

The Story Of Jesus Christ And The Story Of Anancy: Sources For Jamaican Theology



MARK FRANCISCO JONES
HARVARD SCHOOL OF DIVINITY
U.S.A.

By their stories, people tell of themselves. Clarissa Pinkola Estes makes this point about women in her acclaimed book, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*:

Fairy tales, myths, and stories provide understandings which sharpen our sight so that we can pick out and pick up the path left by the wildish nature. The instruction found in a story reassures us that the path has not run out, but still leads women deeper, and more deeply still, into their own knowing.¹

This is a point that can be made especially about Christians, who tell of themselves by their stories of faith, centering on the birth, human encounters, death, resurrection of Jesus Christ, and on his command to his followers that they "[g]o and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (*Matthew* 28: 16-20).

To the extent, however, that such stories are prone to distortion, change, and exaggeration, they come to be entangled in a web of lies. Such has been the fate of the Jesus story. Originally a story of peace and love, by the Middle Ages it could not be told except in and through the deployment of power, domination, authority. This is exactly what prompted Gandhi to say that while he greatly admired Jesus, he disdained Christians, for their story of faith had become the story of the effort to dominate the politics, culture, and ethos of the world.

¹Clarissa Pinkola Estes, *Women Who Run With The Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), p. 8.

It was in keeping with this story that, on October 12, 1542, Christopher Columbus, weighed anchor in the New World. He had come with a missive from the Queen and King of Spain "[to d]iligently encourage and attract the natives of [the] Indies to all peace and quiet, that they may willingly serve us and be under our dominion and government, and above all that they may be converted to our holy Catholic faith."² From the first moment of its unfolding, then, the European expedition to the New World could be traced back to mixed motives — to "discover," and "evangelize," yes, but also to coerce people into servitude.

What has it cost to carry out these objectives? The lives of Indians past counting; a slave trade requiring the forced transport of millions of people from Africa to the New World. Did those Indians have their own stories? What about those Africans, shipped in to become slaves? Certainly, they did. Jamaicans in particular, who have always been passionate storytellers. They tell stories to settle the questions of little children, to account for the history of slavery, and of the poverty that assails them from all around, as well as to generate humor and laughter, even in the darkest of times.

A particularly important Jamaican story is one which traveled to Jamaica from West Africa, with the slaves — the Anancy story.

Anancy, the spider hero of West Indian folk tales, originated in Ghana as the Ashanti Spider God. Sly and soft and sweet voiced, he can be anything from a lovable rogue to an artful prince. Often, he gets overwhelmed by a terrible greed he cannot help. Essentially both spider and man, his nature allows him to change as the situation demands. This ability to change himself, and leave the ground, vanish into a tree or into the housetop to hide, makes him godlike. That is also linked with the way he causes good and bad things to come into the world for the first time, continue to happen and become part of life.³

Roger D. Abrahams asserts the importance and the power of the story both to structure reality and to preserve the life and culture of a people, particularly if they have come to be dominated and governed.

²Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publisher, 1984), p. 379.

³James Berry, *Anancy Spiderman* (London: Walker Books Ltd., 1988), p. v.

"[Stories] carry great power manifested in several ways. Besides directly addressing deep matters of life, the spoken word can actually create bonds and bring about personal or social transformation ... Stories also have specific meanings in the lives of those who tell them ... Stories operate, like proverbs, as a means of depersonalizing, of universalizing, by couching the description of how specific people are acting in terms of how people have always acted.⁴

The Jamaican Anancy stories go right to the heart of Jamaican culture: its sense of humor, its craftiness and playfulness, its determination to survive. They help to structure life in Jamaica. What interests me here is, how do Christians in Jamaica relate to these stories; what lessons do they derive from them? How do the Jesus and Anancy stories serve as instruments of communication and evangelization in Jamaica. One must keep in mind that, in Jamaica, the Jesus story is tied in with European colonization. So in addition to taking into account the extent to which the Jesus story has been deployed to pacify and enslave Jamaicans,⁵ I would like to consider how the Anancy stories have been, for the Jamaican people, a source of emancipation, liberation, and hope. Finally, I would like to examine the ways in which the Jesus and Anancy stories meet; how despite the negative elements in each of them, they yet offer ways of envisioning and of actualizing hope, liberation, life.



It is clear so far that humans have stories that spring from the language and experiences of their particular cultures. Speech, language, and the story stand as evidence of the ability of humans to create their world, to name their culture and experiences:

But there is human language, based on man's encounter with reality, changing through the millennia, used for the needs of daily life, for expression and communication, for literature and poetry, and

⁴Roger D. Abrahams, *African Folktales* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), pp. 1-3.

