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# Indigeneity and the Indo-Caribbean in Cyril Dabydeen's *Dark Swirl*

ALIYAH KHAN

ON 9 SEPTEMBER 2010, at the beginning of Amerindian Heritage Month in Guyana, the Umana Yana or “Meeting Place,” the most visible symbol of indigenous cultural participation in the Guyanese postcolonial state, burned to the ground in an electrical fire. This *benab*, a super-sized replica of the conical *troolie* palm leaf-thatched village dwellings of the Wai Wai people of rural Konashen, Guyana, was erected in 1972 by Wai Wai tribesmen who laboured for eighty days at the behest of the Cold War-era, Afro-Guyanese-dominated government of Forbes Burnham (Jackson 7; Joseph and Thomas 10). Umana Yana was built as a meeting place for visiting foreign Non-Aligned Movement dignitaries, though the Wai Wai themselves had no official role in diplomatic talks with Guyana’s global peers from the newly independent African, Asian, and Caribbean states. Guyanese postcolonial statesmanship has always been the province of the descendants of enslaved Africans and indentured South Asians brought by Dutch and British colonialists to labour on sugar plantations from the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, respectively.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary Afro- and Indo-Guyanese claims to sovereignty are based on this intimate historical labour relationship with the land, but that relationship is so recent in epochal time that the new Guyanese rulers must invoke continuity with the effaced indigenous “Amerindian” presence to establish legitimacy while simultaneously denying the indigenous inhabitants their land rights and very identities.

Guyana is home to nine tribes officially recognized by the government: the Carib, Arawak, Wai Wai, Wapishana, Warrau, Arecuna, Akawaio, Makushi, and Patamona. These indigenous peoples of Guyana now number about 80,000 — about 10,000 more than at the end of the fifteenth century — and comprise between 9 and 10 percent of the country’s population (Ishmael 9-10; Jackson 7). Indigenous villages are disproportionately located in the Amazonian interior and Rupununi savannahs of Guyana, removing them physically and symbolically from

the Atlantic coastal capital of Georgetown. They have little direct political representation in the postcolonial nation-state, and their affairs are administered by the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs. When in 2006 the Guyanese government sought to update the 1976 Amerindian Act, which governed indigenous rights and sovereignty, the ministry refused the demand of indigenous rights campaigners to replace the antiquated colonial term “Amerindian” with “Indigenous Peoples” in the revised act. As Shona Jackson says, this was “a decision not to let Indigenous Peoples self-define”:

The government, however, argues that the term Amerindian must be retained in Guyana because other groups (who are not mentioned) can also be considered indigenous. It is only in this brief moment that the minister’s office even gestures to the larger problems surrounding indigeneity in Guyana, which begins with the difficulty of saying who in fact are Indigenous Peoples. (24)

The Guyanese government’s implication was that Afro-Guyanese, Indo-Guyanese, and descendants of smaller groups of Chinese and Portuguese indentured labourers were also indigenous peoples, despite having arrived in the Caribbean during and as a result of European colonialism. Moreover, the destiny of the nation lay with these newly “indigenous” peoples rather than with the indigenous peoples of the “past.” This recent exclusion of pre-Columbian indigenous groups from Caribbean modernity and futurity is significant in regional discourses of indigeneity not only because it (again) disenfranchises existing tribal groups but also because it exceeds previous debates over the slightly less contentious term “native,” which privileges the birthplace of the subject over any type of primordial connection to the land. To claim indigeneity is to claim everything: all land, all rights, all modes of belonging. Jackson says that, in this vision of the Guyanese nation-state, Umana Yana is the symbol that renders the indigenous peoples and their labour “visible only as cultural, not the productive labor of economic development that allows the formerly enslaved and indentured to claim belonging and political right” (10).

Following Jackson and Fiona Darroch, I show in this essay that postcolonial national power is triangulated and transferred among indigenous peoples, Afro-Guyanese, and Indo-Guyanese through the appropriation of indigenous myth and the syncretism of religious belief.

I read Indo-Guyanese Canadian writer and poet Cyril Dabydeen's short novel *Dark Swirl* (1988), which describes the cultural encounter among a rural Indo-Guyanese family, the indigenous reptilian water spirit the massacouraman, and a white British naturalist, to argue that, like Afro-Guyanese, Indo-Guyanese are interpellated into the nation through "Amerindian" indigeneity and myths of belonging but that indigenous myth, unlike indigenous physical artifacts, lends itself to syncretism with Indo-Caribbean Hindu and Muslim religious beliefs without being destroyed in the encounter. Dabydeen's novel is particularly unusual in Guyanese literature because it imagines the undertheorized direct environmental encounter between Indo-Guyanese and indigenous populations through the indigenous myth of the massacouraman. Moreover, the Indo-Caribbean community's usual interlocutor of national and regional belonging, the Afro-Caribbean, is notably absent in *Dark Swirl*.<sup>2</sup>

Dabydeen was born to Hindu Indo-Guyanese parents in the Canje River sugar and rice agricultural district, where *Dark Swirl* takes place, and this landscape continues to haunt his work and imagination (Dabydeen, "Bowl" 51). This "Indo-Caribbean imagination," he says,

is not readily homogeneous as a concept. . . . It may also embrace the angst of settlement in a new country and the consequent sense of forlornness and nostalgia as one yearns for the old tropic place, leading to the poetic or fanciful. It is also changeable, intuitive, and absolutely irrational in its many selves and manifestations. Simultaneously it is that which transcends the ordinary and mundane and transmutes the quotidian into higher acts and events apprehended at the moment of illumination. And, not least, it may be in the numinous reaction to the prevailing myths of Canada as a cold, virtually hostile land. (47-48)

