

# GARDENING IN THE TROPICS

by Olive Senior

## Annotations to the poems by the author

Main sources:

**Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage.** Olive Senior. Jamaica: Twin Guinep Publishers, 2003 (illustrated). ISBN 976-8007-14-1.

**Dictionary of Jamaican English.** F.G. Cassidy and R.B. LePage. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [1967] 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.1980. ISBN 0 521 22165.

**Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage.** Richard Allsopp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. ISBN 0-19-866152-5.

## THE ENTRIES IN THE GLOSSARY ARE LISTED IN THE ORDER IN WHICH THE POEMS APPEAR IN THE BOOK

### GOURD

**The gourd** here represents the ritual instrument that calls people together, hence, an invitation to the book of poems. The poem lists many of the myths and legends associated with the gourd throughout the world.

The gourd is the fruit of either the Calabash tree (*Crescentia cujete*), common in the Caribbean; or of a vine (*Lagenaria siceraria*) more common in Africa and elsewhere. The fruits of both the tree and of the vine vary in size and shape, but may be used in similar ways as vessels. All gourds are prepared by hollowing out the inner flesh and seeds, leaving the skin. Once dried, the thick skin hardens, producing a sturdy vessel or container. A hollow gourd filled with seeds or small stones, fitted with a handle and sometimes with other decoration, becomes a percussive musical instrument used for both secular and sacred

purposes. *Higüera* or *Jigüera*, the name of the calabash gourd in the Spanish Antilles reflects the original and Carib name of *güira*.

**took-took:** A medium sized calabash gourd used to carry water. The gurgling chuckle of the water pouring out from the small opening gave rise to the name.

**packy:** Jamaican name for the calabash gourd; from the African (Twi) word: *apakyi*.

**Orehu the spirit of water:** Female water spirit in Amerindian mythology.

**houngan's asson:** In Haitian Criol, the *asson* is the sacred gourd rattle of the Haitian Voudon priest – the *houngan*.

**shaman's maraka:** The sacred calabash rattle of the medicine-man (shaman) of the Amerindians.

**shak-shak:** Musical instrument: small calabash rattle, filled with seeds or stones. Also chac-chac.

**maracca:** Musical instrument, as above. Associated with Latin American music and dance; used in Trinidadian carnival music.

## TRAVELLERS' TALES

### MEDITATION ON YELLOW

**El Dorado:** Spanish for 'the golden man'; the name given to a mythical city of gold linked to the early history of Guyana. The term is used figuratively to signify the futile search for quick riches.

**fever-grass:** *Andropogon citratus*; oil grass also known as Tea Grass, or Lemon Grass from its scent; used in cooking and medicine. One of the forty species of the genus *Cymbopogon* (of the *Poaceae* family).

**Yucahuna:** The supreme spirit (*zemí*) of the Taíno, the aboriginal people of the Caribbean who were the first native Americans encountered by Columbus.

**Attabeira:** Taíno chief female deity; spirit of fertility.

- guanín:** Taíno metal; a breastplate of guanín was the symbol of the cacique or chief.
- ‘not the Indies/nor Cathay’:** Refers to the fact that Columbus on his first voyage mistook the West Indies for the Orient.
- Yellow Peril:** A derogatory term used by Europeans from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in reference to a perceived threat posed by Chinese and Japanese people flooding into the West.
- macca:** Jamaican word for prickly or thorn, possibly of Arawak origin.
- cane rows:** Sugar cane that is planted in rows; also, a hair style modelled after sugar cane rows.
- sensimilla:** A high grade of ganja (marijuana).
- golden crystals:** A grade of refined sugar.
- streggeh:** Jamaican word for a vulgar woman or street-walker. The trees listed below are often used in street plantings.
- Allamanda** (*Allamanda cathartica*), **Cassia** (*Cassia fistula*), **Poui** (*Tabebuia spp.*), **Golden Shower** (*species of Cassia*). All are tropical plants with beautiful golden blossoms.
- anacondas, boas:** Snakes that have mythical qualities. Often likened to the Rainbow Serpent.