⁵One has always to keep in mind that the process of colonization continues to militate against any African retentions in Jamaica. Indeed, through the Jesus story the colonizers had striven to get the Africans to forget their old way of life. But stories, especially life-giving ones, do not die (at least not easily, if they ever).

used also for the expression and communication of our ultimate concern. In each of these cases the language is different.⁶

Language and its difference in each situation not only preserve humanity, but prevent humans from kidnapping God, that is, from limiting God to a particular culture and space. Tillich goes on to state that since language is different, universal, and good, God, then, remains different, universal, and good. Tillich maintains, additionally, that in the same way, language and culture are necessary, God is necessary, and necessarily a part of language and culture. Language, communication, and the story remain prophetic for as long as they preempt the identification of God and life with any particular "family or city-god," with any particular culture.

Stories and culture are part of what it means to be created beings. Human beings communicate and share ideas in a way that distinguishes them from the other animals.

In and through speech, humans communicate their value systems, systems of beliefs, and structure their lives and society. Speech finds import well beyond the mere communication of ideas. By serving as a vehicle for the story or the myth, speech is one of the greatest human gifts.

The English word "myth" is derived from the Greek word *mythos*, meaning word or story. Human beings have traditionally used stories to describe or explain things they could not explain otherwise. Ancient myths were stories by means of which our forebears were able to assimilate the mysteries that occurred around and within them. In this sense, myth is related to metaphor, in which an object or event is compared to an apparently dissimilar object or event in such a way as to make its otherwise inexplicable sense clear.... Psychologists, linguists, and anthropologists have taken us beyond our appreciation of myths as primitive literature, science or history to a realization of their importance in our lives today ... In other words, we have come to think of myths as conveyors of information rather than odd examples of pagan superstition, and we have learned that the mythic tales of particular cultures are masks for a larger, less tangible mythic substructure that we all share.⁷

⁶Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 47.

⁷David A. Leeming, *The World of Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 1-5.

So reason, language, and stories solidify a common experience of human being. Stories, in particular, while they might heighten tensions and divisions, create and display an experience of commonality. They contribute to the shaping of self-understanding. Robert Schreiter writes that humans use the narrative or the story to preserve themselves, that is, to “construct and reconstruct constantly for ourselves a sense of safety and a sense of selfhood.”⁸ They tell human beings what they need to know about themselves, how they remember what has happened to them, how they may have changed, or stayed the same, the ultimate meaning of life. This sense of selfhood, inspired by the story, is the source not only of an oppressed person’s or a people’s incentive to survive, but also of their desire to tell and live the truth. The story preserves humanity by missioning human beings to announce to others the how and why of life.

For this reason among others, many countries have embarked upon a careful process to reclaim their stories, especially in the Third World, where the people’s stories have never been lost. There, people continue to send their children to sleep with stories; men and women continue to gather around the telling of stories, some of which have the power to provide them with measure of personal and collective liberty. There, stories preserve the past, heal the present, and offer a way into the future.

Paul Tillich, for one, recognizes the healing and redemptive nature of the story, which for him is an art form expressing “the question of man in a world of guilt, anxiety and despair.” The stories of a culture enable its members to deal with guilt, anxiety, despair, life, beliefs, death, resurrection.

For Christian culture the paradigmatic story is the Jesus story, a story premised on the understanding that God is one who reveals a story, one who speaks, that God also has a story. Jesus, as the Divine Word, provides us with information about God. He is the bearer of the story of God. Prior to the Incarnation, man could have no sense of the otherness of God. Jesus became “flesh” to embody God’s story.

We, too, enflesh our own stories. Just as Jesus, the story of God, came to meet us humans, we meet one another by attempting to meet God.

⁸Robert Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (New York: Orbis, 1997), p. 31.

Our attempts to meet God and one another is our exchange of stories. Oftentimes, however, in the lives and experience of Christians, it happens that one story succeeds in dominating another. This, in Tillich's view, is the danger faced by any religion that tries to particularize, or nationalize, God:

Christianity has separated itself from Judaism because in the fulfillment of time Judaism has made a decision for space, namely for its national law, which never could become the law of all nations. The assembly of God, namely the Church which gathers from all nations, is the end of all religious nationalism and tribalism, even if expressed in terms of prophetic traditions. On the other hand, the Church is always in danger of identifying herself with a national Church, or of leaving injustice, the will-to-power, national and racial arrogance, unchallenged. The Church is always in danger of losing its prophetic spirit.⁹

The point I will argue later is that even among the colonizers who came to Jamaica bearing the Jesus story, already there were signs that they had lost the prophetic spirit of Jesus. What raged within them instead was the desire to impose their cultural dominance upon the Indians they encountered. When one story dominates another, God is not there. The point, therefore, I will argue in this paper is that dialogue, or the inter-communication of stories, must be preserved at all costs. This is an especially important point to make in view of the fact that European theology continues to dominate the Christian market, and is extremely protective of its turf. Note the attacks made against Liberation Theology, its dismissal by many in Europe as unintelligent, as lacking any theoretical depth. Indeed, language, stories, and culture are like a two-edged sword, serving as a means of sharing, fraternizing, and practicing humility, but also of imposing one's dominance upon another. Nowhere in Europe are the languages of the colonized (Indian or African) spoken, whereas, throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, it is French, or Dutch, or Spanish, or English, or Portuguese that are spoken. The same is true of the stories. Few, if any, Europeans know the stories of the colonized.

