

Robin Brooks  
July 2010

## **Teaching Folk Culture: Images of the Nine Night Traditional Ritual in Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb* and Michelle Cliff's *Abeng***

### ***I. Introduction***

Folk culture, specifically Afro-Caribbean religion and Carib history, are critical themes in Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb* and Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*. The representation of folk culture has been seen by many scholars as a defining element of the region's traditions – which have emphasized Afro-Caribbean religion more so than Carib or Amerindian history. Both novels function in a pedagogical fashion to teach readers about the practice of the Nine Night traditional ritual in particular and about the importance of folk religion in general. Consequently, the theme of religion/spirituality infiltrates the narratives in several ways that undermine the hierarchical relation between folk religions and ceremonies such as Nine Night and orthodox Christianity. In *Beka Lamb*, Beka and Toycie attend a Catholic school where they are exposed to the traditions and rituals of Catholicism. The names of Catholic saints are also introduced throughout *Beka*. Daddy Bill is insulted when Sister Virgil speaks ill of “his Protestant upbringing, [which was] for a long time tradition among the black population” (92). Community members in the narrative believe a Creole character, Maskman, was “obeahed” by a group of Carib people for compromising a Carib man's daughter. The narrator even makes comparisons between Christianity and obeah when Beka goes to the Holy Redeemer Cathedral to pray for Toycie: “At first she had been unable to decide which person in the Trinity to ask for help. In the end she chose the Holy Ghost. His reputation was much like that of an obeahman's...” (141). Similarly, Cliff opens *Abeng* with a description of the Savage's Sunday morning church ritual. The characters attend certain churches based on their class background. Readers experience the sermonic tradition of call and response from Brother Emmanuel who urges the mostly female congregation that they must “not smoke the weed, mus' not smoke tobacco, nor ganja...” (15). A slave woman, Mma Alli, teaches Inez, who tries to remember from her maroonage heritage how to make “spells with feathers and stones and shells” (34), more about obeah and magic. Brother Emmanuel of the mainstream church does not appear superior to the rather unorthodox spiritual leader Mma Alli; in fact, Mma Alli may be more effective and powerful.

The theme of religion/spirituality in these narratives connects to the belief in an afterlife. Both Edgell and Cliff portray a scene of a funeral or death ceremony in the narratives. These scenes portray a Nine Night ritual/tradition/celebration. The Nine Night celebration is based on the belief that a deceased person's spirit is finally put to rest on the ninth night after the person dies. Julie E. Moody-Freeman describes such a tradition: “Nine nights...is a ceremony which like the wake celebrates the gone with food, dance, drums, and singing nine nights after death. It is similar to ‘post-burial ceremonies of West African peoples ... [and] bear a striking

resemblance to the after-burial rites of the Ibo people' (Patterson 198)" (32). Moody-Freeman also reveals "the wake is 'a symbol of the past traditions' which is in jeopardy of being forgotten" (33). Moreover, Nine Night has been a trope in anglophone Caribbean writing for over a century. Michael Thelwell's novel *The Harder They Come*, Dennis Scott's play *Echo in the Bone*, Una Marson's play *Pocomania*, and Andrew Salkey's novel *The Quality of Violence* all make reference to Nine Night. Cliff and Edgell are thus contributing to but inevitably also signifying on an existing literary tradition that has been dominated by men. Through the scenes under study in this teaching guide, Edgell and Cliff underscore the interrelated themes of memory, community, marronage, and tradition preservation.

## ***II. Objectives***

- 1) Students will become acquainted with a specific cultural tradition that has African roots, the Nine Night, and its presence in places of the African Diaspora, namely Belize and Jamaica. The aim here is to examine vestiges of African traditions within the places of these novels.
- 2) Students will explore how this tradition informs the literary text by focusing on its thematic/structural and sociological functions. Both Edgell and Cliff describe these scenes in painstaking detail. Edgell opens and closes her book with Beka professing to properly observe her friend's death. Cliff delivers a description of the Nine Night in her ninth chapter, which is, most likely, *not* a coincidence. Clearly, both authors intend to preserve and pass the knowledge of the Nine Night tradition to readers.
- 3) Students will learn how and why the tradition has transformed over time. Characters in both novels express how cultural traditions (specifically burial rites) have changed. Students will examine the causes and effects of such changes.

