reports that is interesting. Obviously, the Djuka of 1908 felt that powerful forces were impinging upon them. The boundary between bush and village — between dangerous, untamed forces and social order — had somehow disappeared. Neither the human community, nor apparently *Gaan Gadu*, were able to provide protection or to harness these forces.

It took a stranger, a Saramaka Bush Negro, to galvanize the growing disenchantment with *Gaan Gadu* into a counter-movement. It is significant that this took place in the Sara and Cottica regions, both areas inhabited by Djuka who paid tribute

to the Tapanahoni priesthood. The Cottica region formed part of the western zone: it had lost a large part of its male population to the gold industry, and now was home to a large number of dependants who had been left behind to fend for themselves as well as they could. For reasons of space, we will limit our account to events on the Cottica and not discuss Atjaimikule's exploits on the Sara Creek in 1905.

In 1910, the old headman of the Djuka in the Cottica region died. Atjaimikule saw his chance; he moved into the area before a successor could be appointed. From the day of his arrival, great feasts in honour of his spirit, *Na Ogi* ('The Danger') were held; these affairs lasted for weeks on end and brought economic life to a standstill. The whole of the Cottica region became Atjaimikule's preserve. Together with his foster child Gaando, he ruled the region as a divine king. Atjaimikule commanded absolute obedience; those who evinced even minor signs of dissatisfaction were threatened with instant death. At the end of 1910, Atjaimikule was arrested by the colonial administration, and subsequently banished to Saramaka territory, where he died in November 1917 (MM: Nov. 1917). Gaando managed to hold out for another year; like his predecessor, he was revered as God, and commanded absolute obedience, until he too was removed by a District Commissioner. As with his stepfather, banishment from the Cottica was his fate. It is not fully clear what charges led to the banishing of these two men from the region, but it seems probable that the disruption of economic life weighed most heavily.

The *Na Ogi* movement resembled Anake's cult in many ways. Both were despotic cults. Fines of 10 or 25 guilders were inflicted on persons for simple mistakes or minor infractions of Atjaimikule's rules (BARTH 1910). While Atjaimikule kept people from working their own fields for months, he ordered 70 to 80 men to prepare fields for himself and his wives. Both Atjaimikule and Gaando trampled upon the rights of their subjects, insulting a number of men by taking their wives, and seizing from others whatever took their fancy. No one was allowed to leave the village without first informing these leaders. Both men prided themselves on their breaking of fundamental social taboos; Atjaimikule, for example, lived with both mother and daughter, an act considered despicable by most Djuka.

Many religious leaders in Bush Negro society have in the past launched iconoclastic campaigns directed against one or more spirit cults. Atjaimikule acted quite differently, choosing instead to spearhead a renaissance for the spirit medium cults. His primary aim was to rehabilitate the *Ampuku* cult, the pantheon of forest deities. The world view propagated by the *Ampuku* cult stresses the harshness and brutality of the world in which human beings live; in order to adapt and hold their own within this world, people must grasp any desirable thing which comes within reach, whether through the use of force or through cunning. Persons susceptible to *Ampuku* mediumship feel irritated by the rules and interdictions imposed upon them by society; they tend to oppose themselves to these, and to see their own aggressive inclinations embodied in natural forces.

Within the transformed theological universe that had been forged by *Gaan Gadu's* priests, the new image of a strict, zealous and vindictive God held a central place. This image encountered resistance when people began to feel that it had been formed in the likeness of the European God or, worse still, the European himself. Many saw in this deity and his servitors a strong element of hypocrisy, a cant they always had sensed in Europeans. After all, Europeans appeared not to be bothered by contradictions between creed and practice; for them, there seemed to be no difficulty in reconciling the Gospel of love for one's fellow men with daily business transactions that demonstrated the starkest forms of human exploitation. If the true law of the universe was the exploitation of one man by another, of one nation by its neighbours, then why conceal this truth? Atjaimikule demonstrated that such facts of life could be brought to the surface. Assertiveness in its bluntest forms, callousness in human relationships — these could be practised in the open, so long as one remained close to the sources of supernatural power. One such source, long neglected, was the dangerous forest gods. Once these deities had re-emerged in full force, the old practice of conscience probing — a cumbersome impediment from the point of view of acquisitive individuals — went out the door. With this barrier out of the way, Atjaimikule felt it his right to seize other men's wives, transgress rules and taboos and, in general, conduct himself as a tyrant.