⁹*Theology of Culture*, p. 39.

Yet, despite the loss of their original languages, the colonized have retained, have preserved their stories. Hence, with Tillich, it is possible to speak of the possibility of the “return and reign” of dominated stories and cultures.

It is becoming increasingly clear — however unpalatable it may appear to Western theologians — that the focus of the Christian faith is moving steadily away from Europe and America to new centers in the Third World. Andrew Walls, writing in 1976, pointed out that within the last three centuries the position of Christianity has changed from being a kind of ‘tribal religion of the Caucasian peoples’ to becoming a truly world religion. Today the greatest areas of Christian strength are no longer in the West; and in Europe in particular Christianity is, in Walls’ words, ‘in marked recession, losing in adhesion, respect and influence.’ Its main strength lies, rather, in Latin America, Western Africa, the Rift Valley, and the Pacific, where it has most adherents, and where its impact upon society is most widespread. It is imperative, then, that European theologians take the Third World’s contribution to Christian thought seriously.¹⁰

Third World theologies, especially Latin American Liberation Theology, have negotiated ways of dialoguing with European Theologies. Yet thanks to the powers in Rome, Liberation Theology has been literally snuffed out. In Latin America today, the majority of people speak of Liberation Theology with scorn. In Brazil, for example, Liberation Theology is not taught at any of the Jesuit institutions. A new and essential dialogue is needed: the dialogue of cultural stories. I close this section with Tillich’s caution against any kind of dominance in language, communication and stories:

Religion is ambiguous and every religious symbol may become idolatrous, may be demonized, may elevate itself to ultimate validity although nothing is ultimate but the ultimate itself; no religious doctrine and no religious ritual may be. If Christianity claims to have a truth superior to any other truth in its symbolism, then ‘it is the symbol of the cross in which this is expressed, the cross of

¹⁰John Parrat, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (New Jersey: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), p. 1.

Christ ... and it is the criterion to which every Christian church should subject itself.¹¹

Evangelization from the point of view of the Jesus story is always couched in the wider story of the Hebrew Bible. Christians believe Jesus fulfills all that is inspired in the Hebrew Bible, that the Hebrew stories and the Jesus story are connected, that they do not stand alone. To understand the role/importance of these stories to Jamaican life, especially the Jesus story, we need to rehearse parts of the Jamaican story.



The earliest inhabitants of Jamaica were the Indians. Today the once-accepted fact that they were Arawaks is largely disputed, so the term Indians will suffice. They had their own religion and stories. In 1492, Columbus and his party arrived in Jamaica. He had been commissioned by the King and Queen of Spain to claim the world for Jesus and for their kingdom. Columbus' meeting with the Indians provided the setting for the first proclamation of the Jesus story in Jamaica. But not long after "the symbol of the cross of the Christ" was planted in the new soil, the slaughtering sword became the dominant symbol, with disastrous consequences, including the decimation of the first Jamaicans by the Spaniards. The best historical estimates place the population of Jamaica at the time of Columbus' arrival, at approximately 60,000; that number, a century later, was 1,500.¹²

Since, by 1509, most of the Indians had been killed, the Spaniards were constrained to bring in slaves from Africa. A brutal encounter of stories, cultures, and religious systems resulted. In 1655, the English invaded Jamaica, chasing out the Spanish. The apparatuses of slavery flourished, despite the fact that the Spanish had freed their slaves. Following the emancipation of the slaves, the British kept political and cultural control of Jamaica until its independence in 1962. Thus, history came to be taught from the British viewpoint, and even the Jesus story was brought in line to foster British interests. British culture and the Jesus story became inseparable partners.

¹¹*Theology of Culture*, p. 67.

¹²Noel L. Erskine, *Decolonizing Theology: A Caribbean Perspective* (New York: Orbis Books, 1981), p. 16.

But what is the Jesus story? Debates about Jesus only go to show how elusive the Jesus story can be. Luke Timothy Johnson, for example, points to the problems which result from the reliance upon history for the verification of claims about Jesus.

The first [difficulty] is the obvious one: historical reconstructions are by their very nature fragile and in constant need of revision. They cannot sustain the commitment of the human heart and life. Even the most casual survey of all the Jesus reconstruction offered just in the last twenty years, furthermore, discovers a bewildering variety of conflicting portraits of Jesus ... The second [difficulty] is that, although the Christian creed contains a number of historical assertions about Jesus, Christian faith as a living religious response is simply not directed at those historical facts about Jesus, or at a historical reconstruction of Jesus. Christian faith is directed to a living person.¹³

John Dominic Crossan similarly highlights the flaws, inconsistencies, and "lies" in the canonical Gospels:

The historical Jesus was a *peasant Jewish Cynic*. His peasant village was close enough to a Greco-Roman city like Sepphoris that sight and knowledge of Cynicism are neither inexplicable nor unlikely. But his work was among the houses and hamlets of lower Galilee. His strategy, implicitly for himself and explicitly for his followers, was the combination of *free healing and common eating*, a religious and economic egalitarianism that negated alike and at once the hierarchical and patronal normalcies of Jewish religion and power. And, lest he himself be interpreted as simply the new broker of God, he moved on constantly, settling down neither at Nazareth nor at Capernaum. He was neither broker nor mediator but, somewhat paradoxically, the announcer that neither should exist between humanity and divinity or between humanity and itself ... He announced, in other words, the unmediated or brokerless Kingdom of God.¹⁴

¹³Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), p. 14.