The Indo-Caribbean imagination is a *migrant* one, with the flexibility to encompass Dabydeen's and the Indo-Guyanese diaspora's immigration to and encounter with Canada. Dabydeen, a prolific author of over twenty novels and short-story and poetry collections, as well as numerous critical essays and opinion pieces, was the 1984-87 poet laureate of Ottawa and winner of three major Guyanese literary prizes: the Sandbach Parker Gold Medal for Poetry (1964), the first A.J. Seymour Lyric Poetry Prize (1967), and the most prestigious, for his novel *Drums of My Flesh*, the Guyana Prize for Literature (2006). His work none-

theless remains understudied. Both of his major biographers, Jameela Begum and Alan McLeod, write of being struck, in the man himself and in his work, by a lack of characteristic postcolonial “self-flagellation and disparagement of country of origin that is common among exilic and emigrant artists” (McLeod 83) and an ability to speak and write “without bitterness, without anger and frustration about his predicament as a creative writer in a white-dominated society” (Begum 21). As theorized by Cathy Caruth and others, postcolonial literature is often read through a paradigm that combines psychoanalysis and the expectation of bodily and other trauma in the sundering from Africa, India, and the “Old World”; however, even though Dabydeen’s work revolves around Caribbean tropes of displacement and exile, it displays a strong mystical bent, a gently satiric engagement with rural Hindu Guyana (as characterized by his 1985 novel *The Wizard Swami*), and an insistence on acknowledging indigeneity and indigenous land rights in the Caribbean and Canada that exceeds the lens of Middle Passage trauma.

Dabydeen’s work invests neither in V.S. Naipaul’s dead end of the postcolonial “mimic man,” doomed to imitate colonial structures and modes of being in perpetuity,<sup>3</sup> nor in what fellow Guyanese writer Wilson Harris termed “the pornography of empire,” a turn of phrase that he applied to the sexually explicit and visceral poetry of Dabydeen’s cousin David Dabydeen in the latter’s 1984 poetry collection *Slave Song* (qtd. in Darroch 172). Cyril Dabydeen’s oeuvre is also difficult to quantify as postcolonial Indo-Caribbean literature because it does not always engage with the characteristic settings of the plantation and the ship of indentured labourers crossing the *kala pani* (“black water”) from India, instead showing more of an affinity for the Guyanese jungles, rivers, and savannahs that feature prominently in the Afro-Guyanese and Creole literary tradition established by Harris and others. These are all reasons why Dabydeen’s work remains underappreciated and why it is a model for a different kind of hopeful engagement with postcolonial spaces that looks toward the future rather than being mired in the past.

*Dark Swirl* is set in the period around Guyanese independence from Britain in 1966 in a rural, unnamed Canje River village abutting the Amazonian jungle. The novel begins with ten-year-old Indo-Guyanese boy Josh and his fear of the village creek, which he imagines harbours some malevolent force. Josh is particularly sensitive, but his parents and the other villagers are also well attuned to the possibility that any

freshwater lake or creek might be home to the reptilian massacouraman, a creature once propitiated by indigenous people who no longer dwell in the area. Also present in the village is a British naturalist who has come, in the last days of empire, to catalogue and collect specimens of the local flora and fauna. He remains unnamed and is referred to as “the stranger” throughout the novel. Josh becomes consumed with vivid, feverish dreams of drowning and being pulled under the surface by a creature with “large emerald eyes” and “a mighty board-stiff tail,” and he refuses to eat (23). His parents, Savitri and Ghulam, and then the entire village begin blaming his “sickness” both on the ostensibly haunted creek and on the white stranger, whose collecting of animals and plants is so unfathomable that they quickly accuse him of being a “bad man” who “wuk obeah wid snake an’ cracadile” (27). The villagers become consumed by the idea of the massacouraman, though no one ever catches more than a glimpse of the creature, and it is more often seen in their dreams than in their waking life. Eventually, Ghulam comes to believe that the advent of the massacouraman is a symbol of Indo-Guyanese migration, a reminder of what the villagers were in India and what they might become in the Caribbean. This realization is linked to Josh’s recovery; in the end, the massacouraman disappears, even though it has awakened in them the idea that they are now resident in the Caribbean. The British naturalist, for his part, is symbolically burned brown by the sun and begins to believe in the existence of the massacouraman, but in the end he refuses Josh’s invitation to live with and become one of the villagers, disappears into the jungle, and is never heard from again. It is the destiny of the villagers to become citizens of Guyana, though the mythical massacouraman appears as a reminder that, though they might be tolerated because of a history of oppression and displacement shared with the indigenous inhabitants, they themselves are not indigenous. Their relation to the land is a creolized, syncretic one.