Atjaimikule convinced the new class of boat owners that they were perfectly equipped to meet the challenge of an era of individualism, and no longer needed to pay attention to the ideals of communal and harmonious living. The time had come to disregard all of the restrictive rules which had been laid down by the deceitful *Gaan Gadu*. The boatmen could face the exigencies of these hard times better without such restraints.

Mediums of forest spirits were the protagonists of an ideology centering around their image of 'natural man'; they were advocating a new order in which 'artificial' social constraints would play no part. *Ampuku* adepts, by word and deed, attested to Anansi's (the spider in the folk tales) time-honoured wisdom, and confirmed that man is a creature full of greed; in their view, all prohibitions, divine or other, that would keep a man from enjoying himself merely served to cheat him out of what was due to him. Thus a contemporary (MBB 1911: 79) of Atjaimikule could write about him: 'He knows only one thing: to see to it that he himself enjoys life fully.' In retrospect, we can say that the rumours of 1908 about tiger-cats running loose in Tapanahoni villages had been symbolically portentous of what was to follow.

6. THE STRATEGIES OF WOMEN

The relationship between the privileged boat owners and Atjaimikule was complex and problematical. It is apparent, in any case, that Atjaimikule's ideology was well suited to their needs. It helped them to adapt to the tough world that foreign adventurers, with their rapacious capitalism, had helped to create in the hinterland of Suriname and French Guiana. At the same time, Atjaimikule also encouraged the spirit medium cults, thereby giving a boost to the old therapeutic community which, as pointed out before, recruited its members (mediums, ancestor priests) from the ranks of the dependants, and furthered their interests. It is true that the ideology propagated by Atjaimikule supported the powerful, humiliated the meek, and glorified exploitation. But this defence of the rights of the strong could be as helpful in its own way to a dependent woman rationalizing her manipulation of an

oracle as it could to a boat owner defending his right to dispose of his French francs as he saw fit. It should be kept in mind here also that the number of dependent women in the community far exceeded the number of boat owners.

On a few occasions in the past, collective action had enabled women to vent their pent-up emotions about male defection and despotism. The revolt of the 'moon house' occupants is a case in point. For a brief time, the oppressive rules of menstrual seclusion were suspended. Such collective action, however, did not produce any lasting effect. During the era of economic individualism then reigning, men and women wanting a share in the benefits brought by modern prosperity had to make their own way. For women, mediumship was the main channel through which they could improve their social position.

Students of possession and mediumship have pointed out that these phenomena sometimes enable the underprivileged to find ways of redressing the ills inherent in their social system. It is important to note, however, that not all such spirit cults produce the same sorts of reactions to situations of deprivation. In times of stress, the selection of one type of spirit possession over another may represent a kind of strategy. In Djuka culture, the strategies involved in becoming a *Papa Gadu* medium are different from those associated with the *Ampuku* cult.

Our use of the word 'strategy' or the phrase 'selection of spirit possession' requires further explanation. It should be stressed that it is seldom that a medium consciously and deliberately embarks on such a career — at least in the spirit cults open to women. This sort of spirit possession can be understood only as an emotional reaction, deeply felt, to a perplexing situation. Most persons who eventually become spirit mediums first go through a long period of affliction. Seizure by spirits must be seen, first and foremost, then, as a form of emotional expression — as the case of the rebellion against the 'moon house' makes so clear.