## ***III. Instructor's Materials (Background Information)***

- 1) **Brathwaite, Kamau. "Kumina: The Spirit of African Survival in Jamaica." *Jamaica Journal* 12.42 (1978): 44-63.**

The Kumina, a dance ritual, is often performed during the Nine Night. Brathwaite reveals that Kumina is "the living fragment of an African (mainly Kongo) religion in the Caribbean/Jamaica" (46). During this dance ritual the spirit of the deceased person may take possession of the living in order to deliver final messages and farewells. See p. 51 and 53 for additional texts on the topic. See p. 55 for pictures of children performing the Kumina. Other: Kumina is also the word for an Afro-Jamaican religion that has been closely associated with Nine Night. However, Nine Night is a ritual practiced in a broad spectrum of religions in Jamaica, and as Edgell's novel makes clear, far beyond Jamaica.

- 2) **Carty, Hilary S. *Folk Dances of Jamaica: An Insight*. London: Dance Books, 1988.**

Carty describes the Kumina dance ritual. A Kumina King or Queen (Mother) leads the Kumina ritual. The drum plays a vital role. The male drum is the Kbandu. Carty notes that spraying white rum on the stretched ewe skin of the Kbandu is important in the drum-making ritual because it helps create the pitch, and so, “spraying the head of the drum with rum before a ceremony (libation) is functional as well as spiritual” (21). Carty mentions that there is a central pole clothed in colors and a round (circle) in which the activities of the dance ritual take place.

**3) Moody-Freeman, Julie E. “Waking the Gone: Nine Nights as Cultural Remembrance of an African Heritage in Belizean Literature.” *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme* 23.2 (2004): 30-37.**

Moody-Freeman’s essay is quite useful to understanding the role of the Nine Night tradition in Edgell’s *Beka Lamb*. Her essential claim is as follows: “Beka's wake for Toycie functions in *Beka Lamb* to recover stories of how colonialism has affected the lives of women, like Toycie and National Vellor. [And] ... the second function of Toycie's wake [is] to remember the often muted history of slavery and resistance in Belize” (34).

**4) Simpson, George Eaton. “The Nine Night Ceremony in Jamaica.” *The Journal of American Folklore*, 70.278 (1957): 329-335.**

Simpson structures his article in three parts. The first part provides general information about Nine Night, while the last two describe actual Nine Night celebrations. Simpson notes there are variations. Generally, however, family and friends gather in a yard enjoying foods and drinks, including rum. They sing hymnals. On the ninth night, the spirit of the deceased will possess the leader and deliver a message.

#### ***IV. Key Passages***

These are the key passages highlighting scenes connected to the Nine Night Ritual that instructors should highlight. The page numbers in this teaching guide come from the following publication of Edgell’s text: Edgell, Zee. *Beka Lamb*. Caribbean Writers Series, 26. London: Heinemann, 1982. Print.

*Beka Lamb*:

- 1) p. 5 (end of chapter one, last five paragraphs)
- 2) chapter eleven
- 3) chapter twelve
- 4) p. 171 (end of final chapter, last paragraph)

*Abeng*:

- 1) p. 50 (beginning of chapter seven, funeral procession)
- 2) chapter nine
- 3) p. 67 (beginning of chapter ten, history of Caribs)

## V. Assignments

- 1) Close reading/Analysis: Highlight the passage in *Beka Lamb* where community women, Miss Janie, Winny and Flo comment that Granny Straker's wake celebration is different from those of the past (p. 75, chapter 12). Direct students to identify and explain specific lines in the passage that reveal changes in the tradition. Ask students why they (and the characters) think the changes occurred (based on the characters' conversation). Then, provide them with the information Moody-Freeman delivers in her essay about the changes and any other information you have found.