### HURRICANE STORY, 1903

- fowl coop:** A cage or enclosure for poultry.
- pinguin fence:** A living fence made from a prickly, cactus-like shrub, *Bromelia pinguin*, which grows about six feet high.
- afu yam:** A hard yellow yam, one of the large family of twining plants of the genus *Dioscorea*, yielding large, starchy tubers; not to be confused with the American sweet potatoes known as “yams” in southern states.
- sweet potato:** A popular Caribbean root crop (*Ipomoea batatas*), grey-green in colour with a dark purple skin, and distinct from the American yam or sweet potato.
- cassava bammies:** flat bread made from bitter cassava (*manihot esculenta*).

**chocolate balls:** homemade chocolate made from cocoa beans which are fermented, sun-dried, parched or roasted, ground, and shaped into balls or cigar-shaped rolls; these are dried and later grated to make a hot drink ('cocoa-tea' or 'chaklata').

**nutmeg:** a spice (*Myristica fragrans*).

**cinnamon:** a spice (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*).

**'milk from fallen coconuts':** milk-white juice squeezed from the grated flesh of the dry coconut; widely used in Caribbean cooking.

**Noah's Ark:** a boat built by a Biblical hero to save his family and a pair of every kind of animal from destruction in the Flood (see Genesis 6-9).

**schooled on Sankeys:** Religious songs, widely known, from the hymnal popularised by the American evangelist Ira David Sankey (1840-1908). An example is "Rock of Ages."

**through the eye:** the still centre of a hurricane; the wind blows from the opposite direction after the 'eye' passes.

**sensay:** a domestic fowl with curled over, ruffled feathers, from the African [Twi *asense*]; it is often associated with obeah.

**leghorn:** a breed of domestic fowl.

**Cotton Tree :** (*Ceiba pentandra*). Huge tree, regarded as sacred in Africa and the Americas. Also called Silk-cotton tree.

## MOONSHINE DOLLY

The poem describes a game – once played by Jamaican children – centred on a doll-like figure which they make on the ground on moonlight nights. It also refers to an Amerindian myth which tells how the moon pulls up a chain of disobedient children into the sky, where they become the stars.

## HURRICANE STORY, 1944

**navel-string:** a symbol of home and rootedness; it was formerly a practice in Caribbean and other cultures to bury the umbilical cord ('navel string') of a newborn child in the yard of the parents' home and plant a tree over it.

to **'turn down'**: to become worthless.

**'one body money can't stretch'**: 'one person's earnings are not enough'.

**'yu mek yu own bed'**: proverbial: 'you've made your bed, you must lie on it'.

**'own row to hoe'**: proverbial 'we each have our lot in life'.

**skellion, tomatiss, pumpkin**: common garden vegetables ('tomatis' variant of 'tomato').

**pregnant woman**: it is believed that a pregnant woman walking over a pumpkin vine will encourage it to bear prolifically.

**higgler**: a vendor or trader; originally one who carries food to sell in the market.

**black cerasse tea and water crackers**: a very poor meal. Cerasse (*Momordica charantia*) is a bitter bush used for tea and medicine, here the tea is black from lack of milk. Water crackers are plain dry crackers made without any fat.

### CAT'S CRADLE

**Cat's cradle** is a universal game in which string is looped around the fingers to form recognisable patterns. The poem is referring to legends among Eskimo and Inuit people of the far north who play the game in the winter months. A legend says that one day a girl will capture the long leg of the departing sun with her string and so keep the winter darkness away; it is also believed that adolescent boys who play cat's cradle will tangle up their fishing lines.

### CARIBBEAN BASIN INITIATIVE

**The title** is a play on words; the 'Caribbean Basin Initiative' was officially unveiled by United States President Ronald Reagan in 1982 as a way of stimulating the economy of the entire Caribbean, especially through increased trade with the USA. The CBI as it is referred to, has had little success. In the poem this externally imposed 'solution' is contrasted with the initiative of individuals – in this case the Haitian people who from time to time choose the dangerous route of migration in small open boats.

**limpets:** marine creatures (gastropods) that cling to rocks and the hulls of ships.

**‘a sign in the basin’:** a method of telling the future (divination) by looking into a container of water.

**‘If you born...drown’:** a proverbial saying: ‘man born fe heng cyan drown’.

**the cutting of the tree to make the boat:** refers to the belief that respect must be paid to the spirit(s) of nature before engaging in certain actions, such as felling a tree.