The ever-present national issue addressed in Indo-Caribbean literature set in Guyana — the historically contentious relationship between Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese, between whom the postcolonial population is almost evenly divided — is almost non-existent in *Dark Swirl*. Rather, Dabydeen follows in the footsteps of Harris, whose work explores the evolution of the multi-ethnic postcolonial nation through magical allegories of land, geography, and place (“History” 156-57). Dabydeen explicitly names Harris as an influence on *Dark Swirl* and

his other works, saying that reading his novels “reinforced the sense of the original [Guyanese] landscape in mythopoetic terms for me” (“Conversation” 111). As does Harris from his first novel, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), on, Dabydeen deliberately invokes in his work indigenous peoples,<sup>4</sup> often left out of Caribbean literature. As Judith Misrahi-Barak says, “Amerindians are the blind spot of the Caribbean at large, and of Caribbean literature more specifically — a blind spot that has existed for too long” (309).

### Myth and the Massacouraman

The Martiniquan poet Aimé Césaire recognized in 1941 the importance of myth at the beginning of Caribbean independence from colonial powers, asserting that “The true manifestation of civilization is myth. Social organization, religion, partnerships, philosophies, morals, architecture and sculpture are the representations and expressions of myth” (120). In the village in which *Dark Swirl* is set, the Indo-Guyanese residents

could hear in the wind echoes of an ancestral past of indigenous men and women fleeing into the bushes; of sugar-plantation owners, white-white, who buried slaves alive under silk-cotton trees with their own dead so their kind would be served even in the underworld; of voodoo brought from Africa to these shores; of jumbies manifesting from smelly hovels; of backoos, who worked in the sugarcane fields in the darkness of the night with an efficiency no man could match; of a plantation owner riding on a majestic white horse, dragging a heavy chain behind; of Moongazer straddling the road, of indentured people, brown and blackfaces, small-framed, clutching at the *Bhagavad Gita* and reciting remnant words from the *Ramayana* in the flicker of light from the wall lamps in narrow logies as they clung to their faith in this hostile place. (28-29)

This excerpt, which occurs before the massacouraman makes its presence known, is a rundown of some of the major folkloric figures of Guyana, the majority of which are derived from a mixture of Afro-Guyanese and indigenous myths and legends, since Indo-Guyanese are relative latecomers to Guyana. Jackson argues that myth in the Caribbean might be more materialist than idealist:

Myth is fuel for the conquistadorial imagination and a foundational context for all settler groups. Myths such as El Dorado are the first imaginative discourses that emerged to reorder, remap, and write over the lands of First Peoples so that they could be productive for the material wealth of the Old World. The first economy, then, that comes out of the Western encounter is discursive. . . . [T]he search for wealth and the emergence of the plantation must be understood as occurring fully within the symbolic structure or sign system of the myth. (34)

Although myths like that of El Dorado do undergird, to a great extent, colonial labour and economic formations in Guyana, I suggest that in the postcolony there is so much syncretic overlap among the discretely folkloric, religious, and spiritual ideologies of *place* of Africans, Indians, and indigenous peoples that the force of the resulting environmental cosmology of belonging produces, in Guyanese literature, the land itself and land-based spirits as active agents in determining human citizenship. From Wilson Harris's first novel, *Palace of the Peacock*, which forges the Guyanese mixed-race future in the crucible of the jungle, to Mahadai Das's seminal poem "Beast" in her 1988 collection *Bones*, in which violent dismemberment at sea is followed by bodily re-formation, to Pauline Melville's short story "Erzulie," in *The Migration of Ghosts*, in which the Afro-Caribbean spirit *lwa* Erzulie appears to exact revenge on the perpetrators of the ecological disaster caused by the 1995 Omai gold-mining project, the theme of "land as agent" transcends literary genres.

Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert identify mythological and religious syncretism as typical of Caribbean belief systems, showing that this type of "[c]reolization — that is, the malleability and mutability of various beliefs and practices as they adapt to new understandings of class, race, gender, power, labor, and sexuality — is one of the most significant phenomena in Caribbean religious history" (4). For this reason, my discussion of the Guyanese context acknowledges some slippage between the terms "myth" and "religion." Colonial repression of traditional belief systems and concurrent Christianization of the colonized in the Caribbean have produced a cosmological landscape in which belief systems are constantly undergoing re-formation, and the boundaries among mythical origin stories, religious doctrines, and folkloric beliefs and figures are not always clear — particularly



when much of each is constructed and reconstructed from oral tradition, sometimes with specific goals of national inclusion.

Paul Younger writes that the “preservation” of Caribbean Hinduism is accompanied simultaneously by nostalgia, anxiety, and purposefulness, producing a religious identity predicated on

the sense of a “new homeland.” In this context, a new homeland is a set of rituals, values, and mythic stories that people agree will define their identity. The authority for this set of traditions is that they are understood as memories of a distant homeland, but the context in which they constitute a religious tradition is the new context in which people are sharing with others in the creation of a new social order. (7)

Hinduism in the Caribbean, Younger argues, is about *futurity*. The “new homeland” model of Hindu religious identity therefore has some room for the Afro-Caribbean. Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert identify Indo-Caribbean Hindu religious syncretism with the Afro-Caribbean belief system of obeah in the forms of “added chiromancy or palm reading to the divination functions of Obeah” (171) and, as Younger also shows (64), in the adoption of worship of the South Indian goddess Māriyamman (as Kālī-Mai worship) by some Afro-Caribbean people, particularly in Guyana and Guadeloupe.<sup>5</sup>