¹⁴John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), p. 198.

Would the issues raised by Johnson and Crossan have mattered to the missionaries who first brought the Jesus story to Jamaica? God only knows. The fact is, these missionaries were filled with a spirit of arrogance, and possessed of a certitude that gave them permission to kill and destroy. Who knows where that disposition had come from? their own history of subjugation by the Turks? Whatever it is, by playing out their arrogance they were displaying their moral vacuity, their ignorance of the message of peace and love at the very heart of the story they had come to bring. Tillich, in *Theology of Culture*, warns against the dangers of the will to dominate and provincialism in the work of both colonizer and missionary. In his view, "the Gospel [ought to be put] before the people so that they are able to decide for and against it. The Christian Gospel is a matter of decision. It is to be accepted or rejected."¹⁵ The problem, however, is that, in Jamaica, as part of the Jesus story, as a consequence of believing it to be not only the superior story but the *only* story, colonizer and missionary promoted racism, segregation, lies about Blackness and Africa. This, as Leonardo Boff sees it, is particularly a shortcoming of missionaries. He writes:

All missionaries, even the most prophetic, begin with the presupposition that Christianity is the only true religion: the Indians' religions are not only false, they are the work of Satan. Method alone is open to discussion: whether to use violence and force (the common method, which went hand in hand with colonialism), or a "delicate, soft, and sweet" method (in the words of Las Casas). Either method was calculated to achieve the same effect: conversion. There is no theological reading of the cultures and religions of the Indians. The only order willed by God is that of Christianity. All persons must be compelled to assimilate this religious order, which is also a cultural one.¹⁶

Fear, death, punishment, governance, were the only means considered for getting others to accept the Jesus story. This story, supposedly good news, a promise of life in all of its abundance, appeared to give legitimacy to the genocide that accompanied its proclamation. Boff

¹⁵*Theology of Culture*, p. 201.

¹⁶Leonardo Boff, *New Evangelization: Good News to the Poor* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), pp. 14-15.

continues: "There is nothing [in the story brought over by the European colonizers] about a following of Jesus. The morality of the commandments is frankly casuistic, in the European ethical mold, and bereft of any concern for the ethics of Indian culture." Notwithstanding the legal abolition of their forced enslavement, Jamaicans continued to wrestle with slavery of a mental, emotional and spiritual sort — such was the legacy of the proclamation of the Jesus story to them. Interestingly enough, a slave ship to the Americas bore the name Jesus.

This, despite the fact that the Jesus story speaks of a God who loves the world, who desires that all be saved, that the hearers of his word neither kill nor maim, that they love without reservation and place themselves at the service — of their neighbors certainly, but of their enemies as well. It speaks of a God who came into the world, chose to be poor, rendered loving service and brought healing to those around him, reached out to sinners, endured suffering and death for daring to upset the order of things. By these elements alone of the Jesus story would the dominance, governance, and cruelty of the Europeans have stood accused. Alas, they were downplayed, altered, erased, just so things could be maintained pretty much the way they were.

The Jesus story failed as a consequence of its incorporation into whiteness. Jesus as white man was the archetypal white man as god. To become a follower of Jesus, at the very least it was required that one put on the soul of the white man. "If you couldn't be white you could at least act white" is how a West Indian novelist once put it.

Therefore, although the European in Jamaica dehumanized both black and white people, there were profound differences in the black slaves' and the white servants' experience of dehumanization. Black people were slaves for life. To be born white was to be free. To be born black was to be a slave for life. Because of the racial difference, oppression of whites was soon phased out, but the master continued to abuse the black family. In the words of Eric Williams, 'the great inhumanity of man' had its genesis in the zeal of white people to maintain the structure of master and slave.¹⁷



¹⁷*Decolonizing Theology*, p. 21.

But as much as the bearers of the Jesus story might have "brought racial division" and self-hate into the lives of the Jamaican people, they did not succeed in breaking their spirit. Where the Jesus story might have failed, the Anancy stories became, for the oppressed Jamaicans, a model of life and hope, "exemplify[ing to them] how the small and physically weak may through shrewdness contrive to triumph over the strong."