The invading spirits causing possession in women are of three kinds. Of these three, two classes of spirits — the *Papa Gadu* and *Ampuku* deities — do not involve the host in taking any blame upon herself. Thus both of these classes of spirits are easily adapted to the expression of protest against unfavourable circumstances.

The *Papa Gadu* spirits tend to reassure their mediums about their ability to command their life situation. Significantly, they do not forbid their vessels from having relations with the other sex. These spirits do not press for independence for women, but inspire attempts to secure better conditions within the framework of existing marital and gender relations. Aggression and frustration are given vent without directly challenging the status quo (cf. LEWIS 1971: 200).

The *Ampuku* or forest spirits bring another message and promise gains of a quite different nature. Assertiveness is an *Ampuku* medium's basic aim. Among men, the aggressive impulse is often given expression in stories of famous hunting exploits, or accounts of apparitions and other unusual events encountered in the deep forest. For females, on the other hand, there is the idiom of *Ampuku*, shot through with images of strife and danger — often including male persecutors appearing in dreams. *Ampuku* mediumship in females often spells trouble for their spouses. Such spirits are believed to kindle in women a desire for independence; they counsel their female mediums to be on their guard against attempts by males to subjugate them, and they urge them to challenge male authority. The *Ampuku* spirits that take possession of women are themselves represented as male; they symbolize the 'inner man' in a woman. *Ampuku* mediums reacting to a threatened loss of security rely on the masculine powers of self-assertion, rather than feminine tactics based on glamour and seduction.

In Djuka religious practice, nowadays as well as formerly, the androgynous qualities of the human being find their most persuasive manifestation in the form taken by *Ampuku* possession. Many invading spirits are believed to be of the opposite sex from their medium. It seems that, whenever the male and female elements in one's nature are at war, the Djuka will interpret such inner conflicts as caused by the powers of the forest.

Among the Djuka, as among Para Creoles (WOODING 1973: 349), various problems, ranging from infertility to an inability to adjust to married life, are seen as being caused by *Ampuku* spirits. Somatic and psychological disturbances are often lumped together and attributed to these spirits. When the course of a Djuka woman's reproductive life is interrupted by miscarriages or a

prolonged failure to conceive and when, moreover, her marital history is punctuated by quarrels, break-ups or general instability, the conclusion will most likely be reached that an *Ampuku* spirit has been dogging her steps. Women with a zest for independence are believed to be especially prone to possession by *Ampuku* spirits.

As far as can be ascertained, *Ampuku* mediumship loomed less large in the nineteenth century than it did fifty years ago, or than it does today. Although a few Djuka men, and perhaps women, achieved fame and notoriety as *Ampuku* mediums during the last century, most Djuka at that time considered this kind of possession a Saramaka speciality. But all of this was to change after Atjaimikule, a Saramaka, set his example on the Sara Creek (1905) and later, the Cottica (1910). Only then did *Ampuku* mediumship become coveted by large numbers of Djuka men and women. The renaissance of the *Papa Gadu* spirit cults ($\pm$ 1905) preceded the rise of the *Ampuku* cult by only a few years. As late as the 1960s and 1970s, female *Ampuku* adepts were not in short supply — one even made a career during this period as a religious leader. Back in the nineteenth century, however, the future of the *Ampuku* pantheon was still far from certain; *Gaan Gadu*'s priests had extirpated the small *Ampuku* cult in the early 1890s. But as it turned out, within fifteen years the cult was to resurface, once again offering females a channel for symbolic expression, redress, and the pursuit of material gains.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

At the turn of the century most males in the productive age categories profited from the lucrative transport trade. To gain further insight into the great variety of female religious responses to the new male affluence during this period, the key variable of 'power distribution' seems helpful. A rough division of Suriname's hinterland into an eastern and a western zone allows us to see that there was a differential distribution of power. Those Bush Negroes settled in the eastern zone earned their living in the same river basin where their families lived; those in the west, in contrast, had to migrate to French Guiana in great numbers and for many

years, leaving behind their wives, children, the elderly and the ailing. It should come as no surprise that Anake's cargo cult, centering around communal ownership of a considerable part of the means of production, was situated in the western zone. Here the ties between boatmen and dependants were more tenuous than in the east (longer periods of absence were involved, and there was less financial support of dependants); this meant that problems such as famine were more pronounced in the west, but it also meant that the wealthy exerted less control there (the 'power distribution' variable).