**dead reckoning:** a method of calculating one’s position on the ocean; note the play on words.

**Gulf Stream:** a warm ocean current that flows from the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic coast of the U.S. and across to northwestern Europe.

**‘bound for an island a stone’s throw...’:** Haitian boat people captured by the USA coast guard were taken to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, a practice which continued up to 1995.

**louvri baryè pou mwen:** Haitian creole invocation to the deity Legba at the start of ceremonies, meaning ‘Open the gate for me’. From the French, ‘ouvrez le barriere pour moi.’

## HURRICANE STORY, 1951

Note that the first syllable of the poem is Ma, the universal sound for mother.

**‘sucking salt’:** expression meaning that times are very hard.

**England:** Many West Indians left for England in the 1950s; the devastating hurricane of 1951 contributed to the emigration from Jamaica.

**so-so:** nothing but, only.

**hard-ears:** stubborn, unwilling to listen, disobedient.

## ILLEGAL IMMIGRANT

**dugout:** canoe made from a tree trunk, especially the **Cotton Tree** (Ceiba).

## MEDITATION ON RED

The meditation is based on a visit the author made to the grave of the Dominican-born writer Jean Rhys (1890-1979), author of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. among many other books. Rhys spent her last years in the village of Cheriton Fitzpaine, Devon, England, where she is buried. Her address was No. 6 Land Boat Bungalows. The poem addresses Miss Rhys and includes the titles of many of her books.

**snowdrops, daffodils, narcissus:** English spring flowers.

**flame of the forest** (*Spathodea campanulata*), **hibiscus** (*Hibiscus spp.*), **heliconia** (*Heliconia spp.*), **poinsettia** (*Poinsettia species*), **firecracker** (*Russelia equisetiformis*) – also called Fountain Bush and Coral Bush, **bougainvillea:** all tropical flowers with red blooms.

## HURRICANE STORY, 1988

**my mother:** the mother in the poem is a higgler or trader, a woman who travels overseas to buy and sell. These traders often spread out their wares on city sidewalks.

**Imelda:** a reference to Imelda Marcos, wife of a former president of the Philippines, notorious for extravagance, including her shoe collection.

**ban her belly and bawl:** an expression of mourning, signifying the pain of the womb ('belly') for the mother whose child dies.

**junjo:** fungus (such as wild mushroom); also mould or mildew.

**spliff:** a ganja (marijuana) cigarette.

**soak up:** plans that are spoilt.

**to raatid!** expression of annoyance; also **rahtid**.

## ALL CLEAR, 1928

The poem deals with the large scale emigration of West Indian males to work on the Panama Canal and elsewhere in Latin America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the women they left behind.

**beating chaklata:** parched cocoa pods are pounded in a mortar as part of the process of making chocolate for tea (see note for ‘Hurricane Story, 1903’).

**sampata:** sandals made of old car tyres; any old shoe – also sampat, zapat. From Spanish ‘zapata’.

**head-tie:** a cloth tied around the head, worn by women.

**Puerto Limón** (Costa Rica), **Havana** (Cuba), **Colón** (Panama): all places that attracted West Indian migrant workers from the 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

**heng-pon-me:** knapsack made of thatch used by farmers and travellers.

**johnny cakes:** fried dumpling; **dokunu:** pudding wrapped in banana leaf and boiled; **cerasee:** tea made from a bitter plant – all foods carried by poor travellers in the days before ‘fast foods’.

**guinea:** British gold coin that was formerly used in the British West Indies; then worth twenty-one shillings.

## NATURE STUDIES

### STARAPPLE

**Starapple:** (*Chrysophyllum cainito*) large tropical fruit tree with leaves that are green above and bronze below; the fruit is purple or green-skinned when ripe and reveals a star shape when cut across. Also known as Caimite, Sapota. Unlike many other fruit, ripe starapples never fall from the tree. The last lines refer to the fallen star, Lucifer (see ‘Madam Fate’, below) and the Biblical apple that tempted Eve and led to the Fall (See Genesis 3-5).