Moody-Freeman writes: "The strict British colonial laws did much to suppress African traditions. Slaves were prevented from beating the 'gombay or goombay' drums in the wake of the white settlers' complaints that they were too loud. ... Zee Edgell's novel, *Beka Lamb*, identifies the British suppression of nine nights, that Bolland and Patterson record, while documenting traces of the tradition that remain in drums, dance, and song during the 1950s, the setting for the novel" (32). Be sure to also include that people's refusal to continue such traditions or disbelief in such traditions, as initially Lilla initially displays, is also a factor in the changes to the tradition.

- 2) Have students outline a Nine Night celebration based on the two novel's details. Note that there are variations. Use the passages from Edgell's chapter twelve and Cliff's chapter nine. Introduce them to the Kumina ritual and Nine Night as expressed by Brathwaite, Carty, etc. Ask them to identify the key characteristics of the Nine Night ritual in *Beka Lamb*. Create and fill in a comparison chart.
- 3) Have students examine the community's treatment of Mad Hannah and her son's death. See chapter nine of *Abeng*. Then have them compare that scene with the funeral procession that comes earlier in the novel on p. 50. Have them answer questions, such as:
  - Why does the community refuse to help Hannah bury her son?
  - Does the community's refusal represent a breakdown in community relations?
  - Does the community's refusal represent disbelief in the tradition, forgetting of the tradition, etc.?
- 4) Have students examine the connection between the Nine Night, memory, and the Caribs. In both novels, the history of Carib people is revered. In *Beka* on the ninth morning after Granny Straker's death, Beka says, "Caribs have a lot of traditions that creoles give up...keeping them is a good thing if they don't do any harm" (67). Later, in explaining why Caribs and creoles do not get along too well, Lilla says, "Maybe it's because Carib people remind us of what we lost trying to get up in the world...the more you left behind the old ways, the more acceptable you were to the powerful people in the government and the churches..." (70). In *Abeng*, Clare goes to a Carib cinema at the beginning of chapter ten, which allows Cliff to position a history lesson of the Caribs immediately after her

ninth chapter: “They were a fierce warrior people who opposed the *conquistadores* with skill and power” (emphasis in original, 67). While the name of the theater may trigger Clare’s thinking about Caribs, the Carib theater itself has nothing to do with Caribs. It is just a name of the building, like the Rialto. At any rate, it appears that both authors are connecting Caribs to a history worth remembering.

Concerning remembering, Moody Freeman writes: “The effects of remembrance through the nine nights ritual is important in this novel, in its recollection of Toycie and Beka's personal lives, and in connecting these memories historically to an African heritage. Beka Lamb rehearses the West African ceremony and practice the belief that the deceased should be celebrated not mourned. Like the African slaves who did not mourn death because it was an escape from slavery, the novel does not mourn death; it mourns the hardships of life” (36).

## **VI. Other**

Go to the University of West Indies (Mona) Singer’s YouTube page to watch them perform a parody of a Nine Night celebration. Have students discuss their reaction to the performance. There are two parts. Both are slightly under seven minutes.

<http://www.youtube.com/user/UWISingersmona#p/c/49B33B9C03957E3A>

## **VII. Intertextual Comparisons**

- 1) Michael Thelwell includes a chapter in *The Harder They Come* entitled “Nine Night Version: Dreams and Visions.” What purpose does this cultural tradition play in his novel? Is it for the same purposes as in *Beka Lamb* and *Abeng*?
- 2) Paule Marshall includes the Big Drum celebration, which has similar features to the Nine Night cultural tradition, in *Praisesong for the Widow*. Does this cultural tradition serve the same purposes as those in *Beka Lamb* and *Abeng*? Additionally, Moody-Freeman does not mention the Big Drum ritual, but she does mention the significance of Marshall’s novel: “Like Paule Marshall's ‘Sleeper's Wake,’ in *Praisesong for the Widow*, *Beka Lamb* is central to Diaspora studies because its mode of telling recovers a tradition that links writer, characters, and readers to a tradition and history at once lost and found” (36).