Who was Anancy? He was, in brief, an African deity, who had "nothing to use to counter the superiority of an opponent [but] his wits and his cunning." "His usual opponent is the mighty Tiger, [a]gainst [whose] massive size [and] destruction-capacity, little weaponless Anancy has to win, and survive, without physical combat."¹⁸

What are the stories associated with him?¹⁹ A foundational story ("All Stories are Anansi's"), is the one about how God transferred to Anancy ownership of every story in the world. Anancy, according to the story, had, on God's command, and against staggering odds, succeeded in capturing the great python, the leopard, and all the hornets in the world. To reward him for his feat, God made Anancy's story the story that begins and caps all stories. "Great warriors and chiefs have tried," God tells Anancy, "but they have been unable to do it. You have done it. From this day onward, all stories belong to you." Imagine the impact of such a story upon a people (especially upon Africans, newly-arrived as slaves in Jamaica), brought to heel by overlords and outsiders. Imagine the impact upon them of its evocation of other monumental struggles: Abraham wrestling with himself, Jacob, Moses, Satan wrestling with

¹⁸Harold Courlander, *The Hat-Shaking Dance and Other Ashanti Tales From Ghana* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Ward, 1957).

¹⁹For purposes of illustration, I will draw from *The Hat-Shaking Dance and Other Ashanti Tales From Ghana*. There, Anancy is rendered "Anansi; both spellings will be used throughout this paper. While many Jamaican authors have compiled similar collections of stories, I will draw from the collection from Ghana to underscore the point that, through the centuries, Jamaicans have kept faith with the very same stories told in Africa today. There are fifteen stories in all in this collection: "All Stories are Anansi's"; "Anansi, the Oldest of Animals"; "Anansi's Hat Shaking Dance"; "Two Feasts for Anancy; Anansi Plays Dead"; "The Liar's Contest"; "Why Wisdom is Found Everywhere"; "Anansi and the Elephant Go Hunting"; "Anansi Borrows Money"; "Anansi's Rescue from the River"; "Anansi and the Elephant Exchange Knocks"; "How the Lizard Lost and Regained His Farm"; "Anansi Steals the Palm Wine"; "The Porcupine's Hoe"; "The Sword that Fought By Itself."

God, Mary arguing with her son to get him to change his mind about turning water into wine, others who, desiring a cure from Jesus, did everything they could to get it from him.

There is also the story ("Anansi, the Oldest of Animals"), about how various animals seek to establish their pre-eminence over Anancy. Anancy sets the record straight, telling them, "If you had come to me first, I would have saved you this argument, for I am the oldest of all creatures. When I was born, the earth itself had not yet been made, and there was nothing to stand on. When my father died, there was no ground to bury him in. So I had to bury him in my head."

In "Anansi's Hat-Shaking Dance," he begins a fast, to mourn his mother-in-law's passing. Driven by hunger, he steals a pot of piping hot beans from the kitchen, which he hides under his hat. The resulting sensation of burning produces a set of bodily movements that many on-lookers decide is a hat-shaking dance. Mothers told this story to their children, to underscore the point that honesty is the best policy. So even when he is weak, Anancy inspires correct living. A Jewish man once said the difference between Christianity and Judaism is Christians have a perfect hero, while Jews have many flawed ones. Anancy is a flawed hero, a source of inspiration and hope, but of humor and laughter as well. Anancy's flaws of character come up again in "Two Feasts for Anansi." Anancy wanted to be present at two big feasts in the village, so he had his sons tie a long rope around his belly, with one son taking one end of that long rope to one party, and another son the other end of the rope to the other party. Their instructions were that if food was plentiful at the party to which they had been assigned they would tug on the rope, and this would be a signal to Anancy to come hither. Because the spread of food at both parties was outstanding, Anancy found himself getting pulled in both directions. Unable to make up his mind, and quite the reverse of filling himself up with good things to eat, Anancy ended up having to contend with the growls of an empty stomach. The lesson of the story was that one could not be in two places at the same time. One could not be in the service of a master and still claim to be free. One had to choose, heaven or hell, good or bad, light or darkness, material riches or the kingdom. Slavery and freedom were distinctive choices for Africans in Jamaica. If their tragedy deepened, it was because they could not make clear choices about the kind of a life they wanted for themselves. One cannot love both oneself and God, or this world

and God. One cannot cling tenaciously to life, and expect to live.

In "Anansi Plays Dead," Anancy's perennial greed gets the better of him again. With famine throughout the land, Anancy fakes his own death; but before that, he gets the villagers to promise that he would be buried next to a yam field. They do as they promise, and then, mysteriously, they find their yam, corn and other products, disappearing. They come up with a plan. They make a "gum-man." Emerging from his tomb at night, Anancy comes across the gum-man, challenges it to identify itself, and, getting no answer, attacks it. He ends up stuck to the gum-man. The villagers discover him and subject him to a good beating. Again, an instructive tale, a warning against the sort of greed and selfishness displayed by Anancy. "From that day until now, Anansi has not wanted to face people because of their scoffing and jeering, and that is why he is often found hiding in dark corners." Situations of guilt, sin, and shame show up as powerful moments for teaching about life and how to live or not to live.