Dabydeen’s *Dark Swirl* bridges the relational gap between indigenous and Indo-Guyanese through the myth of the reptilian snake spirit. As Brinsley Samaroo notes, second only to bovines in popular animal images used in Caribbean Hindu worship is the *naga* (“snake”):

In Caribbean temples, the Nagas are ever-present. They are regarded as the guardians of the mineral wealth of the earth. The serpent Ananta (endless or infinite), whose other name is Sesa, is the protector of the sleeping Vishnu. Lord Shiva wears a garland of snakes as his symbolic ornament. . . . Another commentator points out that the snake of Lord Shiva represents the Kundalini Shakti (serpentine energy) that is present in each individual and that may be awakened by meditation. (192-93)

The *naga* and similar animals in Hinduism are not deities but *vahanas*, “vehicles” and companions of gods such as Vishnu and Shiva, whose personal attributes they sometimes share (188). The Indo-Guyanese villagers of *Dark Swirl*, whether Hindu or Muslim (a distinction far

less important than race during and after the colonial period), can be expected to have some familiarity with the idea of a reptilian spirit before the massacouraman appears; they are predisposed to think of such a figure as mythopoetic.

Dabydeen ascribes his decision to write about a water spirit in *Dark Swirl* to “[w]ater indeed being everywhere [in Guyana], in our ‘land of many waters’ with creeks, canals, rivers. Torrential rains poured down once more, everything appearing as an elemental onslaught, adding to the sense of forlornness and lore” (“Shaping” 68). Water and reptilian water spirits like the massacouraman also figure prominently in Guyanese indigenous cosmologies. The rural Canje River region in which *Dark Swirl* is set is part of the traditional territory of the Arawaks and the riverine Warrau (Ishmael 12). The Warrau origin story of “The First Carib” begins with a setting much like the one that opens *Dark Swirl*, a lake in which villagers fear to swim. In the Warrau story, the lake bottom is inhabited by a water spirit confined there by ancestral Warrau magic and the will of the Great Spirit (38). As with *Dark Swirl*’s boy character Josh, children are responsible for transgressing the boundaries of the lake; in the legend, the inadvertently released water spirit captures an interloping girl and forces her to become his wife. In due course, she gives birth to a half-human son who “was considerably strange. Even though he was beautifully formed, the lower part of his body from the waist down resembled a *camudi*!” — otherwise known as the aquatic anaconda (39). This son “soon grew up to be a huge half-man, half-snake” (40). His fearful human uncles murder him, but he is resurrected by his father as a “huge, handsome warrior, fully human” and fully armed. He names himself Carib, takes his revenge on his relatives, marries the most beautiful Warrau woman, and has many children. At the end of the legend,

In a relatively short time, a fierce Carib tribe grew up and lived on the bank of that lake. Later, when the Warraus tried to regain their homes and land that Carib [had] originally seized, the fierce Carib tribe drove them to the muddy shores of the Atlantic Ocean and took full possession of their rich hunting grounds in the forest. (41)

The Warrau who fail to teach their children history, so that the children go against the directives of the Great Spirit, are responsible for their own dispossession. Along the northeastern Atlantic coast of Guyana and

down into the Corentyne River border with Suriname, Warrau territory lies alongside that of the Caribs and Arawaks (12). The story of the first Carib explains the origins of probable indigenous land disputes rendered moot during the colonial period, for this coastal territory was Guyana's most fertile and thus became the site of the largest sugar plantations.

The half-human, half-water serpent Carib of Warrau myth bears a distinct resemblance to the massacouraman of Guyanese folktales and Dabydeen's novel. Both are freshwater river creatures, unlike the villagers, whose ancestors traversed the saltwater sea. Guyanese lore has it that the massacouraman is reptilian (like the local crocodilian caimans), upright, and larger than a man, and it sports ferocious teeth. Its appearance is the subject of wild speculation in *Dark Swirl*, in which some villagers believe, "[t]he creature had eyes as large as calabashes, teeth like spears. It had numerous appendages; it was amorphous; it defied description. Yet others claimed it was hydra-headed" (65). The massacouraman's visage is shrouded and shifting because seeing it involves a dream state in which the watcher must slip sideways in reality. The creature's form remains amorphous and only partially visible throughout the novel, at least partly because the villagers do not yet belong to that Caribbean place or time.

*Dark Swirl* is about belonging to a land through identification with its myths. The meaning of land, says James Clifford, can figuratively shift as it "signifies the past in the future, a continuous, changing base of political and cultural operation" (482). In contrast, "An absolutist indigenism, where each distinct 'people' strives to occupy an original bit of ground, is a frightening utopia" (483). Clifford suggests that there must be multiple ways of conceptualizing "native" belonging that include the indigenous, the native born, and the autochthonous. Indo-Caribbeans in Guyana (and later in North America and the United Kingdom) are neither autochthonous nor indigenous to the Caribbean in the discourses of contemporary postcoloniality and Clifford's cultural anthropology; they are, however, Caribbean subjects, by dint of a 175-year residence and a syncretic Caribbean cultural identity.