### PINEAPPLE

**Pineapple:** tropical fruit (*Ananas comosus*).

**yayama:** The Amerindian (Taíno) name for the pineapple for whom it was a symbol of hospitality; a practice, like the fruit, taken over by the Europeans.

**pineal eyes:** refers to a pea-sized organ in the brain that some believe functions as a 'third-eye' for those who have 'second sight' or clairvoyance; 'eye' also refers to the 'eyes' on the pineapple.

**counting down:** refers to the fact that 'pineapple' is also slang for a hand-grenade; thus 'counting down' before an explosion.

### MADAM FATE

**Madam Fate** (*Hippobroma longiflora*): poisonous perennial herb with tubular white star-shaped flower, found in the Caribbean and tropical America; also known as Horse Poison, Pipe Zombi, Star of Bethlehem; in Jamaica it has both sinister and medicinal uses.

**Lucifer:** Biblical: leader of the rebellious angels in Heaven; he is associated with a falling star.

### FERN

**The carbon of revolution:** Giant ancestors of the modern fern millions of years ago in the Carboniferous Age created the rich seams of coal (carbon) on which the Industrial Revolution was founded.

### MOUNTAIN PRIDE

**Mountain Pride:** Beautiful flowering tree (*Spathelia sorbifolia*) that grows only in Jamaica, the subject of a legend of a Taíno girl called 'Mountain Pride' who threw herself off a cliff rather than marry a man she did not want; once a year, on cliff-sides, the tree bears a purple crown of flowers in her honour.

### SUN AND MOON

**Sun and Moon** are the subjects of many legends among native peoples of the Americas. This poem refers to one legend in which Moon tried to steal

Sun's fiery headdress and almost burnt up the world. They've been kept apart ever since.

## GUAVA

**Guava:** Tropical tree (*Psidium guajava*) that often grows wild and bears a succulent fruit.

## GUAVA 2

**Lord of the Guava:** The Taíno (native peoples of the Caribbean) believed the spirits of the dead feasted on guavas at night.

## GUINEP

**Guinep:** Tropical fruit tree (*Melicoccus bijugatus*) that bears small green-skinned fruit in clusters like grapes. A sacred plant of the Taíno who called it *Jagua* and used it for black body paint. Also known as Akee in Barbados and Genip, Canep, Chenip, Chennett and other variants elsewhere.

## ANATTO AND GUINEP

For **Guinep**, see above.

**Anatto** (*Bixa orellana*): small tree whose seeds are used as food colouring; As *bija* or *bixa*, one of the sacred plants of the Taíno who used it as red body paint. Also known as *roucou*.

**Arawak** was the name formerly given to the peoples Columbus first met in the Caribbean. Today, these people of Arawak stock are referred to as Taíno; Arawak properly refers to a language group of peoples from northern South America from which the islanders descended; Arawaks are still to be found in Guyana, for example.

The poem ends with reference to another **Sun and Moon** legend (see above). In this one, Brother Moon tries to commit incest with his sister Sun but she leaves a black mark on the face of her attacker which later identifies him. This is why Sun and Moon are forever chasing each other across the sky.

## PAWPAW

**Pawpaw:** tropical fruit tree (*Carica papaya*) the fruit and leaves of which have tenderising properties. The poem describes some of the folkloric beliefs associated with the plant. Also Papaw.

## BAMBOO

**Bamboo** (*bambusa* spp.): fast-growing giant grass, both ornamental and useful.

**bamboo love:** as described – burning quickly and hot.

**bamboo ashes:** what is left after bamboo is burnt – symbolizing something light and easily blown away; something negligible. Bamboo is easily burnt but will regenerate quickly from the roots; stanza 3 refers to a legendary debate between Stone and Bamboo which decided that death rather than immortality would be the fate of mankind.

**Duppies:** ghosts or sprits of the dead.

## GARDENING IN THE TROPICS

### BRIEF LIVES

***desaparecidos*:** Spanish for ‘the disappeared ones’ – refers to the thousands of people who vanished in the ‘dirty wars’ that took place in Argentina, Chile and other Latin American countries in the 1970s-80s. The funerals of drug ‘dons’ in Jamaica are quite elaborate affairs, as described.