In "Why Wisdom is Found Everywhere," it is in a fit of pique and anger at his son for his remark that climbing would be difficult for as long as Anancy would not let go of the pot containing all the common sense in the world — which Anancy, of course, was interested in keeping only for himself — that he smashes the pot, making "common sense" available, however inadvertently, to all who want it. With the spread of common sense, no given group could dominate another. This meant, among other things, that in their struggle for liberation, the slaves had to seek ways of reaffirming their intellect, their humanity, their collective story.

In "Anansi and the Elephant Go Hunting," it is a time of famine. Anancy leads the elephant in the search for yam. He deliberately leads the elephant between two trees, where he gets stuck. At this point, Anancy cuts off the elephant's hind. Not only does Anancy cut off a lot of meat, he abandons the elephant in the forest. Upon returning home, the elephant sends his family to reclaim the meat from Anancy. Anancy's son plays on a magic drum, overpowering the elephant's sons, and forcing them to dance. The elephant follows and the same thing happens to him — like his sons, he cannot stop dancing. Finally, he begs Anancy to put a stop to the play of the drum and to let them go. Anancy extracts an apology from the elephant and lets them go. Greed and ruthlessness once again has served as a lesson of how not to be. From this

story, many slaves could have well reflected on the cruelty of slavery: how they were captured, mistreated, forced to work, and when freed, given no land.

In "Anancy Borrows Money," Anancy reaches his amoral peak. He needs to borrow money, but no one trusts him enough to lend him any money. He leaves his village, goes to the snake, and is able to convince him to lend him money, promising to pay him back in twenty one days. When the debt is due, Anancy visits the snake with a bag of yams, giving him half of the bag's contents, with a promise to come up the requisite money in a few days. Anancy then hides his own half of the yam, and reports the theft to the village chief. The chief allows Anancy to prove who the thief is. Anancy then has all the villagers come forward, and says if his knife cuts them it is proof that person is the thief. Anancy uses the dull side of the knife on all the others, when he comes to the snake he uses the sharp side and kills him. Again, a story that works by showing how cruel people can be. Anancy kills the snake to whom he owes money. Slaves and Jamaicans today marvel at a society that should be benevolent to them, but is not. Black people in Jamaica wonder why in a Jamaica built by slaves, they continue to be treated with such hate. Many racist proverbs and attitudes persist in Jamaica detrimental to black people. Could this story help shed light on why bad things happen to good people? On why God would allow people to suffer and die? On why humans would kill Jesus or enslave each other?

"Anansi's Rescue from the River" tells of Anancy's children, who are born with different talents. When Anancy falls into the river and comes close to drowning, his children pull together in order to save him. Anancy remains eternally grateful. One day he finds the moon, and wishes to keep it in his family. But an argument develops around which child is the greatest. So heated becomes the discussion that the Sky God comes and takes the moon to the sky, where to this day it remains. Mirrored by the story is Jesus' teaching on humility, as well as the conflicts which erupted among his disciples as to who was the greatest. In Jamaica is a common proverb, "Want all, lose all." Parents struggle to instill in their children the values of humility and a willingness to cooperate. Another proverb goes: "The humble calf sucks the most milk." If even one of Anancy's children had displayed a little humility, the moon might still be on the earth. Jamaicans would have a lot more as a nation if they stopped fighting with and among themselves.

"Anansi and the Elephant Exchange Knocks" tells of Anancy's guile at its best. The Elephant is noted for its strength, making Anancy very jealous. He challenges the elephant to a fighting match: the one who can take three hard knocks from the other on three consecutive nights would be considered the strongest. Anancy, of course, is the weaker. He, however, tricks three animals into coming to his house, feeding them a lot, and getting them to answer the door whenever someone knocks. On answering the elephant's knock, each of the three animals becomes the target of a fatal blow. The Elephant, who is certain he has finished Anancy off, is surprised to find him still alive. It is the Elephant's turn to go for his knocks. On the first night, Elephant receives such a huge blow, he almost dies. On the second night, the knock nearly blinds him. By the third night, the elephant fears for his life. Unable to take another blow, he flees with his family to different parts of the world. Anancy exemplifies once again how the small can conquer the big, the weak the strong. The three blows evoke an image of Jesus' three days in the tomb; the flight of the elephants, his triumphant resurrection.

"How the Lizard Lost and Regained His Farm" shows Anancy outwitted. He robs the lizard of all his yams by getting the villagers to believe that he is the true owner of the lizard's fields. He and his children do this by carving out a path leading from their house to the lizard's fields. Because the lizard, who walks on treetops, is unable to produce any such path, whereas Anancy does, the villagers are convinced that the fields are Anancy's. Anancy, then, takes possession of the lizard's yams. The lizard, however, looks up to the heavens and gets an idea. He makes a cloak of green flies — a cloak that buzzes and glistens. It is the envy of all, especially Anancy. Meanwhile, the lizard digs a large hole with a very small opening. Anancy comes to him wanting to buy the cloak. The lizard promises to sell it if Anancy would only fill the hole with yams. Anancy sees the opening and figures it must be a small hole. He agrees. After several trips to his house for yams, he realizes that he has been outwitted. He gets the cloak, but a wind comes, blowing the flies away. From that day on, Anancy builds a web for catching flies, and the lizard moves his head up and down as if beckoning to the sky. Sometimes people outwit themselves and honesty is ultimately the best policy.

