THE MUSHROOM AND THE PARASOL

A WEST INDIAN RIDDLE

BY

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M. J. BECKWITH, in *Jamaica Anansi Stories*, 1 records a Jamaican riddle which seems to be good currency in many of the West Indian territories: — *My father have a house up on one post.* Answer: *Umbrella.* In another of her books 2 she registers a more idiomatic dialectal version: — *My father have a house stand upon one post.* Rev. GEORGE E. LAWRENCE 3) found the same riddle in the Leeward Islands (Montserrat?): — *Me jadah hab a house wid only one upright and twenty rafter. Wha’ dat?* A Sranan Tonggo (Taki-taki, Negro English) variant was discovered by HERSKOVITS 4) in Suriname: *Mi mekk wan see nanga wan posty,* 'me make one house with one post'. Answer: *Na wan prasoro* (parasol). Slight variants are in use in other parts of the West Indies, including those areas where the common language is French Creole.

Miss Beckwith pointed out 1) that two versions of this riddle have been documented for East and West Africa; in Suaheli (VELTEN): — *I have built me a great house; it stands upon one post;* and in Hausa (RATTRAY): — *I build a hut with only one post to prop up the roof.* It would be difficult to say how widely the umbrella riddle is spread over the African continent, but the similarity between these two East and West African forms and West Indian forms is certainly striking. Naturally the concept of an umbrella equaling a house built on one post or relying on one post to keep the roof up could occur independently to more than one individual and be adopted by more than one people. What is striking is that the joke continues to be made by Africans or by people largely of African origin and does not turn up in the collections of European riddles which I have been able to consult. That the circular umbrella or parasol was in use on the West Coast of Africa in the early eighteenth century and probably earlier

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1) *Jamaica Anansi Stories*, New York, 1924.
2) *Black Roadways*, Chapel Hill, 1929.
is well known. Fr. LABAT *) published an engraving entitled Couronne-
ment du Roy de Juda à la Coste de Guinée au Mois d’Avril, 1725. Amongst
the distinguished foreigners attending this coronation — European am-
assadors and others anxious to purchase black slaves — sits a Grand du
Pays tenant un Parasol, which is round-shaped and wide like our modern
beach umbrellas, and quite unlike the rough, irregular leaf-umbrella often
used nowadays in various parts of Tropical Africa. In an earlier Africa the
umbrella may have been ceremonial as well as functional.

Let us turn now from umbrellas and parasols to mushrooms! In the
West Indies the most common generic term for ‘mushroom’ is a metaphor
involving the parasol and, often, a supernatural parasol. Forms such as
paraguai(s), paraguata(s), paraguito are common in Cuba, the Dominican
Republic and Porto Rico. Jumbi umbrella is heard in St. Kitts, Antigua,
Montserrat, Trinidad and British Guiana; duppy umbrella in Barbados
and Jamaica (where it is restricted to a few areas — junjo is the usual
term). The duppy and jumbi are African spirits which have survived in
the New World. They are related to the zombi of the French-Creole-spea-
kling islands — the mushroom is parésol zombi in parts of Dominica. A
‘Christianised’ rendering of this form is parésol djab (< F. rabia), heard
in St. Lucia. A parallel version is parasol di diablo in the Papiamento
of Curacao. Sranan tongo (Taki-taki) uses a form which fits the umbrella
image into a familiar European pattern: todo-prasoro ‘toad-parasol’ (cf.
Eng. toad-stool, Dutch paddestoel etc.). A proverb in the same language 1)
plays on this word: Mi no can tro’ todo fo ope prasoro gi sneki ‘I cannot
change the toad so that he will open a parasol for the snake’.

The supernatural nature of the mushroom is well attested in the folklore
of both Europe and Africa and the fairy ring of the pasture is as awe-
inspiring to the rural Irishman as mushrooms are to the Fulani of Ada-
mawa 2) who dislike them “because they spring up overnight, the impli-
cation being that they are associated with nocturnal spirits”. It is therefor
difficult to decide whether the supernatural umbrella-mushroom came
wholly from Africa, or whether it is a hybrid Eurafrican growth which
developed in the West Indies. It is not likely that the image is purely
European as it is not documented in the classical works on the dialec-
tology of the colonising nations of Europe. It certainly does not appear
in GILLIÉRON’s 3) nor in Peninsular Spanish which is singularly poor in
terms for ‘mushroom’ as compared with say the sub-dialects of Porto Rico
and Cuba 4), nor in the English of the British Isles which has bequeathed
‘mushroom’ alone to the New England States 5). Even if the Africanists

2) HERSKOVITS op. cit., Taki-taki proverb no. 104.
3) Letter from Dr. J. BERRY, School of Oriental and African Studies,
University of London.
4) J. GILLIÉRON & E. EDMONT: Atlas linguistique de la France, Paris,
1903–1910.
5) T. NAVARRO TOMAS: El español en Puerto Rico. Rio Piedras, P. R.,
1948, map 44. Also communications from Ing. JULIAN ACUÑA, Estación
experimental agronómica, Santiago de las Vegas, Cuba.
1939–1943, map 279.