### MY FATHER’S BLUE PLANTATION

**Leaf Spot Disease:** a type of disease affecting bananas, the spray (copper sulphate) that was used turned the leaves blue.

**‘Banana Day’:** In former times farmers were notified of when a banana boat was arriving so bananas could be reaped and taken to the nearest collection point for transportation to the port. Bananas were formerly counted by the number of hands and those not meeting the inspection

were rejected. These activities are referred to in the Jamaican folk song 'Day O'.

### FINDING YOUR STONE

**pierre:** French for 'stone'. The poem is referring to 'thunder-balls' or 'thunderstones', stones that are believed to have come from the sky, are regarded as special, and are used in sacred rituals.

### THE KNOT GARDEN

Though the references are Jamaican, the poem is speaking of political interference and corruption anywhere.

**Knot Garden:** a formal garden of intricate design; notice the play on words.

**wis:** Any tough climbing vine used for tying, basket-making, etc. Also wist (from English **withe**)

**IMF meeting:** refers to the International Monetary Fund, an international financial institution from which member states of the United Nations can withdraw funds to tide them over hard times (balance of payments deficits). The draconian conditions attached to these loans have made 'IMF' a negative expression in many countries.

**higglers and drug barons** – higgler are market traders; the more successful ones are able to move upward in society, along with those people who make a fortune from the drug trade. '**daughters of gentry**' – middle class girls. This is referring to the interplay of classes as perceived in Jamaica, referred to as 'uptown' and 'downtown'. '**Ghetto boys with gold teeth**' refers to poor boys who have become successful reggae and dancehall artists, and who used to acquire gold teeth as a sign of their new status. '**Hits**' is playing on both hit songs and contract killings.

**Cayman Islands, Liechtenstein, Geneva:** all countries that are secretive about banking so are used to hide illegal money.

### THE COLOURS OF BIRDS

The poem is relating a legend that appears in many versions in native America, telling how birds acquired their coloured plumage.

**parakeets:** small parrots that are bright green, fly in noisy flocks and are destructive of crops such as corn.

**‘stationary birds’:** green maize or corn cobs on the plants which resemble the birds.

### THE TREE OF LIFE

The poem is based on a Carib legend which relates how all the world’s food plants came into being. The Carib (along with the Taíno) are the native peoples of the Caribbean encountered by Columbus. Today, Caribs are to be found in parts of northern South America, including Guyana and on the island of St Vincent. This poem (as well as **Advice and Devices**) also refers to the preference of Caribbean ‘small farmers’ to plant a wide variety of food crops in their plots (‘mixed farming’), as opposed to commercial agriculture that is based on a single crop.

**The Flood:** The Hebrew Bible and many other ancient histories and mythologies record the occurrence of such a catastrophe.

The **food plants** described in this poem are discussed above in the ‘Nature Studies’ section.

### SEEING THE LIGHT

The speaker is a native American.

**‘conquista, evangelismo, civilizacion’:** to conquer, christianize, civilize – refers to the intention of the European conquerors towards the native peoples, often with negative results.

**yuca:** (*manihot esculenta*) – a root crop that is one of the principal foods of natives peoples of the Caribbean and Latin America, including the Taíno. Known as Cassava or Manioc in the English-speaking islands.

**Pleiades:** group of stars – the ‘Seven Sisters’ – that are very important in ordering the yearly routine of Amerindian life.

### AMAZON WOMEN

**Missionary Brett, Sir Walter Raleigh:** two Englishmen who helped to propagate the legend of the Amazon women. The Rev. William Henry Brett was an Anglican missionary who travelled the interior of Guyana in

the 19<sup>th</sup> century and published two books of the legends of the Guyanese Indians and translated parts of the Bible into the Arawak language. Sir Walter Raleigh is a seventeenth century English explorer who led two expeditions to the Orinoco to search for gold. He also spread the story of the Amazon women.

**Cristobal Colón:** Spanish name of Christopher Columbus whose diaries and letters from the New World are full of fantasies and legendary stories.