In "Anansi Steals the Palm Wine," Anancy causes debt to spread all over the world. A man in debt visits the village and leaves a container of wine while he goes off traveling. He enters into an agreement with

the villagers to the effect that whoever drinks his wine must take on all his debt. Anancy, greedy as ever, drinks the wine and turns up drunk. He thereby assumes the debt. To rid himself of the debt, he plants a corn-field and announces that whoever eats corn from it inherits his debt. The story ends with these words: "Thus debt came... Some have it and some do not. And when one has it, his whole family joins to help send debt elsewhere. And those who do not have it, they spend their lives trying to avoid getting it." The importance of this story lies in the fact that debt figures more than a concept of sin. As a matter of fact there are teachings on the way life changes, because of somebody's actions. A proverb connected with this story is "curiosity killed the cat." One's inability to control oneself always leads to tragic consequences. Again, this story helps in the moral organization of the Jamaican people teaching about the consequences of evil, greed and lack of self control.

"The Porcupine's Hoe" tells of how Anancy's envy is cause for the multiplication of the hoe. At first there is only one hoe in the world, the porcupine's hoe. It has magic, which the porcupine utilizes in tilling the field. Anancy steals the hoe, makes it work for him, but is unable to make it stop. "It went across the sea and came to the White People's land." They fashioned many like it and then sold it to the Ashanti people. From that day on, hoes, rather than knives, are used to till the fields. In other words, Anancy's folly is the source of good. Somehow Anancy manages to produce good, even out of his evil actions. Again, his evil cannot be justified, but something good comes from it. This calls to mind the story of the Fall, in Genesis, or the story of Judas' actions, or the Protestant teaching on grace. Somehow, good comes out of evil. Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more.

Finally, in "The Sword that Fought by Itself," Anancy dies. Anancy steals a magic sword to help his people fight a battle, but he steals the sword without learning the command that will stop the sword. The sword that begins by fighting Anancy's enemies, when it is done with that job, proceeds to kill his friends. Eventually, it turns on Anancy himself, killing him. There being no one else to kill, the sword becomes a plant which, to this day will cut people up if they are not careful touching it. It is a story about the importance of learning the proper use of anything before actually using it.

These Anancy stories have dealt with the issues of theft, self acceptance, humility, poverty, forgiveness, race, victory, laziness, authority,

defeat, life and death. All these are necessary elements in any attempt to evangelize or call people to a better life. While, on the surface, some of these stories may appear to offer no "Christian" value, on deeper examination one can draw many examples of how to live and not to live from them.



Both the Jesus story and the Anancy stories offer a means of communication, and inter-faith dialogue. Communication can only happen, in the view of Tillich, if there is participation. Jamaicans have to find ways of allowing the stories of their culture to participate in the Jesus story. If this participation does not take place, the Jesus story will be incapable of providing answers to the questions of the Jamaican people. Whatever one may think of these Anancy stories, one must accept that they form part of the Jamaican psyche, they existed in the lives of Africans long before the coming of the Jesus story. Communication and participation always pose difficulties, because a language or story offers a complex series of events. The complexities that come from both stories require an honest search for meaning. Therefore any religion (any story) that does not provide meaning for a people soon dies.

That the Anancy stories and the Jesus story endure in Jamaica is proof that they do provide meaning for many. Yet the temptations of Christians, in trying to prove the superiority of their story, is that they will point only to flaws in the Jamaican stories, robbing them of any meaningful value. The Anancy stories have been labeled as primitive, tales "full of sound and fury signifying nothing" (Shakespeare). Nevertheless, they provide an intricate web of events requiring that one listen, unravel, put into practice, pass on, and even change one's way of being.

When Jesus told a story, his listeners could miss the point if they only tried to identify themselves with the good character. In the story of the Prodigal Son, too often the listener attempts to identify with the prodigal son or the prodigal father. Oftentimes the listener forgets that he or she is more like the older brother. And in the story of the Good Samaritan, one can too readily seek to draw all the lessons from the good Samaritan without realizing that those who refused to help have a lot to teach us about our attitudes. Anancy stories offer all who read or listen to them a host of characters and those who have "ears to hear must

hear." As Mervyn Morris, a Professor of English Literature at the University of the West Indies, Jamaica, puts it:

Anancy may be shrewd but he is still a rogue. Perhaps we have too readily accepted the notion that he, in particular, expresses Jamaican personality. There are plenty of other Jamaicans in the stories. Among them are the animals who are too easily trusting, the ones who go from story to story asking, "True, Brer 'Nancy?" in appalling innocence, as Anancy tells them another lie. They seem almost to want to be deceived. Now perhaps is as good a time as any to re-read Anancy stories as warning against credulity.²⁰

Today, Jamaicans face the challenge not only of re-reading the Anancy stories, but also of re-reading the Jesus story. Bob Marley, Jamaica's most famous singer, says in one of his songs, "Tell the people the truth." The time has come for truth-telling. Certainly, one aspect of truth-telling has to come from Jamaicans asserting the value of the Anancy stories and admitting how the Jesus story has served as a source of division, self hatred, and oppression. Nowhere in the Jesus story can one find justification for slavery, racism and discrimination based on color. Nowhere in the Jesus story can one find justification for colonization, dominance and the kind of governance that Jamaicans endured in the hands of those who brought the Jesus story.