As theorized by Terry Goldie, "indigenization" is the process that white settlers undergo to "belong" to the nation (13). African slaves and Indian indentureds, however, were not voluntary white settlers, nor are they contemporary immigrants into a settler-colonial society. Sunera Thobani's theorization of the latter group, however, offers some insight

into a postcolonial relationship in which there is a third (or fourth) non-indigenous, non-white group with which to contend. Thobani identifies the possibility of a racial “triangulation” of subject formation in settler societies, where the “national remains at the centre of the state’s (stated) commitment to enhance national well being; the immigrant receives a tenuous and conditional inclusion; and the Aboriginal continues to be marked for loss of sovereignty.” In this relational formulation, identity is continually unstable and “realized (fleeting) only in its ongoing strange encounters with its differentiated others” (18). The processes of Indo- and Afro-Guyanese subject formation are unstable and realized in the encounter with each other and with the indigenous, as will be demonstrated, but the apices of the triangle are different, lacking a white national presence but including two formerly marginalized groups continually vying for power at the expense of the indigenous. Jackson coins the term “Creole indigeneity” to describe this process, arguing that “native displacement” along with “either real or figurative disappearance serves as the necessary or enabling condition of black being in the Caribbean, both epistemological and ontological, and is essential for constitution of that being through the rise of national consciousness and class consolidation” (28). “Guyanese” as a category of national belonging in modernity thus demands the displacement of the indigenous and the simultaneous expropriation of their emblems — and their land. Creole indigeneity is therefore a type of what Alan Lawson, Jace Weaver, and others term “settler-colonialism,” in which nations with extant indigenous populations — such as the United States, Canada, and South Africa — absorbed large numbers of white settlers from the colonial metropole. The major difference between Creole indigeneity and conventional settler-colonialism in Guyana is that, though they are loath to admit it in electoral politics, the two majority populations must share power — which opens up space for other entrants into the coalition.

The massacouraman invades the dreams and daily lives of Ghulam and the other villagers, and the process of nativization begins as a seemingly forced integration. But the villagers come to realize that they are akin to the massacouraman: “The object in the creek surpassed the stranger, and it was theirs. It was in their own innards, for the creek was inside them; they drank from it when the government’s artesian well was dry” (Dabydeen, *Dark Swirl* 55). The villagers experience both guilt and a possessive thrill that finally, in the aftermath of colonialism, *something*

might be theirs. Their “evil” is twofold: they are on someone else’s land, regardless of how they got there, and they have been simultaneously deracinated from the Old World and have acquired no other cultural mores in its stead.

### Religious Syncretism and Creole “Indigeneity”

The villagers’ inattention to traditional Hindu and Muslim religious strictures is most obviously demonstrated by the names of the main Indo-Guyanese family: the father is Ghulam, the mother is Savitri, the son is Josh: Muslim, Hindu, and Christian names, respectively, though the family is nominally Hindu, a relatively typical ecumenism of belief in the Indo-Caribbean that includes a Hindu majority, a Muslim minority, and even fewer Christians. The villagers do have some allegiance to the religions into which they and their forebears were born, but the village does not appear to have a pandit or imam or any kind of spiritual leader. More important than doctrine in the novel is ontological knowledge of the “right” and natural order of things in the place in which these villagers find themselves — the mythology of that place. The massacouraman is a part of that mythology.

Antonio Benítez-Rojo calls the Caribbean the site of *supersyncretic* religious beliefs. In this formulation, a “syncretic artefact is not a synthesis, but rather a signifier made of differences. . . . [S]yncretic processes realise themselves through an economy in whose modality of exchange the signifier of there — of the Other — is consumed (‘read’) according to local codes that are already in existence; that is, codes from here” (21). In *Dark Swirl*, what Ghulam experiences is this confusion of codes that results in syncretism. Alone at night in the jungle, on a quest to see the massacouraman,

he pressed on, willing himself to be at one with everything, as if his spirit could be with the insects, reptiles, animals, and plants. . . . It was then he felt himself to be most truly Hindu and yet something else. Most times he scarcely thought about his people’s origins in that distant subcontinent. Here, in this isolated part of the Guyanese coastland, almost cut off from the rest of the population, they — Indians, Africans — lived in a strange harmony, eking out a meagre living. Whatever they had been, he sensed they were becoming something else, but he couldn’t sustain this thought

further; such thoughts came to him suddenly, and as quickly went.  
(44-45)

What is happening to Ghulam is that his foreign Indianness and Hinduism are being processed and swallowed by Guyana and the manifestation produced by its already-existent coding, the massacouraman. "There" is being read and assimilated by "here," and the syncretized result will be a new "here" that is partly what was once "there." The constitutive elements of the syncretism will be visible, too, in the final product. It is a process not of destruction but of assimilation and transformation. Dabydeen is careful to note that both Indo- and Afro-Guyanese live together in the village, bound by class and history and even the mutual ability to see the massacouraman. It is a nationally unifying move. But the novel focuses on one Hindu Indo-Guyanese family, and the jungle brings back Hinduism and a sense of racialized "Indianness" to Ghulam, who, like the rest of the villagers, does not appear to be religiously observant. Pure deracination is shown to be unsatisfactory in its erasure of history, for what will Ghulam bring to this new becoming with the land if his cultural well is dry? In other words, Dabydeen depicts a diasporic context in which the villagers have become careless, apathetic, and forgetful in their isolation, and their spiritual and cultural fates are in doubt.

