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 Tongo (Taki-taki, Negro English) variant was discovered by HERSKOVITS 4 in Suriname: *Mi meki wan so go mung go posu,* '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 equalling 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.