For as long as the Jesus story is read or told as a means of justifying oppression, the Anancy stories will have to be read as a means of tricking and escaping the oppressor. If the Jesus story is used by an oppressive class to pacify the oppressed and to maintain the status-quo, then the Anancy stories must subvert that system of oppression. The Jesus story is one of subversion. Jesus subverted the religious, social and political landscape of his time. This subversion served as a means not to bring more chaos or oppression but to bring freedom and love. The Anancy stories, read carefully, offer freedom and love. Where there is oppression, there needs to be a re-reading and re-telling of the Jesus story. If the truth of the Jesus story in all its subversive nature were proclaimed, maybe there would have been less need for an Anancy story. Maybe. Re-reading the Jesus story means re-doing theology in Jamaica.

²⁰Louise Bennett, *Anancy and Miss Lou* (Kingston: Sangsters Publishers, 1979), ix.

Theology in Jamaica still presents a white Jesus, a Jesus whose call to Jamaicans is for them to *act* white, if they cannot *be* white. Jesus is King of Peace, so do not rock the boat. Jesus is the suffering servant, so enjoy your lot in life. Jesus is white, so stop that incessant African drumming. Jesus is in heaven, so keep your eyes fixed on heavenly things. Jesus is God and therefore has nothing to with culture. Presently, there are new efforts to disconnect Jesus from the blatant economic oppression rampant in the country. Jamaicans have no real sense of the Incarnation, because they have been fed such a high Christology story, and being white, Jesus could never truly be one of them.

With debates raging concerning the truth of who Jesus is, one is left to wonder how well those who brought Jesus knew Jesus. Jesus' desire that all peoples love each other took back-bench to an exploitation of slaves. Even after slavery the deliberate attempts to keep the whites and browns high above the poor blacks continued in the churches and schools. The Jesus story was robbed of its liberative meaning and used to rob people of their world. So often the Jesus story was used to justify oppression on the grounds that those who suffered would be with Jesus in the afterlife:

Theology must not ignore the world in which people struggle for meaning. Theology in the Caribbean must be approached via sociology and history rather than philosophy. As the Church in the Caribbean wrestles with the issues of race, laziness, authority, the 'cunning' black person, the church will come to understand through the sociological and historical method that these characteristics were indispensable tools for the survival of black people... As the church takes modern blacks seriously, it will see in their attitude of 'laziness' the judgment of God on the image of human beings as producer, production agent, and salesperson.²¹

Taking blacks seriously means taking their stories, experience and culture seriously. To take a people and their stories seriously changes how one evangelizes or tells one's stories. We mentioned already that Tillich sees this new phase as one in which the Jesus story is not presented in a way that it is accepted, but presented so that others can make their own choices about it. He goes on to say that "we who communi-

²¹*Decolonizing Theology*, p. 84.

cate the Gospel must understand the others.”²² Those who bring the Jesus story must understand the Anancy stories, and those who have accepted the Jesus story better understand and accept the Anancy story. If this does not happen there can be no true inculturation of the stories, no Incarnation.

No longer can the religious approach in Jamaica be one of Jesus or Anancy, or Jesus or the Jamaican culture. Jesus and Anancy go hand in hand; this is the only way to live in Jamaica today. Are there many elements of the Anancy stories that need challenging? Yes. Are there many elements of the Jesus story that need challenging? Yes. Jamaicans will be known by the stories they tell, and they have many. The Anancy stories and the Jesus stories must continue to be told. In the telling, hopefully, there will be dialogue between and a mutual reshaping of, these stories.

H. Richard Niebuhr captures the nature of this dialogue when he asserts that a culture's stories cannot be viewed as totally antagonistic to Christian principles, cannot be ignored, and must call forth from Christians a willingness to listen and to dialogue:

What we have in view when we deal with Christ and culture is that total process of human activity and that total result of such activity to which now the name culture, now the name civilization, is applied to common speech. Culture is the 'artificial, secondary environment' which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values. This 'social heritage,' this 'reality *sui generis*,' which the New Testament writers frequently had in mind when they spoke of 'the world,' which is represented in many forms but to which Christians like other men are inevitably subject, is what we mean when we speak of culture.²³ ↪

²²*Theology of Culture*, p. 202.

²³Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), p. 32.