For Ghulam's Hindu family, religion and taking recourse in the *Bhagavad Gita* are not incompatible with an acknowledgement of supernatural forces, such as obeah, an Afro-Caribbean Guyanese, Trinidadian, and Jamaican system of belief derived from Ashanti and other African Gold Coast religions (Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 22). Aisha Khan notes that, in the Caribbean popular imagination, "To practice obeah is to engage, more or less, in evil. To believe in it seems a logical assessment of empirical reality. Obeah has the power of efficacy (it causes intended things to happen); it can be offset by the stronger (sacred) power of God/s; few admit to 'working it' but most 'know' that it has been done" (116).<sup>6</sup> In *Dark Swirl*, the villagers, like many Guyanese, refer to obeah as "supernatural" and a form of "black magic." Although there is no direct evidence of the actual practice or practitioners of obeah, the initial supposition of the villagers is that the massacouraman is a manifestation of obeah and is therefore evil. Their immediate recourse is to try to dominate the massacouraman by chanting from the *Ramayana*, in the hope that an incontrovertibly

religious text will prevail over a being that is myth and legend. Some of the villagers remember Islam enough to invoke the Muslim name for the devil and associate it with magic and the white naturalist: they call the man “Shaitan! Evil one!” and declare, “Is not massacouraman, is only the whiteman obeah!” (53). Here half-remembered Indian religiosity is distinct from the folkloric but real existence of the massacouraman and from magical practice believed to be malevolent and Afro-Caribbean.

What Ghulam and the villagers are missing is a cohesive cultural syncretism that will make them Caribbean. They believe that they are acting as though they still live in India, though they do not really know anything about the land of their ancestors. They know words from the *Ramayana* but do not understand how these fragments might be reintegrated into something new. There are two major avenues of religious syncretism for the Indo-Caribbean: Hindu/Muslim community rituals that are not doctrinal but framed as quasi-religious “Indian custom” and adoption of certain folkloric Afro-Caribbean beliefs. It seems to be logical to assume that Hindu polytheism, for example, lends itself easily to association and syncretism with the *orishas* of Vodun and related Afro-Caribbean religious practices, but in practice this syncretism did not happen: “Most of the elements common to both the Orisha and East Indian religions may be explained by the theory of a ‘parallel tradition’ rather than of open borrowing from the other” (Mahabir and Maharaj 97).<sup>7</sup> Indo-Caribbean religious distinction is kept as clear as racial distinctions, and indeed these modes of community preservation are inter-related. Khan explains that Hindus and Muslims in the Caribbean have a complex and fraught relationship with the “superstitions” and spirit beliefs that they harbour. There is a distinction between “what people know they ought to believe and . . . what they often discount with difficulty. . . . Superstition mediates legitimate and illegitimate, but the potency, the potential danger of illicit or marginalised beliefs and practices are not necessarily in doubt” (112). That is, people believe strongly in and worry about extrareligious spirits and supernatural phenomena even when they “know” they should not. In Dabydeen’s novel, the villagers are very conflicted over whether or not the massacouraman really exists. Tellingly, the final unspoken consensus is that it does.

What, then, comprises Indo-Caribbean non-religious spirit belief? Khan uses the local Trinidadian term *simi-dimi*, meaning “mumbo-jumbo, or superstition” (103).<sup>8</sup> *Simi-dimi* ranges from universal Caribbean

beliefs in folkloric figures, such as the massacouraman and a host of others, to the efficacy of working obeah alongside religious prayer, to more specifically Indo-Caribbean traditional medicine, wherein “masseuses” who were often midwives were called on to treat medical ailments through a combination of herbal and spiritual remedies.<sup>9</sup> According to Khan, to Indo-Caribbean people, *simi-dimi* connotes “dilution and loss of identity” (228). To engage in superstitious belief and practice, then, is to lack power and, crucially, to be not “Indian.” *Dark Swirl* repudiates this sentiment and uses the supernatural to empower the marginalized Indo-Caribbeans left, post-indentureship, to the mercy of the jungle. The massacouraman reminds them of the Indianness that they have forgotten while forcing them to acknowledge that they have changed places and must become something of both India and the Caribbean. The creature is the return of the indigenous Caribbean that lacks representation in the Afro-Caribbean/Indo-Caribbean divide.

In the case of the “Creole indigenous” settler-colonial variant that Jackson argues characterizes Guyana, the indigenous must remain a fixed, mythic, and effaced presence that anchors the state and is unaffected by the Creole struggle for power. To replace the indigenous would be to question the validity of the postcolonial state. Governance is therefore a question of who most closely approaches the indigenous (metonym of the land itself), receives their cultural artifacts and concomitant mandate to govern, and then keeps them in their place. Many non-indigenous Guyanese continue to refer pejoratively and casually to the indigenous as “Bucks” (Poynting 207), and, as noted earlier, this dismissive and racist rhetoric has been codified into law with the refusal to name the “Indigenous Peoples” in the 2006 Amerindian Act. This decision reinforces the suggestion that Creole indigeneity is a settler-colonial project, though one that must account for the colonial oppression of non-white “settler” labour by the white metropole. Although it is acceptable and even desirable for “East Indians” to transition to “Indo-Guyanese,” and for “Negroes” to become “Afro-Guyanese,”<sup>10</sup> acknowledging their place and power in the nation, indigenous people remain “Amerindians,” belonging only to the geographical hemisphere of the Americas.