The *Gaan Gadu* movement which originated within the Marowijne-Lawa basin and continued to receive most of its support from people in the eastern zone, intended to make their villages safe for capitalism — that is, to keep things smooth for the owners of the means of production (boats), and for their crew members. Although Atjaimikule, with his following in the western zone, did not challenge private ownership — he even defended his neglect and exploitation of dependants as a law of nature — the absence of an idiom of evil directed at dependants is revealing. Obviously, Atjaimikule saw that there was little profit to be gained from persecuting his own followers. Most importantly, Atjaimikule's *Na Ogi* cult offered the dependants in his area access to a kind of countervailing power (spirit medium cults).

Much of this discussion has focussed on *new* movements that arose around 1900. One should, however, not lose sight of the older, traditional mechanisms for redressing some of the inequities in the relationship between the sexes. *Gaan Gadu*'s priests, when endeavouring to extirpate the spirit cults, certainly did not lose sight of these. The 'traditional world' is not a homogenous, stable whole, but on close inspection reveals a great number of conflicting forces, along with institutionalized outlets for their expression. This paper has discussed two such channels. More interesting than either new or old movements and expressive outlets considered by themselves, it seems to us, is the interplay between new conditions of life (as either catalyst or damper) and older mechanisms of countervailing power. It is this which we have tried to bring to light in this contribution.

NOTES

1. We would like to thank KENNETH BILBY and BRIAN DU TOIT for valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

The data on which this paper is based were collected during eighteen months of field work on the Tapanahoni in the early 1960s, and later during six return trips of shorter duration, mainly in the 1970s. The research forms part of a more comprehensive study (with oral history and archival work) of Djuka society and culture.

2. Spiritual conditions for women worsened as well. The *Gaan Gadu* priests protected the reputations of the successful freight-carriers but allowed the dependants — a category which encompassed the old, infirm, disabled and the women — to be stigmatized as witches. This was new. Up till then, mainly ambitious men who rose above the common level were singled out as targets for witchcraft accusations (VAN WETERING 1973; THODEN VAN VELZEN 1978).

3. Our data on mediumship were gathered in the early 1960s. It is always hazardous to extrapolate on the basis of data collected during one's field work to a much earlier period. We discussed this problem with Djuka (oral) historians who generally supported our views on the continuity in the distribution of mediumship over age groups and sexes and the proportional representation of the cults. These same sources made an exception for the *Ampuku* cult; they felt that it was smaller at the end of the nineteenth century than it is today.

4. The theme of institutionalized diversity in religious experience that is characteristic of the Afro-American spirit cults in Suriname has been dealt with more fully in THODEN VAN VELZEN & VAN WETERING (1983).

5. The approximate date of the resurgence of the *Papa Gadu* cult has been arrived at by comparing the reports of SPALBURG (1979) and DE GOEJE (1908). Whereas the former, whose diary covers the period 1896–1900, makes no reference to activities connected with the *Papa Gadu* cult at all, the latter makes note of an elaborate feast in honour of these deities at Diitabiki in 1907. During those days, according to oral historians, Godo Olo was the centre of a nascent *Papa Gadu* cult.

6. Da Amooikudu was the first to describe to us the turmoil surrounding the resurgence of the *Papa Gadu* cult.

7. This is, for instance, expressed by the phrase 'she uses cold ablutions' (*a e wasi koo wataa*) which announces that the dangerous period after childbirth has terminated.

8. Great singers, whether male or female, arouse exultation. They often enjoy considerable prerogatives.

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