**Nanny the Maroon Queen Mother:** a Maroon leader of Jamaica, now officially a National Hero.

**The Fair Anacaona:** Taíno leader who was brutally murdered by the Spaniards

### TROPIC LOVE

**'You don't bring me flowers anymore'** is playing on the title of a once popular love song (the most popular version is by Barbra Streisand and Neil Diamond who is one of the composers).

### THE IMMOVABLE TENANT

This poem can be read as a parable of neo-colonial relationships

**old as Methuselah:** a symbol of longevity. Methuselah is 'the oldest man in the Bible', reputedly living to 969 years (Genesis 5: 21-27)

**rich as Croesus:** a symbol of extreme wealth. Croesus was a king in Asia Minor noted for his great wealth (546 B.C.).

**'can't mash ants':** a Jamaican phrase that suggests someone who seems timid, frail and incapable.

**Warner:** a man or woman who claims to receive special messages of impending disaster and travels through city streets and countryside to 'warn' the inhabitants.

### GARDENING ON THE RUN

The poem refers to the Maroons: runaway native Indians and enslaved Africans who established their own societies in the Americas, many of which are

listed in the poem. The words in italics are from the court records of an actual trial.

### **ADVICE AND DEVICES**

The speaker in the poem is confiding to the reader some of the folkloric beliefs he (or she) employs for successful farming. The references to ‘Do Good’ and ‘Oil of Compellance’ suggest that the farmer is resorting at times to obeah (black magic or sorcery). See reference at **The Tree of Life** to ‘small farming’.

### **MYSTERY**

#### **AFRICAN GODS IN THE NEW WORLD**

These poems evoke the representations of the orishas (deities) of the Yoruba religion of Africa in New World religious expressions such as Voudon (Haiti), Candomble (Brazil), Santería (Cuba), Shango (Trinidad) and so on. Yoruba culture survives mainly in Nigeria.

### **MARASSA**

Divine twins in Haiti – identical and mirror images of each other. Among the Yoruba, the twins are called Ibeji; in Cuba Ibbeyi.

### **OBATALA**

The head of the Yoruba orishas, creator of the world, god of purity and justice. (Obbatalá in Cuba).

### **OSANYIN**

The Yoruba god of herbalism. He is represented by a bird on top of a tree and is portrayed as having one leg, one arm, one eye and one ear bigger than the other. Known as Ossae in Brazil, Osaín in Cuba.

## **OSOSI**

Warrior deity of wild animals, the forest and the hunt. Oxossi in Brazil; Ochosi in Cuba.

## **OGUN**

Warrior God of iron and of war - he controls much of the material in the earth and represents primitive force and energy. Oggún in Cuba, and Ogun Ferraille in Haiti ('ferraille' means 'iron'). The worship of Ogun may be traced back to Iron Age civilizations in Nigeria and adjacent countries.

## **SHANGO**

One of the most powerful of the orishas; virile warrior representing strength, virility, and violent energy; lord of music and drumming, of thunder and lightning. Also Sango (Yoruba), Xango (Brazil), Changó (Cuba).

## **ORUNMILLA**

Lord of divination and master of magical powers. Orúmila in Cuba.

## **BABALU**

Associated with diseases connected with the earth such as smallpox and is seen as representing punishment for the excesses of mankind. Portrayed as an old man robed in a scarlet gown. Also regarded as the doctor of the poor. He is symbolised by small gourds, peanuts, sesame seeds, and grains which suggest the pustules of smallpox. Babalú Ayé in Cuba, Omolu in Brazil; also known as Shakpana or Sonponna.

## **OYA**

Principal female deity, goddess of the wind and the marketplace; in Africa she is the goddess of the great River Niger.

### **OLOKUN**

The owner of all sea water, believed to live in the bottom of the sea.

### **YEMOJA**

The symbol of universal motherhood; in Yorubaland she is an orisha of the river, in the New World queen of the sea and salt water. She is universally revered in Brazil. Yemayá in Cuba

### **GUÉDÉ**

Lord of the Dead in Haiti; the deity of the crossroads, keeper of the cemetery, of life and death. Like death figures in many mythologies, Guédé has a quick temper and a huge appetite for food and sex.