In *Dark Swirl*, the appearance of the massacouraman, an environmental spirit, is outside the principle of reason. For the white naturalist, with reason as his guide, the jungle is not sacred. His goal is to name



and control all of its plant and animal manifestations as discrete, disembodied elements rather than as part of a whole landscape. The scientist also has the temerity to attempt to capture the massacouraman, a river spirit, in order to gain fame by exhibiting it in Europe as a freak of the New World. In the colonial construct of “today *magicman*, tomorrow fraud” (Devi 149), he epitomizes the fraud, both because colonialism has failed and because he lacks human empathy. Although the stranger is associated with outside “science” rather than the supernatural, the villagers understand that he is a kind of dark magician. They repeatedly accuse him of working black magic on them:

“He one whiteman jumbieman, tekking out t’ings from the creek; an’ putting t’ings in too!”

“T’ings from the land. . . . T’ings from far.”

“Digging up the ground wid he bare hand,” they imagined.

“Now all ahwe get punish, like Josh an’ he fadder!” (50)

The villagers practise small-scale farming in which they “dig up the ground” and “put things in,” but they do so for survival, and their use of hoes — tools — symbolizes their humanity. Digging in the ground barehanded, as the stranger does, indicates madness or inhumanity. The villagers call the stranger a jumbie, or ghostly spirit, since he is white and represents the attempted return of the colonizer. They imagine that he has brought evil to their slumbering village. Now they fear that they are complicit and will be punished by the massacouraman.

Despite blaming the stranger for the advent of the massacouraman, the villagers understand that the creature is a Guyanese local:

“Is massacouraman he bring wid he?” one questioned nervously.

“It cyan be, Massacouraman belaang right in dis place. It na he who bring it.” (27)

The massacouraman’s provenance is uncertain but not for long. Ghulam is the first person to question its relation to his own place in the world: “Was it what they called massacouraman, something which was close to him and the other villagers, which was local — wasn’t from outside. Was part of himself, really. Where did such thoughts come from?” (48). The Martiniquan writer Édouard Glissant says that the work of the Caribbean writer is to reconstruct a “tormented chronology: that is, to

reveal the creative energy of a dialectic reestablished between nature and culture in the Caribbean" (65). In Dabydeen's novel, the massacouraman is the agent of this dialectic, ensuring that, in the transposition of the Old World to the New World, Indian and African cultures do not realign themselves without relation to the indigenous Caribbean landscape.

Unlike the scientist, the villagers in *Dark Swirl* understand that the removal of flora and fauna from the jungle is an affront to nature. They have not yet recovered from their dehumanization during indentureship and are averse to caging other creatures. The stranger is the colonial thief and jailer. When Ghulam and the villagers first see animal "specimens" locked in crates and boxes, "they looked at the stranger in disbelief, because this was the first time they had seen these creatures outside their natural habitat. The stranger was definitely a different kind of human being; they were convinced now of his danger" (31). Only a madman would attempt to control nature or transplant its elements; the colonizer does not fit the definition of "human" because he does not respect the natural order. Ghulam intuitively feels that freeing the specimens might rid the village of the spectre of retribution from the massacouraman, and he goes one night on a mission to free the animals. The stranger resists seizure of a crate, saying, "I brought it here and I'll take it with me; as I'll take all the other things." His relationship with the land, again, is one of colonial acquisition. Angry, Ghulam reiterates what some of the villagers believe: "Is obeah you wuk obeah pon we" (77). Removal of bits of the land cannot be seen as anything but an act of bad magic. His attempt to free the specimens shows his understanding that the land is already haunted by its history of colonization and that he must stop this last iteration of its disembodiment.

Unlike Ghulam, the colonizing white naturalist never marries and has no progeny. He has been so busy colonizing others that he forgot to ensure his own posterity; even his attempted capture of the massacouraman to secure fame fails. He is left with no legacy, remaining the nameless white embodiment of colonial greed that can never be content, because there is always more to acquire (33). The villagers, as he says, might be "simple folk" whose history has been taken from them, but they are human folk, and he is an old creature with the sickness of colonialism: "How he festered, like an old disease" (99). He is the rightful sacrificial scapegoat, and the massacouraman takes him: one day he

simply disappears into the jungle, falling victim to that old European colonial terror, the ecological excess of the tropics.

Glissant argues that “the Caribbean folktale zeroes in on our absence of history: it is the site of the deactivated word” (85). The word, in the form of historical multiplicity, is (re)activated through relationality, since Caribbean people have had no time for cultural accumulation (61-62). For Glissant, folktales, which he distinguishes from myths, are what can “combat the sometimes paralyzing force of a yearning for history, to save us from the belief that history is the first and most basic dimension of human experience, a belief inherited from the West or imposed by it” (84). The Guyanese massacouraman comes from an indigenous pre-Columbian time into the postcolonial present, thus disrupting the linear colonial narrative of history. Glissant calls the process of Caribbean combination and metamorphosis a “subterranean convergence” that illustrates the true “transversality” of human behaviour (66). In its least complex sense, the mathematical term “transversality” describes the intersection of a line with a system of other lines, such that each point at which they touch becomes part of the joined nodes and boundaries of a certain shape of topographical space. Applied to the Caribbean, transversality, as Glissant suggests, is a convergence of intersecting points (cultures, ethnicities, origins) that forms a particularly Caribbean topography. It is another way of positing a multiplicity that forms a whole. *Dark Swirl* illustrates the process whereby the lines intersect their transversal to create a new space through the way in which the villagers come to accept the reality of the massacouraman.

*Dark Swirl* reminds us that the Indo-Caribbean story of migration and becoming includes negotiation not just with the Afro-Caribbean but also with the indigenous presence in the Caribbean. The Guyanese indigenous presence persists despite dislocation and erasure from land and literature. In the context of the fast-growing Indo-Caribbean double diaspora in North America,<sup>11</sup> Dabydeen’s work also offers the subtle and timely reminders that migrant communities, even with their own socio-economic struggles, can politically and physically displace marginalized indigenous communities and that the national substitution of one historically oppressed minority group with another does nothing, without the alliance of those groups, to remedy the systemic injustices of the colonial legacy.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The political territory of the Guianas — as distinct from the larger Guianas Shield tectonic region — is comprised of present-day Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana. The northernmost region that became British Guiana and then independent Guyana was first occupied by the Dutch in 1593 and changed hands several times, with the British taking final control in 1803. Indigenous slavery ended in 1793, and African slavery ended in 1838, after which small numbers of indentured Chinese and Portuguese and a large number of indentured subcontinental South Asians (about 500,000) were imported to labour on the colony's sugar plantations until 1917. Ron Ramdin's *Arising from Bondage: A History of the Indo-Caribbean People* (2000) provides a thorough historical account of Indo-Caribbean indentureship, as do the works of Gaiutra Bahadur, Frank Birbalsingh, Basdeo Mangru, Brinda Mehta, and Verene Shepherd. For a historical overview of global nineteenth-century Indian indentureship and its comparative aftermath in the Caribbean, Fiji, Mauritius, and South and East Africa, see the work of Judith M. Brown, Marina Carter and Khal Torabully, Hugh Tinker, and Paul Younger.

<sup>2</sup> From the 1960s independence-era fiction of Wilson Harris to Andrew Jefferson-Miles's 2002 novel *The Timehran*, which revolves around the indigenous "painted child" figure of the *timehr*, the mythical encounter between the indigenous and the Afro-Caribbean in Guyana has received significantly more literary and theoretical attention than the encounter between the indigenous and the Indo-Caribbean.

<sup>3</sup> See Naipaul's novel *The Mimic Men* (1967). Homi Bhabha defines "mimicry" in the postcolonial context as "representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is . . . thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power" (122).

<sup>4</sup> *Dark Swirl* is thematically preceded in Dabydeen's oeuvre by his short story "Amerindians," whose Indo-Guyanese protagonist Roy is a land surveyor, an occupation in which both Harris and Dabydeen have worked, the former in the Guyanese hinterlands and the latter in the Canadian forests. Like the main characters of Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*, Roy is a member of a land-surveying crew of diverse ethnic backgrounds, including indigenous ones.

<sup>5</sup> Two scholars have suggested avenues through which the religious and mythical encounter between the Indo-Caribbean and the indigenous might be theorized. Jeremy Poynting suggests *ahimsa*, or non-violence toward animals in particular, as a commonality in Indian Hindu and indigenous cosmologies (214), and Vanita Seth shows that Columbus's conflation of indigenous Americans with "Indians" of the subcontinent points to the early modern European location of both groups as "a source of origins," though the indigenous embodied "man in the state of nature" and Indians represented "civilizational antiquity" (121).

<sup>6</sup> As a result of British colonial outlawing in the eighteenth century, obeah is less ritually developed than Haitian Vodun and Cuban-Dominican Santería; as Khan writes, "the loss of the 'codified, institutionalized, and consistent' elements of institutionalized religion relegated Obeah to the proscribed realm of 'witchcraft, magic, superstition and charlatanism'" (158).

<sup>7</sup> *Orishas* or *loas* are the deities of Shango, Candomblé, Santería, Vodun, and a host of syncretic and related Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latino faith practices brought by African slaves to the New World.

<sup>8</sup> Khan argues for the likely derivation of *simi-dimi* from the Arabic term *dhimmi*, which historically meant a non-Muslim resident of a Muslim land required to pay the *jizya*, a religious tax (103). Hence, the term would be derived etymologically from "*semi-dhimmi*."

I disagree for two reasons: (1) the corresponding Guyanese term is *semi-jemi*, no relation to *dhimmi*, and it is impossible to say which, if either, is originary; (2) the pattern of the word has much more in common with the rhyming repetition that characterizes African-derived Caribbean syntax and indeed has the same original meaning as magical “mumbo-jumbo.”

<sup>9</sup> Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) explores the tragicomic fate of one such Indian masseuse and mimic man in colonial and postcolonial Trinidad.

<sup>10</sup> Jackson suggests that the historical colonial subject “East Indian” becomes the national postcolonial subject “Indo-Guyanese” and “Indo-Caribbean” in the process of articulating Caribbean belonging (187-88). The shift in nomenclature is recent, since “Indo-Caribbean,” “Indo-Guyanese,” and “Indo-Trinidadian” were immigrant group identifiers coined in 1980s Toronto that reversed the migrant journey in the 1990s and are now popular in the Caribbean, displacing “East Indian” (Lokaisingh-Meighoo 180).

<sup>11</sup> Indo-Caribbeans in North America are part of the phenomenon that Mariam Pirbhai refers to as the “double diaspora” (13): that is, twice-displaced diasporic subjects who, as immigrants in North America or the United Kingdom, are often identified as, or identify themselves with, the community labelled “South Asian.”

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